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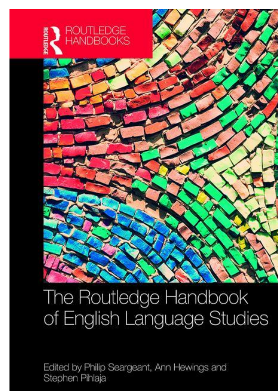

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Literature and the English language

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Literature and the English language

Geoff Hall

Background

Literature influenced earlier understandings and valuations of English, an influence that continues today in English studies in the UK and beyond. English-language literary texts typically use language in recognisable but at times unusual ways to prompt responses in readers or auditors. In this chapter I focus on the 'literary use' of English language which can sometimes be unusual or noticeable, but which also exists on a continuum with other uses of language. I make a distinction between literature as *text,* with identifiable linguistic tendencies, and literature as *discourse*, meaning texts that offer distinct challenges and satisfactions to particular readers when compared with other texts. The chapter also reports some historical perspectives on the development of the English language traceable through literary texts, with the aim on contextualising contemporary Literary Linguistics in a broader study of English and showing how recent work offers empirical evidence to support claims about particular authors and 'literary language' more generally.

To begin focusing the wider discussion we may sample some utterances taken from English language literature:

1 That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory.
2 Sit ye down father. Rest ye.
3 I will do such things. What they are, yet I know not.
4 Their heads are green, and their hands are blue, And they went to sea in a sieve.
5 Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me.
6 I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.

All of these quotations are easily remembered by me from some of my own favourite uncontroversially literary texts, from poetry and drama more specifically (compare Tambling 1988, examples and discussion). The memorability of some literary text is itself an interesting feature, indicating careful design and appropriacy to recognisable meanings. A reader may wish then to consider what might be specifically 'literary' about these instances of language use, or whether indeed they are particularly literary at all. At first sight the extracts contain some obviously less

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frequent vocabulary items such as 'sieve' (text), but we also note that what is really original is going to sea in a sieve (discourse), and perhaps also the surprising colours of the actors, and the challenge to our usual narrative expectations of cause and effect or logical sequence of some kind ('And'). '[Y]e' is old fashioned or dialectal language (2), though the invitation is otherwise entirely everyday and unremarkable. Old-fashioned too, probably, is the sequence of 'yet I know not' (3). In the case of (6) from G. M. Hopkins's late sonnets, 'fell' is ambiguous, likely to be noticed as both dialectal and old-fashioned ('fell' for 'fall') but also exploiting the less common and traditional meaning of 'skin', 'fur', 'pelt of animal'. Examples (1), (3) and (6) use negative structures for ideas difficult to express, unsatisfactory or counter-intuitive. You may also note that parallel structures commonly found in literature, repetitions or near repetitions come to our attention, such as 'ye'/ 'ye' (2), 'call to me' (5), alliteration as repetition ('feel'/ 'fell'; 'much' 'missed'/' me'), or poetic metre pushing a reader to consider relations between 'green', 'blue' and 'sieve' (4). Example (1) contains a metalinguistic reflection on its own adequacy or felicity; much literature is overtly concerned with itself in this way. In form, however (1) looks like conversational ordinary language use.

In sum, I would submit that utterances like these are fascinating both for their apparent ordinariness and readability, and the fact that at the same time they can also be seen as slightly unusual, highly designed and suggestive instances of language use. Some language items are 'foregrounded' (Garvin 1964), designed to catch a reader's attention. They are more fundamentally highly meaningful in context, including emotional charge. Importantly, any linguistic literariness they may display or that may be discerned lies as much in their uses in context (what I have labelled 'discourse') as in intrinsic formal features and patternings ('text'). Literature is a linguistic textual phenomenon, but also a sociocultural phenomenon, and a cognitive phenomenon offering readers particular challenges that many report enjoying and valuing. (Maybin and Pearce 2006 introduce each of these perspectives carefully in turn).

Literature as text and discourse

Variation is the most basic characteristic of language use in literature and a wider range of variation is typically found in literary texts than in any other text type or genre. Any language can be used in literature, whereas most other text types and genres are more constrained. For example, a weather forecast or a sales letter will not normally feature the same range of vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical and other devices as a literary text – though it is important to note that *some* of the same features will be found. There is no hard and fast dividing line between the literary and the non-literary, whether textually or more widely. More interesting still, a story, novel, poem, drama or other literary work may well include within it apparently faithful representations or even actual 'found' reproductions of weather forecasts, sales letters, dialogues in the street and in the boardroom and much more besides, recontextualised for new aesthetic, reflective purposes. Literature is a kind of 'supergenre' in this sense, able in principle to include any other genre to do a different job from the one the language used was originally designed to do. Language will typically be less standard in form in literature than in most other forms of communication. Or more accurately, literature, particularly in more modern times, can be expected to contain a mix of the standard and the non-standard. This mix and variation of language features is so distinctive that it can be claimed to be a distinguishing and defining feature of a literary text even in a time when genres in general seem to be less fixed and formal than they once were. Certainly all linguists who have looked at English language literature have agreed for some time that the language used is characteristically non-standard (Blake (1981) remains a classic early study with multiple examples).

