

*Language and verbal art revisited: linguistic  
approaches to the study of literature*

Donna R. Miller and Monica Turci (eds) (2007)

*Reviewed by Michael O'Toole*

The first paper and centrepiece of this volume of papers from a symposium held in Bologna in 2004 is by Ruqaiya Hasan. Her title is 'Private pleasure, public discourse: reflections on engaging with literature'. She discusses some interesting issues about the relationship between the analysis of language in literary works – the medium through which we, as private individuals, construe them – and the institutional, 'public' discourses of literary history, criticism and biography through which works are largely taught, sorted and hierarchized. She regrets, like so many of us, that these distinct approaches are separated and even regarded as in competition in academies, syllabuses and books throughout most of the English-speaking world.

The bulk of her paper, however, is a recapitulation of some very important methodological proposals she made in greater detail in her 1985 book *Linguistics, language and verbal art*, which, as a small in-house publication from Deakin University, is not sufficiently widely known and cited. Hence the value of this 'revisit'. She defines her central concept of 'symbolic articulation' as the interlevel between the theme of a literary work and its language and offers another look at how this contributes to our understanding of a poem by Les Murray and the relationship between characters in *As You Like It*.

There is some confusion about Slavonic influences on contemporary poetics both in Hasan's paper and in the Introduction by Miller and Turci. Although Mukarovsky of the Prague School was influential in the West with his 1928

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discussion and illustrations of ‘foregrounding’ in verbal artworks (due largely to the availability of Paul Garvin’s *Prague School Reader* (1964) and several stylistics anthologies), the concept of foregrounding and its obverse, ‘automatization’, together with other key theoretical concepts such as ‘defamiliarization’, ‘laying bare the device’, ‘retardation’ and ‘the dominant’ of a poem had all been propounded and colourfully exemplified by Shklovsky, Eikhnenbaum, Tynyanov and Jakobson in post-Revolutionary Russia a decade previously. Mukarovsky was Czech and not a ‘Soviet critic’ (p.1) and the Russian work was well represented in Lemon and Reis (1965), in *Russian Poetics in Translation*, Vol. 4 (1977), and preeminently in Victor Erlich’s magisterial study *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*, which appeared in its second edition in 1965. Moreover, the ‘Neo-Formalists’ (p. 21) were not Russian, but a group of British and West European students of Russian literature who met and published in the 1970s with the aim of clarifying, testing and disseminating the theories and methods of the Russian Formalists of the 1920s, whose work had been suppressed under Stalin.

These details apart, Hasan’s paper offers a clear introduction to a poetics that focuses on the text itself, armed with the linguistic tools of analysis to do the job properly.

Donna Miller’s paper on grammatical parallelism in D.H.Lawrence goes further in showing the power of an analysis equipped with the right tools. She picks up on Roman Jakobson’s (1960) claim about ‘marked reiteration at the syntagmatic level as the empirical criterion of the poetic function’. As with so many of Jakobson’s original and prophetic insights – particularly in his 1958/1960 specification of the six functions of language, there was no functional lexico-grammar to substantiate the claim, but only a number of intuitive examples based on traditional grammar and phonology. Miller has a fully fledged and widely tested systemic-functional grammar to engage with the texts of three poems from different phases of Lawrence’s oeuvre. She clearly has a comprehensive knowledge of Lawrence’s poetry and prose and a deep sympathy for his philosophy. Her readings of the poems are thorough, insightful and instructive. Her stress on GP (grammatical parallelism) in all three functions is a model of how the foregrounding of a linguistic pattern produces a ‘dominant’ in a text which realizes its central theme: a nice example of Hasan’s ‘symbolic articulation’.

Continuing the errors concerning the Russian Formalists, Shklovsky is spelled ‘Shklovosky’ twice within four pages, even though he is spelled correctly three times in the References for this chapter. In general, it must be said that the editors’ and publisher’s textual editing for this book has been surprisingly careless – for a book on linguistics topics. Miller has a curious propensity to

use 'unto' as a substitute for (I think) 'to what end' or 'for what purpose', and 'overall' gets spelled in three different ways: as one word/ two words/ hyphenated. The editors' introductions to each paper are useful in contextualizing the authors and their work, but irritating when they recapitulate the essential argument of each paper, even down to the phrasing used. I can see no virtue in repeating virtually word-for-word in the Introduction the quotations from Lawrence, Martin and Halliday with which Miller opens the argument of her actual paper. This kind of repetition (not motivated like GP!) occurs with every chapter in the book.

The editorial intrusion is rather different in the Introduction to David Butt's paper where it moves from experiential fact to evaluative appraisal. 'Butt', we are told, 'is *all too aware* of such traditions of thought [as the antagonism between science and literature] and he is *successful in convincing* the reader of *the validity of his position*... As Butt *rightly* argues, Saussure and Einstein engaged in similar epistemological projects...' – Well, thanks, eds., I think I'll make up my own mind!

Butt has spent his academic career straddling the divide between the human sciences of linguistics and poetics and the so-called 'hard sciences' of physics, quantum theory, neurology and mathematics. We are fortunate to have a colleague with the competence and intellectual energy to pursue this gymnastic feat. In his paper 'Thought experiments in verbal art' he studies patterns of lexical cohesion, deixis, transitivity and finiteness, and the logic of embedding in poems by Wallace Stevens and the last scene of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The conclusions are persuasive, but the paper moves away from the standards of detailed textual evidence set by Hasan and Miller. As with the readings on epistemology, we have to take Butt's word for it that the linguistic patterns are as he says.

