UNIT 6: STYLISTICS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- appreciate the nature and scope of stylistics
- distinguish between the approaches of stylistics and literary criticism to a literary text
- appreciate the features of formal poetic style
- appreciate the features of formal prose style

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In the general sense, stylistics is the study of style; of how language use varies according to varying situations and contexts in which language is used either orally or in writing. In this unit you shall be introduced to the nature and scope of stylistics. We observe that what style we adopt depends upon a number of situational factors that can be explained in three domains namely, *the field of discourse, the style of discourse* and *the mode of discourse*.

Next we shall discuss the distinction between stylistic analysis of a literary text and the approach of literary critics to a literary text by arguing that while the literary critic is concerned among other things with value judgement of a literary text, stylistics is concerned with how language operates in the literary text and to explore its significance.

We shall next move on to an analysis of the formal properties of poetic style by stating that poetic style is essentially a deviation from the general use of language either of written prose or conversational discourse.

Following the different deviations and devices that poets use to make poetic language distinctive, we shall discuss the features of formal prose style and the style of conversation. The unit is essentially an introduction to the field of stylistics to make you aware of the approaches that can be adopted to analyse literary style as evident from the stylistic analysis of the poetical text given.

6.3 NATURE AND SCOPE OF STYLISTICS

Stylistics is concerned with the study of style of distinctive varieties of language and variations in the use of language. When we use language, we adopt a style. However, what style we adopt depends upon a number of factors that can be explained in terms of three domains:

(a) The subject-matter or topic that is governed by different fields of language use or the *fields of discourse*. These fields include the fields of science and technology, business communication, law and journalism, religion and literature. Each field is characterized by its distinctive language use. For example, the style of science and technology is different from that of business communication which again is different from the language of law and journalism.

(b) The relationship between the participants of the discourse which could require the *style of discourse* to be formal, semi-formal or informal. We modify our style of language use into formal, semi-formal and informal depending upon the demands of a particular situation.

(c) The *mode of discourse* which refers to the medium in which the language is used. The medium could be spoken or written. The style of spoken language is different from that of the written language and so on.

We make a selection from a range of syntactic and lexical possibilities according to the purpose of communication and the context and situation in which the communication takes place. For example, depending on the speaker-listener relationship, we use an informal or a semi-formal or formal style. Likewise, depending on whether it is in the spoken or the written mode, our style may vary. Again, depending on the field in which we are using language as to whether we are writing a news-story or a work of fiction or a commercial correspondence, our style will also vary. A study of these variations in the use of language belongs to the purview of stylistics.

The study of style has traditionally been the preserve of literary criticism. Through the centuries, literary critics from Horace and Longinus to Matthew Arnold and Dr F.R. Leavis and beyond, have characteristically examined the way in which different literary works use different literary styles to represent human experience. The ultimate concern of the literary critic is with evaluation, with being able to say whether a work succeeds or fails as a work of art.

Stylistics does not discriminate between literary texts and non-literary texts as worthwhile objects of study. In other words, stylistics does not attempt to accord a privileged status to a literary work over a non-literary work which could be a travel brochure or an entry of a recipe book or any written text for that matter. Thus, the scope of stylistics is much wider than that of literary criticism with its exclusive concern for literary texts.

Secondly, stylistics does not accord a privileged position to the written text over the spoken word. The spoken word can be fairly extensive; one can think about sports commentaries, religious sermons, chat shows, conversational acts, etc., all of which come under the purview of stylistics. The primary agenda of stylistics is to concern itself with the text – either literary or non-literary, either spoken or written, as a linguistic entity worthy of serious study.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Answer the following questions briefly:

(a) Give a definition of stylistics.

(b) Compared to stylistics, what do you think is the limitation of literary criticism?

(c) Explain the term 'field of discourse'.

(d) Give an example of a sentence illustrating formal style.

6.4 STYLISTICS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

A major concern of stylistics is to use new insights in linguistics to study the language of literature. From this point of view, one of the definitions of stylistics could be that stylistics is the linguistic study of literature. This definition raises a basic question: how is a stylistic analysis of a literary text different from that of literary criticism?

By stating that stylistics is also concerned with the study and analysis of literary texts, it is important to remember that the approach of stylistics, (more appropriately, *literary stylistics,* as the term is referred to in order to distinguish it from general stylistics,) is not the same as that of literary criticism. H.G. Widdowson (1975) very convincingly draws the distinction between these two fields. He states that the ultimate purpose of literary criticism is to interpret and evaluate literary writings as works of art. The literary critic explicates the individual message of the literary text in terms which makes its significance clear to others. He deciphers a message encoded in an unfamiliar way, to express its meaning in familiar and comprehensible terms.