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To extend this idea of variation, Carter and Nash (1990) coined the useful term *re-registration* to point to the way literary works use a wide range of registers and deliberately bring them into contact or even conflict with each other (another example of 'foregrounding') so that literature can be defined, in this view, at least literature in English in more modern times, as texts which employ an unusually wide range of differing styles and registers, where most genres (a business letter, a tax form, a notice in a hospital) will typically display a more monochrome style. In re-registration, meaning is generated precisely from shifts and contrasts of register. Bakhtin (1981) had anticipated this point in the earlier part of the 20th century with his ideas of 'heteroglossia', in 'Discourse in the Novel' [1934-35] tracing a wide range of 'languages' (registers and styles) in character speech as well as in narration in classic 19th-century novels by Dickens and Dostoevsky. Adamson (1998), Jeffries (1993) and others have shown how this 'novelisation' as Bakhtin termed it, today extends to poetry, drama and indeed all the literary genres and forms, with very few exceptions. A poet like Philip Larkin characteristically structures his poetry precisely upon register clashes to foreground (typically) a metaphysical or spiritual point with 'poetic' marked language against the banality of everyday experience represented by more everyday language (see, for example, Larkin's 'Sad Steps'; on register, see Biber and Conrad 2001, but also Butler 1999).

A further and related distinctive feature of literary texts to be noted, however, is that functionally, where a sales letter or weather forecast, job interview or even chatting with a friend in a café has identifiable purposes or functions, the function of a literary text – another way to know one when you read or hear it – is likely to be less obvious, or at least 'socially and historically variable' (Burton and Carter 2006), valued by different groups for different reasons at different times, with inferential work expected and required rather than any immediately obvious surface meaning to be easily taken away. The purpose may be aesthetic, social or cultural, political, educational, or indeed produced almost involuntarily for the sheer pleasure, satisfaction or need of creative self-expression. The purpose of a literary utterance may not be known even to the author and crucially, unlike other forms of communication we experience, it is not obviously directed specifically and purposefully at the reader who reads it or auditor who hears it, sometimes hundreds of years later in contexts which could never have been predicted. Even an advertisement (closely related linguistically to literature in its tolerance for variation) has a clear purpose: to engage with your desires, wishes and anxieties in ways more directive than the literary work, and you were certainly intended to notice it if not immediately act upon it. What, by contrast, is a reader of a novel supposed to do when they have read it, as a result of this reading? What is the value of the reading of a text never in the first place particularly intended for this particular reader? Indeed it is remarkable, given how vague or varied the functions of literature reading often are, on a first glance, how many people over so many centuries have been prepared to give so much time and other resource to such a poorly defined activity, whether as producers or consumers or both, and how highly the activities associated with literature production and consumption have often been valued. The source of this value, and the extent to which the valuation is linguistic, must be a concern for this chapter and takes us into the idea of literature as sociocultural discourse (language use considered in contexts of use).

Literature, then – to offer a working definition – is a vague and generic term usually given to a large and somewhat miscellaneous range of texts, usually fictional or imaginative, that a given group values particularly highly for aesthetic or cultural reasons (after Eagleton 1983). These texts are linguistically distinct, if at all, only in their eclectic range of use of language forms and features and a tendency to self-awareness of forms used. Returning to the examples with which I began, it may be noticed how repetition or partial repetition is a typical feature of

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literary texts. But again, those opening quotations were also intended to prompt the reader to consider whether this is a distinctive or perhaps just a more pronounced feature of the literary utterance than of more obviously non-literary language use. Readers will have their own prototypes associated with 'literature', perhaps including notions of pleasure and recreation, creativity and ingenuity, even moments of profound insight into some aspect of the human condition; or sometimes less pleasant and more strenuous memories of difficult reading and assignments in school, puzzling to make sense of unusual language forms or use or combinations of forms.

