Stylistics or Cognitive Stylistics?

1. ON STYLISTICS

Is cognitive stylistics the future of stylistics? To answer this question in the essay that follows, I will briefly discuss Elena Semino and Jonathan Culpeper’s *Cognitive Stylistics* (2003), Paul Simpson’s *Stylistics* (2004), and a recent essay by Michael Burke (2005). However, because questions are like trains – one may hide another – any discussion of the future of stylistics raises intractable questions about stylistics itself. French students of stylistics, for example, will come across definitions of the discipline like the following. According to Brigitte Buffard-Moret, “si les définitions de ... [la stylistique] – que certains refusent de considérer comme une science – sont divergentes, toutes admettent que son propos est l’analyse et l’interprétation des faits langagiers, essentiellement dans un texte littéraire” (2000: 5). For Georges Molinie, “l’objet de la stylistique ... c’est l’étude des conditions verbales, formelles, de la littérarité” (1997: 3). Meanwhile, according to Anne Herschberg Pierrot, “La démarche du commentaire stylistique consiste à montrer – procédés linguistiques du texte à l’appui – la validité d’une hypothèse d’interprétation” (1993: 281). For students reading stylistics textbooks in English, in Simpson’s *Stylistics* they would read that “[s]tylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language” (2004: 3), and in Peter Verdonk’s *Stylistics* (2002) they would find stylistics called “the study of style, which can be defined as the analysis of distinctive expressions in language and the description of its purpose and effect” (2002: 4).

While Buffard-Moret is right to admit that definitions of stylistics may be divergent, what the French and English definitions above have in common is their use of terms such as analysis, study, interpretation, and commentary. But although these terms are commonly used in definitions of stylistics, they are not at all synonymous. That is why the definitions above remind us that stylistics faces several problems. First, as Buffard-Moret suggests, some have questioned the scientific status of stylistics. Linguistics is certainly one of the sciences du langage, but the attempt to give stylistics a scientific foundation was challenged by Stanley Fish in his famous 1980 essay, “What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?” Fish felt that those in stylistics harbored a desire to be scientific although criticism, even if grounded in linguistics or the language...
sciences, was not itself scientific. Therefore, those whom Buffard-Moret suspected of denying stylistics the status of science might have been adhering to Fish’s critique. Second, despite Molinie’s emphasis on “la littérarité,” the language of literature is not the only kind of language that stylistics can analyze. Although stylistics is normally associated with the linguistic analysis of literary texts, Wilfred Rotgé (2004) has recently argued that many of us in stylistics today examine different types of discourse. Third, there is the issue of description versus interpretation, or what I would call poetics versus hermeneutics. Herschberg Pierrot (1993: 281) suggests that stylistics is a way to prolong interpretations while Burke (2005: 187; my italics) says “stylistics should proceed from description to interpretation.” As Fish warned us long ago, the shift from description to interpretation in stylistics too often seemed to be arbitrary, so the onus for clarifying the relationship between stylistic analysis and literary interpretation continues to fall on those critics who do stylistics.

Issues like these, of course, have been around since at least the 1960s. That was when Roger Fowler and F.W. Bateson argued about the place of stylistics in English Studies (see Simpson 2004: 148-157). Decade after decade, stylistics has had the uncanny ability to provoke highly public denunciations of the enterprise. For instance, Bateson adamantly told Fowler in their 1966 debate that “our two disciplines do not overlap” (qtd. in Simpson 2004: 156) since Bateson wanted to exclude linguistic theory from literary criticism. Then Fish argued that stylistics was dead in America in the late 1970s while Jean-Jacques Lecercle argued that stylistics in Europe was vanishing in the early 1990s. Although Lecercle’s claim was immediately challenged by Katie Wales (1993: 30-31) in the very next issue of The European English Messenger, to his credit Lecercle showed that stylistics was stubborn in its persistence even though the term itself had apparently fallen out of fashion.

