UNIT 2 THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LINGUISTICS, LITERARY CRITICISM AND STYLISTICS

Structure

2.0   OBJECTIVES

The aim of the unit is to show you the relationship between linguistics, literary criticism and stylistics.

This will help you understand that linguistics and literary criticism are not rival disciplines, but in fact have a close relationship with each other. In fact, the interrelations between the two fields have given rise to the discipline of **Stylistics**.

2.1   INTRODUCTION

First we must ask ourselves the question, 'what is linguistics?' Linguistics may be briefly defined as the scientific study of language within the realm of the sentence. It can be divided into different branches, namely, Phonetics and Phonology; Morphology and Syntax; and Semantics, and each of these areas contributes to our understanding of how language works.

But as we have seen earlier, language is not restricted to the sentence. It operates not only in the purely linguistic sphere, that is the sentence, but also in text/ discourse (that is the linguistic context, which may be larger than the sentence, and sometimes smaller than the sentence) and also in the speech context, or the social situation in which speech occurs. This last comprises the participants in the communication, the place and time of interaction, the topic, medium, etc. Thus, linguistic, textual and sociolinguistic factors are all required in order to understand the nature of language. In addition, there is the psycholinguistic aspect which is involved in the processing of language in the minds of the speaker and the listener. Language is not then, a purely linguistic artifact, but a process of communication between human beings in a linguistic and speech context.

Let us see how language functions as a tool of communication. Any act of communication begins as an experience or a message in the brain of the speaker/ writer. In order to communicate this experience, words or sentences (which are in fact sequences of sounds) are uttered/ written. The listener who knows how to interpret these sound sequences, or the reader the graphological message and capture the experience which the speaker wants to communicate. Language is, therefore, a system that mediates between the world of sound/ script and the world of experience.

2.2 LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Let us see how linguistics relates to literary criticism. We are all aware that language is the stuff of which literature is made, whatever be the literary genre concerned, novel, drama, poetry. Linguistics describes the system underlying language use, while literature makes use of the relevant aspects of these linguistic features to express what the writer has to say. Thus, a study of the linguistic features concerned in a particular literary text will shed much light on the feelings or ideas the writer wishes to express. The distinction between linguistics and literature can also be expressed with reference to the Swiss linguist de Saussure's distinction between 'langue' and 'parole'. Linguistics could be taken as a parallel to 'langue' or the code, or system of rules common to speakers of a language (say, English), while literature could be parallel to 'parole' or the particular uses of the system made by language users on specific occasions. Literature is, thus, the creative use that the poet, novelist or dramatist makes of the language.

We have seen that language is not only a linguistic system: it is used for purposes of communicating a specific message to a participant in the speech situation. The real life speech situation has its own parameters, as seen earlier, and the language used has to be appropriate to that context. Literature recreates life, and therefore reflects real life speech situations. But literary situations, however realistic, are ultimately figments of the imagination of the writer. In real life, we can say along with Shylock, 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?'. In a novel, the character does not actually bleed. In a dramatic performance, the character does not die, he only acts as if he has died. Again, it is not possible to save Desdemona from death on the stage. Even if you rescue the actress, Desdemona cannot be saved. The literary situation, therefore, is different from the everyday situations of life.

Literature can, therefore, be considered to reflect life, and simultaneously create a world which is separate from that of reality. It is a world, which though analogous to that of reality, is still separate from it. The conventions of speech interaction apply to literature, but it can free itself from these shackles by a variety of means, primarily, the use of metaphor. Thus Wilfred Owen can say,

'I am the enemy you killed, my friend'

In terms of real life, this is a meaningless utterance. The use of the words 'enemy' and 'friend' contradict each other. Secondly, the speaker is already dead, and can therefore, not be in a position to speak. However, as a line in Owen's poem, it is very effective and meaningful, because it brings in dimensions of life that are not confined to the literal, surface reality.

Commenting on the relationship between the two disciplines, literature and linguistics, G N Leech writes:
"By popular definition, literature is the creative use of language, and this in the context of general linguistic description can be equated with the use of unorthodox o deviant forms of language." Literature, therefore, contains additional dimensions of meaning and aesthetics, which do not figure in the world of linguistics. Linguistics, however, helps in analyzing the meaning and effect of style in literature in more objective terms such as word forms, sentence structure, syntax, sound sequences, ‹ Prior to the application of linguistic analysis, literary style was appraised only subjectively, not on the basis of concrete or objective criteria.

The influence of linguistics on stylistic analysis is of recent origin: " ...a discip¹ has to attain a degree of maturity and confidence before it can profitably take iɔ ken a type of material guaranteed to produce exceptions to rules of general

application" says Leech. It is interesting to review the evolution of criticism and its gradually growing concern with the language of literature in Britain. The importance of linguistic description seems to be a growing factor within the special purview of literary criticism.

Roger Fowler (1971) describes this in an essay entitled '*Criticism and the language of literature: some traditions and trends in Great Britain.*' "A work of literature", he says, "is usefully considered as a verbal structure, whatever else it may be. This verbal structure may be described." Though description and criticism have different goals, yet, "criticism in this century in terms of most theoretical and practical efforts has entailed the activity of description. 'Objectivity' is a desirable attribute in the modern scientific age: hence the willingness of the 20th century to accept the label 'descriptive criticism' as a shorthand indication of what it is doing."