English literature typically has for its central object of study a group of texts historically valued, or found to be of particular interest at least, often for ethnic, nationalist or purportedly linguistic reasons. Other claims relate to ethical or related benefits to be gained from literary experience by individuals and societies. Many now prefer to use the term 'literatures in English' rather than 'English literature' precisely to emphasise the growing global diversity and variety of both English language use, as explored elsewhere in this Handbook, but also the growing diversity of literary production, distribution and consumption of such literatures even as that very fact sometimes provokes politicians or educationalists to a new attempt at control, limitations and prescriptivism. Thus Carter (2016; after Bakhtin 1981) usefully prompts us to consider competing 'centripetal' and centrifugal' swings and tensions in relation to English use and study through history and beyond the purely educational field. Orthodoxy in modern literary studies values diversity over standardisation, the centrifugal rather than the centripetal features of English use, with ever-increasing diversity in English language use and in literatures written in English an evident fact (see also Burton and Carter 2006).

Prize-winning novels or other works of literature represent varied experience from around the world, of varied authors from around the world, with differing identities and with experimentation with literary form also commonly found. Importantly, such prizes are typically controversial and disputed. Allington (2016) among others reports characteristic suspicion of the publishing and prize awarding industry on the part of self-identifying 'ordinary readers' in book groups or on websites. Assignation of value and consequent rewards is typically contested with regard to literary creation. It is interesting to note, however, that when disputes threaten in book groups, readers will often refer other readers back to the precise language of the text under discussion (Peplow 2016). Similarly, the fundamental contention of scholars working in the area of linguistics known as stylistics, is that the experience of the precise language of the literary text is where understandings and interpretations begin and will typically return to. Readers of literature will often notice more consciously and carefully the surface linguistic forms in a literary text than they do when processing other forms of linguistic communication (Zwaan 1994).

Historical perspectives

In education, a qualification in English at school in the UK by the mid-20th century, required for white collar jobs, university entry and many other more advantageous pathways in life meant certified knowledge of and ability to write essays about classical literary works, rather an odd requirement at first sight. Very few jobs would require literary reading skills understood as the ability to read poems, plays or stories, or to write critically about them. Nevertheless, literature was felt to be central to understandings of and competence in using English language and even to English identity for many of those awarding certificates and offering or withholding jobs. A singular and clearly knowable English language, to be located, it seemed, somewhere in the realm of literature, was pretty much taken for granted,

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with the abundant evidence suggesting that the situation was not actually so simple pretty much ignored. Similarly, the idea that literature or English literature is a straightforward knowable body of knowledge or experience came to be widely challenged even as advocates tried to elaborate its contents and ways of working, mainly through the 20th century. Modern understandings of *literature*, at first programmatic, increasingly more nuanced and empirically informed, and then critical, emerged from the 19th century in Europe and the US with the governing class's anxieties around decline of Christian faith, class tensions and gender, and not least deriving from the demands of empire (Viswanathan 1989). (for useful overviews see Eagleton 1983; Williams 1977; Baldick 1983). Literature was posited or presented by influential 19th-century cultural pundit Matthew Arnold as the 'best' uses of English and so a model to study and to imitate in schools and beyond. Valued culture, for Arnold, was 'the best which has been thought and said', notably in classic literature (Arnold 2006 [1869]). Poetry is still commonly seen as 'the best words in the best order', in the aphorism widely attributed to English Romantic writer Samuel Coleridge.

Literature was also the authoritative source of knowledge of the English language as philology emerged, notably from the 18th century in Europe. For example, Murray's first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) on historical principles took the majority of its citations used to illustrate the English language from literary works and from the King James Authorised translation of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, from Shakespeare in particular (and from *Hamlet* in particular from within that corpus: 'in my mind's eye' etc.). Such facts have much to tell us about a culture's preoccupations: see Winchester (2003). Our lifespan is still for many marked as 'a vale of tears' as we move, Christian by belief or not, 'to love and to cherish' someone 'till death us do part', 'for richer, for poorer', 'in sickness and in health', toward 'ashes to ashes and dust to dust' (*Book of Common Prayer*). Today we find it surprising how much language from literature still occurs in everyday speech. However, the supposed 'standard' form and the 'literary' form were much the same thing for respected early scholars. Just as literary scholars were attempting to fix the canon of English literature, so too the philologists and lexicographers were attempting to fix the standard language, and the two projects were mutually intertwined. Racist and nationalist ideologies of England and the English were also being constructed with the help of such notions of pure, essentialised English language and literature, and the supposed shared culture of the English. Ironically, however, the historical approach of what became known as the Oxford English Dictionary, to give the date of first written use and meaning and then show how these meanings change over time, of course already began to undermine the idea that any simple and unchanging 'truth' about the English language can be definitively established by consulting the OED. Critiques of this 'fixing' have come from linguists but also from within literary studies itself in more recent times. Multiple and contested understandings of English as well as of (English) literature now exist. This is partly because of the historical development of ideas of English language and partly by dint of the very nature of literary uses of language as themselves by definition linguistically reflexive, inclusive and culturally central. Literature, as is generally agreed by those who have studied these issues, 'foregrounds' for our attention language and language use, whether in English or any other language. Scholars of language and educators have thus predictably often been drawn to the study of language in literature, even though modern linguistics would argue that this is to mistake the part for the whole.