The basic distinction of stylistics with literary criticism is that stylistics does not attempt to account for literary value of a literary text unlike literary criticism. Stylistics is concerned with the language of the text. Given a piece of literature, a poem for example, stylistics will be interested in finding out how language operates to make the text meaningful. If there are any curiosities of usage, some expressions that appear to be foregrounded against normal usage, stylistics attempts to see how these curiosities might

be accounted for. It does not attempt to follow the path of literary criticism leading to a search for literary value of a piece of text. Freed from the burden of evaluation, stylistics approaches a literary text with a fresh and almost a naive eye and explores some very basic issues concerning the ways in which the language of a literary text communicates.

We may illustrate the stylistic approach to a literary text through the concept of foregrounding. It is a term originally from painting where it is a means of achieving significance. If we assume that literary language is somewhat different from non-literary language, then we can say that non-literary language is the background against which literary language is foregrounded. Foregrounding devices are not systematically employed in non-literary language unlike as in literary language where a word or expression stands out or deviates from normal collocation or usage so as to give what Leech calls “an extra regularity into the language. Stylistic analysis of literary texts would attempt to discover foregrounding in the text and see how these devices are aesthetically purposeful. When we read Eliot’s “Prufrock...” for example, the colloquial expressions in the poem appear to stand out. Stylistic analysis attempts to discover significance in these deviations.

The nature of the language of literature has been engaging the attention of stylistics more than anything else. These engagements point to diverse views on literary styles, especially formal poetic style, by carrying the notion that poets exercise a freedom in their use of language that is denied to the others. The term “poetic licence” is used to explain this freedom. Poetic licence is the liberty allowed to poets to play with the language according to their needs in the uses of *figurative speech, archaism* among others. These uses characterise literary language in the sense that they are deviations from the general use of language which has been considered to be the norm. These devices including foregrounding are the tools of stylistics in the attempt to analyse literary texts.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q2. Answer the following questions:

(a) Explain the term "poetic licence".

(b) Briefly discuss the term 'foregrounding'.

6.5 FORMAL POETIC STYLE

The term "formal poetic style" carries the notion that the language of poetry contains features that distinguish it from the features of prose. If we take the language of prose as the norm we can say that the language of poetry is a deviation from the norm. Poetic language deviates by the use of figurative speech and archaism. The term figurative speech refers to the use of literary devices like *similes, metaphors, personification, transferred epithets* etc. We had earlier discussed these literary devices along with a number of stylistic devices in our unit on *The Language of Literature*. The term *archaism* is another literary device used in literary texts. The term denotes use of words or expressions especially in poetry that have now been considered old or obsolete. These uses contribute towards making the language of poetry *deviate* from that of prose or the language of conversation referred to as *verbal style*.

Deviation is especially characteristic of poetic language: the language deviates from expected norms of linguistic expression. A study of these deviations can give us a fair idea of what constitutes poetic language. Moreover, these deviations provide us a framework for the analysis of a literary text. They are the linguistic devices that poets make use of to bring distinctiveness in literary language. A few of them have been briefly discussed below:

(a) *Lexical deviation*: The term refers to the liberty of poets to coin new words or to give new meanings to an old word. Poets apply the existing rules of word formation with greater generality than is customary.

(b) *Grammatical deviation*: The term refers to the liberty of poets to deviate from the grammatical conventions that allow an ordering of different grammatical elements in a pattern. Word-order in English syntax being fixed, it is possible to identify patterns in poetry that deviate from these fixed patterns as in

(i) My days among the dead are passed (Southey)

(ii) Home they brought her warrior dead. (Tennyson)

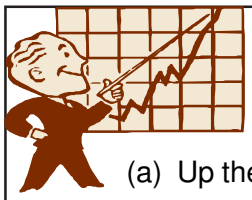
(c) *Phonological deviation*: Phonology is the study of the sound system of a language. The term phonological deviation refers to a deviation from the normal pronunciation of a word for certain poetic effect. In their effort towards identifying rhyming words, poets deviate from normal pronunciation For example. John Donne deviates from the normal pronunciation of the word 'wind' (strong flowing air) to pronounce it as a verb form of the word 'wind' (to twist or to turn) in the poem "Sweetest love, I do not goe..." Apart from rhyme, metre, assonance and alliteration which are a part of the poetic language are realized with a patterning of sounds.