While accepting the importance of evaluation, R. A. Sayce (1953) had remarked, "The critic's first and most important task must be to discover, as far as he is able, the objective characteristics of the work under consideration." The characteristics he had in mind were aspects of the language, syntax, sound patterns, etc. At the turn of the century, T.S. Eliot (1923) (cited in Fowler, 1971) had objected to two major failings of critics:

1) Literary criticism had become an emotive response to a stimulus: it had degenerated into an art of persuasion, an art founded on oratory.
2) Criticism lacked a significant and shared critical vocabulary. The critic refused to analyze, to say how, in terms of his perception of the verbal text, he made his evaluation.

Richards in his two seminal works on Criticism aimed, as Tillyard puts it, "firstly, to supplant the easy-going and vaguely laudatory criticism that was still largely in vogue, by something more rigorous, and secondly, to apply the science of psychology to the process of making and enjoying literature."

In *Practical Criticism* Richards directed his attention to individual poems and tried to provide guidelines for literary analysis through the dissection of isolated texts. Nevertheless, Fowler feels that " the ends to which the detailed scrutiny is addressed as well as the terms and assumptions it employs, suggest a distinctly non-cognitive and non-verbally directed quality". In fact much of English literary criticism since Richards, he says, displays fundamentally affective and emotional tendencies, if not moralistic tendencies, for which "the terms of descriptive criticism function as a screen of pseudo-objectivity."

Richards, nevertheless, is deemed to be the father of modern critical theory There are two major reasons for this. He wished to professionalize literary criticism and discourage irresponsible forms of amateur criticism, and to this end he concentrated on practical criticism. Simultaneously, however, he raised the theory of literary criticism to a new level of seriousness with his concentration on the textual features of analysis.

Inspired by him, the next generation of literary critics (the New Critics) came up with a battery of concepts for the analysis of text, e.g. Empson's 'ambiguity', Brookes' 'paradox', and Blackmure's 'gesture' and 'irony', 'tension' and 'dramatic structure'.

However the terms needed to be 'more' concrete than merely vaguely deferential to the sense of complexity, the multi-levelled meanings, in literature. The terms "had to be given meaning by a sensitive insight into the way language works. Richards' dogmatic linguistic categories could not impart meaning to a descriptive terminology." (Fowler 1971)

Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) became the major and continuing stimulus to descriptive criticism in England. In an argument for the rational analysis of poetry, Empson says,

"Unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me. The reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else, one can reason about them....." Empson's contribution has been in terms of his focus on "the words, the sentences, the syntax, the metrical structure of poems, of meanings from the near equivalence of two shades to the stark opposition of contraries. " (Fowler 1971).

For Donald Davie, twenty-five years later, the linguistic world of poetry is a syntactic world, and he helped to make syntax the focus of literary criticism. His confidence in the domination of style by syntax is evident in his generalization "what is common to all modern poetry is the assertion or the assumption (most often the latter) that syntax in poetry is wholly different from syntax as understood by logicians and grammarians. When the poet retains syntactic forms acceptable to the grammarian, this is merely a convention which he chooses to observe (Davie, 1955. *In Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English poetry*)

Winifred Nowottny (1962) talks of literary form and the necessity to ground literary criticism on verbal analysis. "In considering the language of poetry", she says, "it is prudent to begin with what is 'there' in the poem - 'there' in the sense that it can be described and referred to as inarguably given by the words" (*The Language Poets Use*: I)

Thus, says Fowler, " whenever one begins an analysis of a poem, one is going to be led off into other corners, detect new relations between elements, interpret details in the light of unique confrontations of linguistic levels." An explication of syntax leads to discussion of metre and meaning.

David Lodge's book *Language of Fiction* (1966) emerged from substantially the same critical and linguistic background as Nowottny's. Lodge recognized that stylistic description had its limits. By itself it was not capable of carrying the entire burden of criticism. He, therefore, suggests some alternative principles for the evaluation of style in narrative:

a) To isolate deliberately or at random, one or more passages and to exhaustively analyze these (the 'textual' approach).
b) To trace significant threads through the language of an entire novel. (the 'structural' approach).

Subsequent advances in Britain and America are: J. P. Thorne's work in the area of 'stylistics,' generative grammars, M A K Hallliday's article 'Categories of the Theory' (1961) and samples of analysis have been provided by stalwarts like Halliday, Sinclair, and Fowler and more recently, on the area of poetry and fiction by Geoffrey Leech .

2.3   STYLISTICS

The word 'style' has a fairly uncontroversial meaning, referring to the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose, and so on. The speaker/ writer makes selections from the linguistic system for the required occasion. However, even in talking about the same topic, for example, the weather, style is dictated by the occasion. Thus, certain English expressions like "bright intervals" "scattered showers" etc. belong to the style of weather forecasts, while

others like "lovely day", "a bit chilly", etc. are expressions used in everyday conversational remarks about the weather. It is the appropriate selection of elements from the total linguistic repertoire that constitutes style.