One key reason for the variation found in literature is simply because it is a historical collection of texts. Languages vary over time. Adamson (1998) is the best single source for understanding the historical and changing nature of the language used in English language literature. (See also for historical English language studies and literature, including a brief

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introduction to Adamson's research, Auer et al. 2016). Adamson traces an ordinary-language impulse in literary writers in English from the 19th century at least, undoubtedly complicated by modernism with its notoriously difficult literary texts, but consistently resisting and struggling against artificially literary heightened or 'poetic' (in a denigratory sense) style. Increasingly colloquial or demotic and/ or mixed styles, including representations of non-standard language use are characteristic of much contemporary literature, not least that which is most highly valued, one aspect of contemporary cultural 'conversationalisation', through dialects and other vernacular strategies (Hodson 2014) as in writers like Larkin, Harrison or the present Poet Laureate in the UK, Carol Ann Duffy (examples in Hall 2000; Jeffries 1993). While the prototype of literature for many will be a written text, literature was originally oral (early ballads, legends and epics) and in many cases still is. The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2016 is Bob Dylan, whose lyrics will be known to most as sung, not as written. It is interesting to consider from Adamson's account, the way in which the spoken 'ordinary everyday language' is returned to again and again in literature as a resource for creative use and improvisation, though this may also be changing with the affordances of modern technology to record, reproduce, sample and then broadcast sounds ever more easily and creatively.

Literary language

Jakobson's classic 1960s linguistic essay on 'poetic language' was arguably the beginning of modern stylistics and has been much discussed elsewhere in print. There Jakobson posited, in essence, that 'poetic language' is found predominantly in literature, where it is to be understood functionally as language that in one way or another draws attention to itself. Standard devices for doing this are repetition or near repetition ('parallelism' is Jakobson's term) and deviant uses of language (neologism, archaic language, unusual collocations, innovative uses of figurative language, dialect forms in standard contexts (or vice versa) and so on. See, for example, discussions in Goodman and O' Halloran 2006; Jeffries 1996; Tambling 1988). Many of these ideas remain very fertile sources of understanding of how language in literature works. Cognitive poetics has taken up such ideas as 'foregrounding' as a defining characteristic of literature; salient forms or uses are likely to be noticed and found meaningful by the literary reader (see Stockwell 2002 for an introduction to foregrounding and cognitive poetics more widely.) Also interesting, for example, is Jakobson's idea that because of this concentration on language forms literature can be driven by language as much as by meaning (unlike the weather forecast or a sales letter). Thus popular musician Ian Dury wrote lyrics for his songs with the aid of a rhyming dictionary, with the rhyme word then driving the backward formation of the rest of the line. Sound driving sense, as Jakobson would say. Most of us who have tried to do any extended writing recognise the truth of E. M. Forster's widely quoted adage, 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?' It is basic to literature to be particularly concerned with form, perhaps especially when reading and writing poetry. A genre like the sonnet can be extended and played with (16 line sonnets in sequence in the cases of George Meredith and Tony Harrison rather than the usual 14 lines) but here as elsewhere form (rhyme, rhythm, metre) is found by many to be creatively enabling as well as sometimes constraining. Creative literary writing can be a key space for such experimentation and play with form and meaning.

Early stylistics showed how revealing attention to the 'language of literature' could be. Halliday (1967) on linguistics of agency in William Golding's novel *The Inheritors* is still highly illuminating analysis. Later stylistics went on to raise important sociocultural issues in

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literary writing through close and informed examination of the language used. Nash (1990), for example, showed how close the language of popular romances sometimes was to the much more highly valued literary language of D. H. Lawrence, as well as suggesting some interesting differences. Staying with studies in language and gender, stylisticians investigated claims from critics, literary theorists and writers themselves that women somehow 'write differently' from men. Woolf's idea of the 'female sentence' was empirically shown to be at best highly problematic, textually speaking (e.g. Mills (1995), 'The Gendered Sentence'.) Others have looked at linguistic constructions of gender in literature, for example Hermione in the best-selling Harry Potter series (Eberhardt 2017). Sotirova's (2011) subtle studies of free indirect speech have shown the value of attention to language as a primary fact of any literary experience. Most recently, a stylistics of discourse has necessarily concerned itself with actual acts of literary reception and literary reading practices where traditional stylistics and literary criticism tended to speculate or assert without evidence on the effects of language in literature on a purely textual basis (Allington and Pihlaja 2016; Allington and Swann 2009; Peplow et al. 2016).