(d) *Graphological deviation*: Graphology means writing. The term refers to the liberty of poets to deviate from the norms of conventional writing including both spelling and punctuation. Blake calls his animal "Tyger" and not "Tiger", making the spelling of the word a deviation from the normal spelling of the word which was already standardised in Blake's time. Blake makes use of a deliberate choice of the old spelling suggesting an animal more mysterious and different. A striking example of punctuation is the American poet E.E. Cummings who deviates from all the rules of punctuation and capital letters in his poetry.

(e) *Semantic deviation*: The term refers to the liberty of poets to deviate from the normal conventions of meaning and to give new meaning to words and expressions. Wordsworth's "The child is father of the man" is a striking example of semantic deviation in the sense that the surface meaning conveyed by the line deviates from normal meaning which would tend to regard the man as the father of the child.

(f) *Register deviation*: The term "register" refers to the situational use of language. Poets often take the liberty to shift from one register to another for poetic effect. For example, they may deviate from a formal poetic style to a conversational style or some other variety of style that makes the text to stand out to provide significance of some sort.

Apart from these deviations, poetic language makes use of a few other devices to achieve poetic effect. These include *repetitions, foregrounding* and *parallel structure*. Repetition is often employed by us even in our ordinary language for emphasis. Poets use the device systematically to achieve more complex effects than are possible in daily language. The repetition may be of sounds or words and phrases and sentences or lines in poetry as in "Stopping by woods..." by Robert Frost where the last two lines are repeated "And miles to go before I sleep" primarily to give a connotative significance to the word "sleep" to refer to death. Parallel structure, on the other hand, is seen as a poetic device in which a structure or line used earlier is repeated with minor changes in words as in "To err is human, to forgive, divine". In nursery rhymes and ballads, it affords some kind of pleasure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Name the type of poetic deviation in these lines:

(a) Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen

(b) The sun does arise
And make merry the skies

(c) Tomorow and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty face from day to day...

(d) Discuss semantic deviation.

6.6 FORMAL PROSE STYLE

The term formal prose style used here refers to written prose that is distinct from conversational or verbal style on the one hand and formal poetic style on the other. The basic character of formal prose style is its distinctive and well-structured syntax, its use of complete and well-formed sentences that follow all the conventions of grammar and usage. For example, a notable feature of formal prose style is the use of subordinations and passive constructions. Such constructions are very rare in conversational style.

The sentence constructions used in formal prose style follows the cannons of grammaticality unlike poetic style where grammatical deviation of a device followed by poets besides a host of other devices that go under the category of poetic licence. Grammaticality can be called a distinctive feature of formal prose style.

Besides grammaticality, formal prose style is marked by appropriateness. It is not enough for sentences to be grammatical; the style followed must be appropriate for a given situation. Different fields of language have been identified namely the language of science and technology, of business communication and so on, as it becomes necessary to select the appropriate variety of language for the distinctive field. Thus, the formal prose style used in newspaper writings will not be appropriate in writing a legal brief or a report in the area of science and technology.

Moreover, formal prose style is characterized by the extensive use of cohesive markers to show relationship between words and sentences to achieve connectivity and coherence of the text. Just as one word leads to another in a sentence, one sentence in a paragraph leads to another and one paragraph in a longer text leads to another. In between there are cohesive devices that characterise formal prose style.

Formal prose style contrasts with conversational or verbal style that refers to the style of spoken language. From the point of view of production, it is clear that spoken language and written language make somewhat different demands on language producers. The speaker has available to him/her the full range of voice quality effects as well as facial expression, postural and gestural systems that are denied to the writer. The most significant character of verbal language is that it is typically much less structured than that of written language. Spoken language is characterised by incomplete utterances, context-bound utterances and space fillers like *well, er, I think, you know,* etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Answer the following questions:

(a) Explain the term “grammaticality”.

(b) Explain what you mean by the term “appropriateness”.

6.7 STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF A POEM

In this section we propose to present a stylistic analysis of the first section of “To Autumn” by John Keats by considering the lexical and grammatical devices and foregrounded lexical items that contribute towards a cohesive structure of the lines.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun:
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees;
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core ;
To swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o’er-brimmed their clammy cells.

The first thing that we note about the lines from John Keats’ “To Autumn” is that the lines have a cohesive structure. Both lexical and grammatical devices have been used to bind the lines into a cohesive piece of text. The poet achieves this cohesion by the use of lexical sets that form a network of inter-related lexical items. The following are the lexical sets identified:

(a) mellow—mature—ripeness—sweet

(b) fruit – apple – gourd – hazel – kernel

(c) vine – moss’d cottage-trees – flowers

(d) swell – plump – o’er-brimmed – fill – load – bend

(e) season – summer – warm days – sun

These lexical sets notably *mellow – fruit – vine – swell—season,* contribute towards building up a network of cohesive devices to bring out the deeper meaning underlying the lines. They heighten the effect of the "mellow fruitfulness" of autumn brought about by the conspiracy of the maturing sun with the season.