The next two papers make an interesting contrast in corpus linguistics. Monica Turci takes the most obvious lexical item 'dark' and its derivatives in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, sorts them electronically in terms of their frequency, collocational patterns and dispersion and manages to reach some far from obvious conclusions, both about the structure of the novella and about the social semiotic of the period in which it was written and read. She finds, for instance, a major contrast in the occurrence and role of the lemma dark\* across the three installments as originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (no pun intended, presumably). Using the full range of systemic-functional grammar, she then checks on the realisations of dark\* in the nominal group, the clauses – independent, dependent and embedded – and collocationally. Intriguingly, 'the concordance analysis [reveals] that nowhere in the text does Africa appear as a collocate of dark\*', but that it relates primarily to European

thoughts and plans and, above all, to Kurtz and the landscape with which he merges. 'This,' Turci says, is the linguistic manifestation of a certain attitude of the European in relation to Africa and the African people' and it ties in with late nineteenth-century theories of species, race and degeneration – and, of course, the whole ideology of imperialism. Despite the force of this conclusion, she never allows the political to overshadow the poetical.

Carol Taylor Torsello also uses corpus linguistics in her study of 'Projection in literary and non-literary texts.' In the process she shows what a thriving team of colleagues and students she leads at the University of Padua, producing statistical graphs for relative occurrences of all types of projection in front-page newspaper articles, on the Internet and in the pages of *The Economist*, *Time* and *Newsweek* as well as the 'literary' texts of Saint John's Gospel, one of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels and two novels and an essay by Virginia Woolf.

Now, it is clear from her references that Taylor Torsello has already published, back in 1991, an important study on point of view in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, so the question arises as to whether she is contributing to the study of 'verbal art' with her detailed statistics on projection in print and electronic media texts. Halliday and Hasan have always been clear that lexico-grammatical patterns should be studied in every kind of register, whether literary or non-literary – and they have shown equal commitment to both. However, my reaction to Taylor Torsello's genre comparisons is that they produce quite predictable results and that the real strength of her study is in comparing the role of the various kinds of projection in the three Virginia Woolf works. She finds important similarities and differences in the proportion and grammar of projection between the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* and her extended essay/ lecture/ rumination *A Room With a View*. This comparison deploys the full resources of the grammar and offers us new and important insights into the writing and philosophy of one of the great English writers: verbal art revisited properly.

Bill Louw's paper 'Collocation as the determinant of verbal art' clearly makes the editors of this volume a bit nervous. The usually ingratiating comments of their other introductions now shift to 'Louw's challenging and provoking paper...' and 'Scholars could argue that Louw's theoretical position is at times too uncompromising and overly absolute in stating what *is* valuable in the analysis of verbal art (i.e. Malinowskian and Firthian context of situation plus collocation), and what *is not* (pretty much all the rest)? For this reviewer, Louw's paper was like a refreshing cold shower:

As the future of collocation will always be computational, this means that reading itself will become at the very least a partially computational act in the future. The computer is no longer an optional accessory... Our young scholars have justifiably become impatient. They no longer wish to defend structuralist or mentalist schools of thought that are now so easily falsified by collocation studies.

Though focused on the future and youth, however, Louw sets his argument in a venerable tradition of poetics, anthropology and linguistics represented by Jakobson, Firth, Malinowski and Sinclair. In the process, he clarifies some important issues regarding collocation and tests them on partial readings of Ezra Pound (spelled 'Erza' in the editors' introduction), Henry Miller, George Orwell and Edwin Thumboo.

The remaining five papers in this volume appear to be linked to a different agenda to that of the six I have reviewed. Either the editors, as organisers of the Bologna symposium, wanted to complete a publishable volume with some of the papers given, or they felt it was imperative to represent current European trends in: translation theory, comparative literature, Austrian experimental prose in German, Turkish migrants' ethnolect in Germany and poetic theory in 1950s Spain.

As this reviewer is not qualified to judge any of these topics, I will merely list their authors and titles:

- 1) Ute Heidmann and Jean-Michel Adam (University of Lausanne): 'Text linguistics and comparative literature: towards an interdisciplinary approach to written tales. Angela Carter's translations of Perrault.'
- 2) Mirella Agorni (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan): 'Translation teaching and methodology: a linguistic study of a literary text.'
- 3) Anne Betten (University of Salzburg): 'Deconstructing standard syntax: tendencies in Modern German prose writing.'
- 4) Sandro M. Moraldo (University of Bologna): 'Kanak sprak: the linguistic features of Turkish migrants' communicative style in Feridun Zaimoglu's works.'
- 5) Maria Jose Rodrigo Mora (University of Bologna): 'Debating the function of language in poetry: meta-textual musings in the Spanish 50s generation.'

The editors sound a trifle embarrassed, if defiant, about the mix of approaches to verbal art in their general Introduction:

Focusing on a wide range of world literatures and literary genres, the authors often boldly cross what are still institutionally rigid boundaries between disciplines. This we see as a positive aspect of the volume. Indeed, one of the book's principle aspirations is to provide a variety of applications of theoretical and methodological approaches, all firmly rooted, however, in specific contexts of culture, a belief in the importance of which the contributors all share, as we've said. ... The end result is a variety of 'stylistics', if you will, including the functional, pragmatic, comparative, corpus-based or driven, gender and translation types.

### **Book reviewed**

Miller, D. R. and Turci, M. (eds) (2007) *Language and Verbal Art Revisited: Linguistic Approaches to the Study of Literature*. London and Oakville: Equinox.