Stories are also to be found in everyday conversation with much the same features and structure as in literature. When does storytelling become recognisable as literary fiction? What features of a story may lead to a higher valuation than for some others? Is life writing (for example) 'literature' (biography or autobiography)? Children's or teenage fiction? Graphic novels? Most important for the present discussion, how far are these evaluations based on language use alone? Toolan (2001) offers an informed introduction to the worlds of narrative and its study (narratology), which serves as another area of enquiry for those who wish to investigate what literature is, or how it works, and the role of language in that working. The answers lie in awareness of language use as discourse: who is writing for whom about what, as much as what they are writing. Educational or other powers and authorities, publishers and exam boards, critics and teachers, will play a crucial role in generating or promoting wider evaluations of stories. Toolan (2012) specifically investigates the fascinating question of the linguistics of 'bad literature', when unconvincing or clumsy language use disqualifies a text from the label of literature. (See Toolan 2012 on valued creative use of repetition versus repetition as irritating or ineffective writing).

Thus the basic point needs to be clearly reiterated that literary language is recognised and valued as such as discourse. That is, utterances are literary because of the context in which they occur, the co-text of utterances or sentences preceding and following, the larger context of the whole poem/play/ novel, and larger contexts such as the literature lesson at school, the reading circle or public performance. Taken alone and out of context, any of the examples with which I began could have been found in non-literary contexts. 'Non-literature' is an interesting thought experiment, but for that reason is not meaningfully considered in terms of isolated sentences. The non-literary, in so far as it can be found or imagined, is language used (by author or reader) for non-literary purposes. (See Carter (2004), for example, on the surprisingly pervasive poetic nature of everyday discourse.) There is nothing or little literary or non-literary but thinking makes it so. No literary readers, no literature, as some would have it. Zwaan (1994) again offers strong empirical evidence for such a position.

Recent research

In this section I report briefly on some instances of linguistic or stylistic research into language use in literature to illustrate the advances and advantages a more scientific approach to our topic can bring.

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Corpus linguistics research on literary language

As has been argued already, there is no single linguistic feature distinguishing the supergenre Literature from the non-literary, nor does a single feature distinguish a novel from a poem, a sermon from a lecture. Rather, as Biber and colleagues notably show through computational linguistic analysis (Biber and Conrad 2001), clusters of tendencies suggest the presence of the literary or a specific genre and the likelihood of its being taken for literature by a given group and even valued as a strong exemplar of literature. It was already established by the 1990s (Carter and Nash 1990; Adamson 1998) that what is unusual about language in literature is actually not only unusual (or 'deviant') uses of forms, but also the very range of styles and registers to be found in literary works, particularly in modern times. Language variation includes dialect (regional, class) style (gender, identity, idiolect) and register. Register is a term used by linguists to label uses of language (media news, sports commentary, legal document, adult talking to child and so on) which experienced users of a language can recognise as identifying or even constructing a situation of language use. (Montgomery et al. 2013, Chapter 7 is a good basic introduction to the idea with reference to literary texts.) Corpus linguistic work of Biber and colleagues went on to identify statistically systematic 'dimensions' of a language use in literature use (clusters of 'features', we might say, such as particular pronoun use co-occurring with particular tenses or sentence structures) which co-occur and come to show relative tendencies of a particular genre in comparison with other genres (see Biber and Conrad 2001; more recent examples in Biber and Conrad 2009). Overall Biber's work statistically supports Adamson or others who argue that literature and indeed English language use generally has become more vernacular and less formal over time to the present day. (Biber and Finegan 1989 was an important first sketch). Fictional literary texts such as the novel are shown to typically share many features with personal phone conversations or examples of written interpersonal communication. The more closely a genre is specified ('19th-century realist novel', 'Victorian narrative poetry', etc.) the more easily and reliably linguistic dimensions can be identified. 'Literature'– even 'English literature' – is not identifiable purely linguistically but probabilistic tendencies can be identified for specific literary genres. There is no 'literary language' then, in any useful generalised sense, but some typical uses of language, particularly in relation to specific literary genres. Corpus linguistics has now shown this systematically and extensively, beyond the single qualitatively 'hand-harvested' examples of the earliest linguists who looked at this question.