The adjective "maturing" in "maturing sun" is interesting. The denotative meaning of the word is the action of ripening of the fruit by the sun. But connotatively, it could also mean the sun of autumn in its maturing stage before its decline in winter. These lexical items in each set not only help to form inter-textual patterns but also to paint a landscape of autumn with the ripening fruit, late flowers and the bees gathering honey in their already clammy cells touched by a sunset glow.

A notable feature of the given lines is the foregrounding of some lexical items in order to make them stand out against the background of normal use of language. As example we refer to the expression "bosom friend" that is used in the context of the "friendship" between the sun and the autumn season. This friendship leads them to "conspire" to come into a secret plan to ripen the fruits of autumn. From this sense it is seen that the word "conspiring" too stands out. The poet makes use of lexical items denoting human action that are attributed to non-human entities – the sun and the season. Thereby, these lexical items carry a deeper significance. They suggest that the poet takes recourse to personification. Foregrounding occurs here because the placement of the lexical items *bosom friend* and *conspiring* become figurative.

Another notable stylistic feature in the lines is the pattern of syntax.

- To bend with apples...
- To swell the gourd...
- To load and bless...
- To set budding more...

They are parallel structures that also build up inter-textual patterns where they are related among themselves. The lexical sets identified above denote a large variety of fruit of the season. But they connote to create a situation of the abundance of autumn. Words like bend, swell and load contribute towards creating the effect of the abundance of autumn.



6.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed stylistics as the study of style; of how language use varies according to varying situations and contexts in which language is used either orally or in writing. You are now familiar with the nature and scope of stytistics. We briefly discussed the three domains namely, the field of discourse, the style of discourse and the mode of discourse. Next we discussed the distinction between stylistic analysis of a literary text and the approach of literary critics to a literary text by arguing that while the literary critic is concerned among other things with value judgement of a literary text, stylistics is concerned with how language operates in the literary text and to explore its significance. We next moved on to an analysis of the formal properties of poetic style by stating that poetic style is essentially a deviation from the general use of language either of written prose or conversational discourse. After discussing the different deviations and devices that poets use to make poetic language distinctive, we moved on to provide a sample of formal prose style and the style of conversation. An attempt has also been made to work out an analysis of a poem by applying the devices and deviations as tools for analysis.



6.9 FURTHER READING

1. Leech, Geoffrey N.(1975). *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry,* Longman.
2. Toolan, Michael. (1997). *Language in Literature,* Arnold, London.
3. Widdowson, H.G. (1995). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature,* Longman.

6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1.

(a) Stylistics is a field of study that makes use of the new insights in linguistics to study the language of literature. In other words, stylistics is the linguistic study of language. However, because of its concern with language, stylistics also reaches out to non-literary language as worthwhile objects of study.

(b) The field of stylistics is much wider than that of literary criticism. Stylistics encompasses not only literary and non-literary texts but also both oral and written texts. On the other hand, the range of literary criticism is restricted to an evaluation of a literary text.

(c) For the field of discourse refer to 6.3. (a).

(d) Example: You are advised to see the doctor.

Ans to Q2.

(a) The term "poetic licence" refers to the liberty enjoyed by poets to break the rules of the language when it suits them. The poets exercise this freedom of distorting common or ordinary language with a definite aesthetic purpose. But unless the aesthetic purposefulness emerges, sooner or later in the interpretation of the poem, the deviation will be felt to be mere whimsical or a habit on the part of poets for their own sake.

(b) See 6.4.

Ans to Q3.

(a) Parallel structures or parallelism

(b) Grammatical deviation

(c) Repetition as a poetic device

(d) For semantic deviation see 6.5.

Ans to Q4.

(a) Grammaticality: see 6.6.

(b) Appropriateness: see 6.6.



6.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give brief answers to the following questions

(a) Explain the term 'style of discourse'.

(b) Give the two modes of discourse stated in this unit.

(c) Stylistics does not discriminate between literary texts and non-literary texts. (State True/False)

(d) Give an example of personification.

Q2. Explain the following:

(a) Foregrounding

(b) Lexical deviation

(c) Phonological deviation

(d) Parallelism

Q3. Answer the following:

(a) Discuss the nature and scope of stylistics.

(b) Discuss the distinctive features of stylistics and literary criticism.

(c) Give a stylistic analysis of the following poem titled “The Eagle”:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands,
Close to the sun in lonely lands
Ring’d with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls,
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

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