In contrast to Lecercle, however, Molinie’s revised textbook told French students in the 1990s that stylistics was alive again. According to Molinie (1997: 3):

Après avoir connu une période faste dans les années 50-60, apparaissant comme une discipline nouvelle, la stylistique s’est trouvée en retrait, dans les années 75-85, par rapport à l’explosion d’autres domaines, pour vivre de puis peu une sorte de renaissance, qui en fait désormais une discipline porteuse et novatrice. Ce mouvement, qui n’est pas sans rappeler le sort des écrivains avec leur passage au ‘purgatoire,’ appelle réflexions et explications. Le plus simple, à cet effet, est de tenter de situer la stylistique dans le champ des sciences humaines, à la fois comme recherche et comme enseignement.

Molinie’s evaluation that stylistics was no longer in purgatory turns out to have been accurate. While Lecercle ironically proclaimed “vive la stylistique” (1993: 18), he felt that stylistics was disappearing because the word was less frequently being used in book titles (Simpson 2004: 4). However, publications in stylistics are still coming out. If you searched the Modern Language Association’s International Bibliography in October 2005 for publications in “stylistics,” you would find 28,640 entries since 1964 (compared to just 8,388 for “philology”). Of the 28,640 entries for “stylistics” in the bibliography, 21,045 have appeared since 1980 when Fish’s full critique of stylistics came out, and 11,612 publications have appeared since 1993 when Lecercle published his statement on stylistics. Lecercle was right about the decline in publications explicitly carrying the “stylistics” brand name, but there has hardly been a falling off where books are concerned. For example, of the 37 books published in English between 1964 and 2005 with the word “stylistics” in the title, 19 were published since 1980. In fact, 10 were published between 1980 and 1992 while 9 were published between 1993 and 2005. This includes one published by Oxford University Press and two published by Routledge, two highly respected publishers
in the academic world. And so, no matter what its enemies may say, stylistics is here to stay.

2. ON COGNITIVE STYLISTICS

To speculate about the future of stylistics is to assume, of course, that stylistics has a future. Since publications in stylistics continue to appear, and since conferences devoted to stylistics continue to be held, it is safe to say that stylistics does indeed have a future, especially in Europe. The roots of stylistics stretch back, of course, to classical rhetoric, even if “the academic discipline of stylistics is a twentieth century invention” according to Richard Bradford (1997: 3). Given the fact that elocutio was one of the five parts of classical rhetoric, this part of rhetoric seems to live on to this day under the assumed name of stylistics. Having said that, the proliferation of terms such as corpus stylistics, feminist stylistics, discourse stylistics, cognitive stylistics, and literary linguistics seems to suggest that the field of stylistics has become hopelessly fragmented. Like Simpson (2004: 2) and Burke (2005: 194), however, I see “cognitive stylistics” as yet another form of stylistics tout court. However, what makes cognitive stylistics somewhat different is its relationship to cognitive science. By that I specifically mean the cognitive theory of linguistics and the cognitive psychology of reading, two fields that relate directly to cognitive stylistics today.

As Semino and Culpeper (2003) point out in the introduction of their edited collection, *Cognitive Stylistics*, there may be a difference in opinion between those in North America who see cognitive stylistics as but another version of cognitive linguistics, and those in Europe who may see it as a form of cognitive psychology. For example, as Semino and Culpeper write near the very beginning of their book:

This collection aims to represent the state of the art in cognitive stylistics – a rapidly expanding field at the interface between linguistics, literary studies and cognitive science. Cognitive stylistics combines the kind of explicit rigorous and detailed linguistic analysis of literary texts that is typical of the stylistics tradition with a systematic and theoretically informed consideration of the cognitive structures and processes that underlie the production and reception of language (Semino and Culpeper 2003: ix).

Forty vears after the Bateson and Fowler debate, the linguistics – literary studies interface has become more fully developed. Indeed, in terms of supply and demand, the immensely popular English Language “A level” exam in the UK produces students who often want to take stylistics classes in British university English Departments. But even if the linguistics –literary studies interface is healthy, the cognitive science – literary studies interface may be less so. Although scholars in the field of cognitive stylistics frequently cite linguists and psychologists, I suspect that these citation practices are not reciprocated in cognitive science journals. That is why some skepticism may be warranted when evaluating the state of cognitive stylistics. However, to give credit where credit is due, Semino and Culpeper are entirely right to argue that just as linguistics matters to stylistics, so too does psychology matter to cognitive stylistics. As Don Freeman writes in his afterword to *Cognitive Stylistics*, what the essays in the volume “share is a far firmer empirical basis and multidisciplinary theoretical approach than was possible given the state of our knowledge in the early 1970s about human cognition” (Freeman 2003: 319).