Shakespeare's language

A second example of more recent scholarship on language use in literature can refer to advances in Shakespeare studies. The writings usually attributed to William Shakespeare have often been taken as the paradigmatic instance of literature in the English language in modern times. Here if anywhere is highly valued literary use of language. It is therefore worth pausing to examine more carefully some of the claims that have been made for Shakespeare's language by non-linguists and then to show what more recent linguistic research can add to such claims and understandings. Once again, it can be seen that inflated claims for the distinctive nature of literary language use have to be carefully qualified. Probably the most persuasive and impressive single volume on Shakespeare's language to date is Kermode (2001). The eye of an experienced editor has carefully examined speeches and exchanges with the detail of the Shakespeare canon and contexts fully in mind, and the results are fascinating and illuminating. Nevertheless, the method is frustratingly impressionistic. Why look at this speech or word(s) rather than another? The examination is driven by literary judgments of

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dramatic value rather than by issues of language description or analysis, despite the book's title *Shakespeare's Language*. We learn a lot about Shakespeare's writing but only incidentally about his language. The account is highly selective without the principles for selection being made explicit. The focus is firmly on describing characters and plot first and foremost; the language in which this is done actually remains secondary. Historical understanding of Elizabethan rhetoric is the discipline used through most of the book with very little evidence of any knowledge or interest in what linguistics since the 17th century might have to offer one of the most sophisticated Shakespeare scholars in the world at that time. It is an unfortunate missed opportunity. Later plays, we are told at one point, in a fascinating cataloguing of repetitions and near repetitions in Shakespeare's writings, are 'unlike the rhetoric of earlier rhetoric' (Kermode 2001: 216). Earlier plays have characters who talk like the rhetoric books Shakespeare would have studied at school (35). I would trust Kermode's highly informed intuition, or at least find it worth investigating. Unfortunately, unable or unwilling to apply linguistic methodologies, Kermode seems to have no resource beyond this impression to analyse and describe in what way exactly the repetition differs between earlier and later plays. Interesting quotations are offered, but no systematic account, a good example of the difference between literary criticism and stylistics (Hall 2014).

More promising for those wishing to explore systematically and scientifically Shakespeare's use of English is research related to Culpeper's (2016) 'Shakespeare Encyclopedia' project based at Lancaster University, UK. Through a computational corpus-linguistic approach features of Shakespeare's word use, grammar, semantics and more can be highlighted both in their own right, and importantly against a background of contemporary uses. This analysis allows us to see what might have been distinctive about Shakespeare's writing and could have contributed to his being noticed and valued by some contemporaries as a leading playwright even before the near canonisation that took place from the 18th century onward, where sociocultural factors are obviously an important part of the bard's growing reputation beyond any purely linguistic virtues (Taylor 1989). Although some commentators historically have pointed to the size and range of Shakespeare's vocabulary as a source of his greatness, Elliott and Valenza (2011) show that this statistical claim is not valid. The impression of an unusually large vocabulary can be explained both against the general growth of English vocabulary during the period in which Shakespeare wrote and in which he inevitably participated and the demands of dramatic writing, where other contemporary dramatists were using a similar or even larger range. Similarly, examining a myth largely promoted by OED's pervasive quoting of Shakespeare as 'first' user of a new word meaning or word, Goodland (2011) shows that Shakespeare's reputation for coining new words has been much exaggerated because of weaknesses in the original gathering and recording of first usages. Such research implicitly raises interesting questions about the sometimes unreflecting high valuation of originality of language use and forms in the overall valuation of creativity. While there is no space here to discuss the issue, computational linguistics also makes increasingly sophisticated contributions to authorship attribution studies (e.g. Vickers 2004 on Shakespeare). Even if qualitative judgements of scholars will always also be finally inescapable, they can be usefully informed by such statistics. Elsewhere, Hoover (2007), for example, uses computational methods in thoughtful ways to deepen our understanding of the evolving style and techniques of Henry James.

Metaphor in literature

Literature is thought to be particularly prone to metaphor and other non-literal uses of language. Once again, however, modern linguistics gives a more precise and nuanced picture.

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Metaphor is pervasive through all kinds of language use (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). What varies is what kinds of metaphor are used and how. Metaphor in literature is typically innovatory and elaborated rather than conventional and passing, not more frequent than in other text types, but interestingly, often self-consciously signalled as such (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Dorst 2015). It may be convenient here to instance Sylvia Plath's poem 'Metaphors'. This is another instance of the central argument of this chapter, that the language found in literature is not fundamentally different from other uses of language, but may be deployed in original ways for primarily creative purposes. Our understanding of these specificities has grown with recent research (see also Semino and Steen 2008). For modern cognitive linguistics, metaphor is thinking as much as it is language use, or the two are indivisible, so that the novel metaphors of literary works naturally are used to explore innovatory thought and expression, once again moving understandings on from linguistic surface form text to discourse and meanings.