'Style' can be studied in both the spoken and written varieties of language, whether literary and non-literary. Within the field of literary writing, the term may be used to refer to the linguistic habits of a writer (e.g. the style of Dickens or Proust), or to the way language is used in a particular genre, period or school of writing, or some combination of these, e.g. epistolary style, euphemistic style, etc.

Thus, it is various kinds of literary style that literary criticism seeks to identify and evaluate. Style, according to Geoffrey Leech, is a relational term. We talk about the style of x, referring through 'style' to characteristics of language use. These are correlated with some extralinguistic x, which we may call the writings defined by x (writer, period, etc.), which in turn provide the data that linguistics helps to analyze. in terms of the characteristics of language use.

But in an extensive or varied corpus it becomes difficult to identify a common set of linguistic habits. The small details reflecting a habit of expression or thought may help provide what may be called the linguistic 'thumbprint' of the author. One of the uses of stylistics is the role it can play in establishing the authorship or date of a literary work. Rigorous statistical studies of style are required, concentrating on specific linguistic traits which might be the clue to an author's personal style (e.g. the range of vocabulary, or sentence length, or frequency of certain syntactic features. like conjunctions). This area of study is called **attributive statistics**. This is different from literary stylistics, however, which looks for the correlation between features of language and the meaning that is to be derived.

But, the distinctiveness of personal style should not be over-emphasized. Samuel Johnson uses a different style in the didactic, expository prose of his essays in *The Rambler*, a simpler narrative prose in *Rasselas*, and an informal discursiveness in his private letters. Therefore, it can be said that Johnson has several styles, and not just one that reflects his personality. Consider that if it is difficult to generalize about the style of an author, how much more difficult it becomes to generalize about the style of a genre or an epoch. The more general the domain, the more selective and tentative are the statements about its distinctive style. It is only in a text, whether considered as a whole or in an extract, that we can get closest to a homogenous and specific use of language. Even in a text like a novel, however, the author's style in his commentary may differ from the voices of his characters.

However, we do not study style for its own sake. We study the style of a work because we want to explain some aspect of its meaning, and, to consider how the style brings out its meaning. Thus the linguistic question is – why does the author seek to express himself here in a particular way? From the critic's point of view the question is, "how is such and such an aesthetic effect achieved through language?"

The aim of literary stylistics, therefore, is to relate the critic's concern about aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern regarding linguistic description. The tussle between the linguist and the literary critic thus gets reduced and in the last two or three decades we have had more and more linguists turning to literature to study the rich and individualistic (often, deviant) ways in which language is used. As he proceeds with the analysis of the literary text, the linguist forms his/her own subjective, emotive impressions, and does not only bring a clinically antiseptic attitude to his/her reading. On the other hand, as we have seen in an earlier section. literary critics have felt the need for bringing in greater objectivity, through the use of linguistic analysis, into their aesthetic appreciation and evaluation of a literary text.

A question often asked in this connection is, at which end do we start our literary criticism - the aesthetic or the linguistic? But a hard and fast rule is not the answer to

the question. The image used by Spitzer of the 'philological circle of understanding' is more appropriate as represented below.

Spitzer argued that the task of a linguistic-cum-literary explanation proceeds by means of a movement to and from the linguistic details to the literary centre of the writer's art. In the cyclical motion that results, linguistic observation stimulates and modifies literary insight, and then, literary insight, in its turn, stimulates further linguistic observation. There is no logical starting point since both the literary and the linguistic parameters, however imperfectly developed, are brought simultaneously into operation. The cyclical motion between theory formulation and theory testing brings out the scientific nature of the method.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

To summarize briefly, we have seen in this section how with the gradual maturation of the discipline of linguistics, it has come to play an important role in literary criticism. It has given rise to the field of stylistics where the rivalry between the linguist and the literary critic can be gradually eliminated, and in fact, a mutually co-operative role in the field of literary evaluation and appreciation can be established.

2.5 KEY WORDS

aesthetics: philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty, especially in the arts.

literary criticism: a reasoned discussion of literary works.

ambiguity: an openness to different interpretations; or an instance in which use of language may be understood in diverse ways.

paradox a statement or expression so as to provoke use into seeking another sense or context in which it would by true eg. Wordsworth's line 'The Child is the Father of the Man'.

irony a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency. The straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance.

stylistics a branch of modern linguistics devoted to the detailed analysis of literary style or the linguistic choices made by speakers and writers in non-literary contexts.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. You have read the views of many scholars on the relationship between linguistics and literary criticism. Try and cull out your own view in about 200 words.

2. What is style? Does each author have their own personal style? Comment.

3. Would a linguistic description of a literary work give a true picture of the emotion it evokes? Discuss.

2.7 READING LIST

1. Fowler, Roger (ed). (1966). *Essay on Style and Language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London.

2. Fowler, Roger. 1971. *The Linguistics of Literature*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London.

3. Widdowson, H .G. *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature.* Longman. London.

4. Leech, Geoffrey & Short, Michael. 1981 *Style in Fiction*. Longman. London.