As our knowledge of the human mind increases, so too will our understanding of language and reading, which is a working assumption of critics who have made the cognitive turn in their research.

Exactly how much knowledge of current psychology or linguistics a literary critic needs to have in order to do cognitive stylistics “properly” remains uncertain. For
example, in Gerard Steen's essay in *Cognitive Stylistics*, "Metaphor in Bob Dylan's 'Hurricane': Genre, Language and Style," Steen analyzes a song about a boxer with the potential to become world champion but who is framed for murder by police in New Jersey and later imprisoned. As Steen asks at one point in his essay, should a cognitive approach to language and style "aim for a relatively superficial 'psycholinguistic' account for the initial stage of accessing and integrating the words of the utterances, or for a relatively deep and more generally cognitive account of some intermediate or further stage of message construction?" (2003: 192). Steen's question is a fair one to ask, but by contrasting a "superficial" way of doing cognitive stylistics with a way that is allegedly "deep[er]," Steen is favoring cognitive analysis over other types of analyses even if we cannot say with great confidence which one is "deep" and which one is "superficial." However, Steen notes that while some critics have imagined cognitive stylistics to be "a branch of cognitive linguistics," he nevertheless desires to locate cognitive stylistics within "the cognitive psychology of reading" (2003: 194). While we may agree or disagree with Steen, his well-argued point is that a "cognitive-stylistic analysis of language and style needs to assume some sort of framework for the cognitive processing of texts, and that is what may be found in the psychology of reading" (2003: 195). Steen's emphasis on psychology, in other words, is an attempt to defend some of the assumptions made in cognitive stylistics.

Steen's version of cognitive stylistics also relies on empirical methodology. After explaining the relevance of research in psychology to stylistics, Steen then tests a prediction he makes about how readers/listeners will identify metaphors in the Dylan song. The empirical findings obtained from 18 of his students become additional evidence Steen uses to support his argument. 

Steen's emphasis on psychology, in other words, is an attempt to defend some of the assumptions made in cognitive stylistics.

Whereas Steen was concerned with the relationship between psychology and cognitive stylistics, Simpson is concerned with the relationship between stylistics and cognitive stylistics. Simpson begins his 2004 textbook, *Stylistics*, by arguing that the picture Lecercle painted of stylistics in 1993 was unfair. Simpson does so, I think, in order to argue that stylistics is still thriving and to suggest that cognitive stylistics has breathed new life into the more general field of stylistics. For Simpson, cognitive stylistics is "one of the established branches of contemporary stylistics" (2004: 2), but, as Simpson admits, "What distinguishes cognitive from other sorts of stylistic models is that the main emphasis is on mental representation rather than on textual representation" (2004: 92). For Simpson, defining language as a form of cognition allows us to study the human mind when it appears that what we are studying are texts. As Dan Sperber once stated, with respect to metaphor, "la figure n'est pas dans le texte...Elle est dans la représentation conceptuelle du texte" (1975: 415). What this means for cognitive stylistics is that we must give equal attention to language and the mind when one of our objects of study, figurative language, resides within the human conceptual system. As Simpson writes:
Stylisticians in the 1990s began...exploring more systematically the cognitive structures that readers employ when reading texts. In doing so, they borrowed heavily from developments in cognitive linguistics and Artificial Intelligence, and this new emphasis in research methods saw the emergence of cognitive stylistics or cognitive poetics. While cognitive stylistics is intended to supplement, rather than supplant, existing methods of analysis, it does aim to shift the focus away from models of text and composition towards models that make explicit the links between the human mind and the process of reading (Simpson 2004: 39).

Borrowing concepts from cognitive science, which Simpson refers to above, is what I meant earlier in my comments about the interdisciplinary citation habits of those in cognitive stylistics. More important is Simpson’s view that reading processes and cognition have become useful avenues of exploration for those in stylistics. By enlarging what Moliné would call our objet d’étude to include the human mind, cognitive stylistics opens up new areas for literary study. To demonstrate what I mean by paying attention to the reading mind when conducting a stylistic analysis, I wish to end this essay with a discussion of Michael Burke's recent article, “How Cognition Can Augment Stylistic Analysis.”