Dispute and debate: why read literature?

If, then, literature is linguistically different in its range and exploitation of the resources of English, but not completely different, what might be the value or advantages of continuing to read literature when there are ever more distractions, and less demanding, often more immediately attractive ways to spend our time? The literature fan whose attention to literature has been rewarded in past experience will need no convincing but a new generation of readers are clearly not reading the same things in the same way as their parents did. Literature reading (broadly understood) is widely agreed to lead to an expanded vocabulary and general language awareness enhancement, and those who read more, unsurprisingly, become more fluent readers and usually also better readers on a variety of measures. Further claims for writing skills advantages are made, most convincingly where creative writing and other more active approaches to literature reading are used. Advocates for stylistics or looser language-based approaches to literature reading argue that evidence-based approaches to literature through its language increase accessibility for those who find literary texts difficult or confusing, giving them a way in from which more rewarding literary experiences may grow. The relative success and growth in popularity in the UK of various English language and literature 'A level' (school leaving) syllabuses in recent years suggests many teachers and students find something in such claims (Stockwell 2016: 220; for further statistics, see reports of the UK English Subject Group). Literary critics see a need to engage with the language of literary texts in scholarship, criticism and education, but at the same time express hostility to purportedly reductive linguistic approaches or stylistics without offering any alternative (Hall 2014). As with Kermode's (2001) sophisticated ruminations on Shakespeare's writings, much literary criticism and linguistic research in such areas could and should be mutually informing, but sadly this occurs too infrequently. A 'keyword' (for example) for a literary critic is thematic and intuitive, but far more nuanced and contextual than the frequency statistics of the linguist's 'keyword' (a word occurring more frequently in a text than probability would predict). For computers 'what you see is what you get'; critics will always be better at inferencing and interpretation. The challenge is to produce an account of the language of literary texts that can bring insights and findings of the two parties into dialogue. These enquiries can and should be complementary rather than conflictual.

It is probably uncontroversial now to recognise the need for flexible understandings of literature. Culture wars and battles over the canon are largely a matter of the past for educators if not for politicians. Literature for those in education is widely understood to be an appropriate

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way to engage in formal education or in wider life-issues such as migration, diaspora, globalisation, race and ethnicity. Not long ago UK Education Minister Michael Gove upset many such educators by insisting on removing American literature titles by John Steinbeck from school study in favour of Shakespeare and 19th-century English poetry with a declared nationalistic agenda. A difficulty readers like Gove have with the expanded canon of literatures in English is increasing globalisation in English language literary creation and the obvious non-standard uses of English in many writers with a wide range of variation. The shortcoming of such views, as we have seen, is that variation and non-standard uses have been central to works recognised as literature from the beginning and increasingly so in more recent times. The problem of accessibility of Shakespeare is partly of outdated language, but as Kermode (2001) points out, no audience of Shakespeare ever understood or indeed listened to every word of his plays. One mistake is to approach literature with inappropriate expectations. England and the English were only ever an imagined community. The same applies to novels or stories from Africa, Asia or the many places in between: to be sometimes puzzled in our reading is not a bad thing. Creativity in English language use was ever thus. Reading literature problematises notions of one correct or standard English, both now and across history; it cannot possibly teach such mistaken notions. The UK school standards auditing body Ofsted worries in recurrent reports that too many 'non-fiction' texts are being used and studied, that their value is not clear, and they can be studied in other subjects anyway. As this chapter argues, however, the only way to appreciate what literary writings might offer that is different or new is precisely to study them against the background of other genres from which they are thought to differ and on which they draw.

Future directions

Space only allows a very brief highlighting here of some more obvious topics for future research, already touched on in this account. Hewings et al. (2016) can fill out some of these topics further for those interested as well as my own references included below.

- Corpus linguistics (e.g. Mahlberg; Culpeper et al., Biber) and 'digital humanities' generally prompts new questions as well as deepening understanding of older ones. Its contribution has already been important but there is still clearly much to offer. Thus Mahlberg (2013) studies repetition and parallelism in Dickens as a creative technique in ways facilitated by software and digitised storage of the work. A similarly repetitive and even obsessive writer like D. H. Lawrence would benefit from such an approach too.
- Related are studies of literature and new media, new technologies, Kindles, audio books and more. New technologies are prompting new reading and writing practices, particularly among younger readers (Deegan and Hayler 2016). Language study needs necessarily to give way to more multimodal studies of semiotic creativity and reception as new technologies affect composition and consumption of creative texts in ways we are only beginning to study and understand.
- Literary reading research (compare Peplow and Carter 2014) is a relatively new area for the investigation of how readers make literary meanings from words. Growing awareness of which words are noticed, for what purposes and how deployed in interpretation is one immediate benefit from this stream of research and the role of language in literary meaning making. Some aspects of the account of literary language in this chapter may well need to be modified as these findings extend.
- New Englishes, postcolonial Englishes, transnational and translingual creative uses, and hybridity are the norm in much new literature in English. Remarkably little has been

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written to date on code-mixing and related phenomena in English literary works, or perhaps rather in works with a 'matrix' of English language (Sebba et al. 2012). The phenomenon is not entirely new, of course – consider the multilingual realities of medieval England, to be seen as late as Chaucer's early attempts at vernacular English-language literature in the 14th century; Wolf (2017) has explored George Eliot's use of French in her classic English Victorian novels. Taylor-Batty (2014) has begun to explore the pervasive multilingualism informing classic modernist literature in English. There is no doubt however that such practices are becoming ever more common and seem likely to continue or increase into the foreseeable future. 'English', as elsewhere in this Handbook, is not a straightforward idea, but nationalistic and monolingual approaches have limited understandings of literature as of language to date.

- Cognitive and neurolinguistic advances are prompting new understandings and new understandings of literary linguistic practices. One fascinating example (Garrard et al. 2005) expands our understanding of Alzheimer's as well as of literature by charting a narrowing vocabulary in the later novels of Iris Murdoch.
- New interest in ethics and literature reading – e.g. educational research into 'empathy' and emotions in the literary reading experience is also being driven by cognitive linguistics (Sklar 2013). Language is a way of relating to each other, understanding each other and building relations. This traditional role of literature is increasingly investigated rather than just taken for granted or asserted and undoubtedly feeds into the educational arguments for engagement with literature and 'English studies'.

Cultural and linguistic creativity generally, including creative writing, has never been more popular than it is today. 'Other people' used to write 'literature' and tell us how to read it. Now more and more ordinary people participate in various ways in literary creativity across a range of sites. Literature has been a demonstrably important source for many expressions and usages in English historically, though the importance of literature as such a source may now be declining even as classic literature reading is arguably declining, or at least broader and looser notions of the literary are coming into play. A recent study found British people could more readily quote fragments of advertising than they could recall classic literary texts ('I'm lovin' it', 'Does exactly what it says on the tin', etc.) (Guardian 2008). Advertising undoubtedly uses literary linguistic strategies and devices quite extensively and appeals in some of the same ways at times (Cook 2001), and we live in a culture of promotional messages. Literature has also played a crucial part in historical efforts to 'fix' a standard English language, and in attempts by those in power through education and other cultural mediation to enforce norms of best or 'proper' English language use, broadly in foredoomed attempts to hold back language change (Aitchison 2013). There is much research still to be done in this demanding and still rapidly evolving area even as our understandings of literature and of the English language continue to evolve. Literature is a 'site of struggle' as Bakhtin (1981) rightly observed, and these struggles take place in and through language use in literature. In debates over literary language are to be found key indicators of who readers want and don't want to be and how they want to live. If literature didn't matter, these often emotional and controversial debates would have ceased long ago. They matter.

Further reading

Adamson, S. (1998) 'Literary language', in S. Romaine (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language*. Vol 4. 1776–1997. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 7: 589–692. A classic, but not

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yet surpassed, informed introduction to modern literary language and its evolution toward more vernacular standards in recent times. Also raises many other relevant areas for those interested by this chapter.

Hall, G. (2014) 'Stylistics as literary criticism', in P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, Ch. 7, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 87–100. Language as an issue in literary criticism and linguistic or stylistic approaches to English literature. The argument is that unhelpful hostilities and misunderstandings which are illustrated can and should be overcome in the interests of the value of both approaches.

Hall, G. (2015) *Literature in Language Education*. 2nd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ch. 1 Literary language and ordinary language. Discusses some of the issues raised here in more depth and with further references.

Pope, R. (2012) *Studying English Literature and Language. An Introduction* [*The English Language Studies Book*]. 3rd edn. London: Routledge. A lively, sometimes provocative introduction to many of the themes broached here and their centrality to 'English studies'. Can be read selectively or opportunistically as a reference book rather than a straightforward textbook, and contains many useful examples to explore and stimulate new insights and connections.

Language and Literature (Sage journal) ISSN: 0963-9470 Online ISSN: 1461-7293. The leading international research journal for issues in language and literature will give a taste of the range of issues and approaches that currently exist.

Related topics

- The idea of English
- World Englishes: disciplinary debates and future directions
- Standards in English
- The language of creative writing
- Stylistics: studying literary and everyday style in English.

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