3. THE FUTURE OF STYLISTICS

Burke's article appeared in The Cognitive Turn: Papers in Cognitive Literary Studies, a special issue of the European Journal of English Studies (August 2005) edited by Michael Toolan and Jean Jacques Weber. Predictions about the future of cognitive stylistics are not easy to make because, as Toolan and Weber admit in their introduction to the volume, “literary and linguistic studies that apply a ‘cognitive approach’ tend to be received with about equal amounts of enthusiasm and resistance” (2005: 107) by literary critics today. One source of the resistance is no doubt revealed in part by Burke's disclaimer that adding “a cognitive dimension to stylistic analysis” does not result in “reductiveness of interpretation” (2005: 186). Literary critics who frequently cite cognitive scientists have been charged with the so-called crime of reductionism in the past, or of “taking the wonder out of literature” as one graduate student once reported one of his professors in the US telling him. That is, cognitive critics are charged with “reducing” literary texts to their linguistic elements or to the cognitive processes responsible for bringing texts to life. Although some critics today such as Norm Holland (2002) explicitly discuss texts in terms of neuroscience, Burke’s point is that cognitive stylistics is not about deconstructing cherished notions of that discursive category known as “literature.”

The primary text at the center of Burke’s essay is Philip Larkin’s 1955 poem, “Going”:

There is an evening coming in
Across the fields, one never seen before,
That lights no lamps.
Silken it seems at a distance, yet
When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
It brings no comfort.
Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down? (Burke 2005: 187)

Although Verdonk had already stylistically analyzed this very poem several years earlier, there is no limit to the questions we can ask about a text (Dillon 1982: 77). That may be why Burke picks up where Verdonk left off with “Going” by asking, and then answering, three questions: (1) “What are the main attractors at the beginning of the poem?” (2) What is the figure (trajector) and ground (landmark) in the first two stanzas? (3) Based on the above...what then, or who, is ‘going’? (Burke 2005: 190). First, Burke finds that the title “going” immediately attracts our attention and is thus foregrounded (2005: 190). In other words, our curiosity is piqued by the title’s ambiguity and the expectations it may create for readers who want to know who is going where in the poem. Second, Burke says that the figure (or trajector) is “evening” while the ground (or landmark) is the word “fields” (2005: 191). As Burke maintains, “consciously or not, Larkin is posing a subtle and complex argument with regard to life and death by allowing words to suggest one thing in the theme of the poem and the underlying cognition to suggest another” (2005: 193). While the assumption that tension was an inherent property of great poetry was frequently made by New Critics, Burke finds that Larkin’s opposition of the word “Going” in the title with the word “coming” in line 1 creates a kind of linguistic tension that is symbolic of the persona’s psychological state here. Concepts from cognitive grammar (i.e. trajector, landmark, and profiling) provide Burke with a heuristic to account for the recognition of tension in the poem. Third, Burke says the poem leaves readers with an unresolved or “uncertain” feeling (2005: 191), and he further notes that in the last line the poem “ends in a very negative, cognitive-metaphorical fashion with ‘down,”’ which is to say the line originates in the GOOD IS UP or DEATH IS DOWN conceptual metaphors (2005: 192).

Although Burke does add a “cognitive dimension” to Verdonk’s analysis of Larkin’s poem, what makes Burke’s essay even more valuable is that he demonstrates one of the values of cognitive stylistics. For instance, Burke draws our attention to comments made by a previous critic when he tells us:

[Martin] Bidney’s earlier observation of ‘fatal horizontals’ can now be partially cleared up. When he spoke of ‘motion along a line typically leading to nothingness or death’ (1999: 355) and of ‘The sinister spread of evening...declining to something even lower as a mysterious increase in gravity loads the hand down’ (1999: 307), this can now be partially explained in cognitive stylistic terms by looking especially at how the image-schematic and cognitive metaphoric structures are inverted and how, as a result, they are examples of cognitive foregrounding (Burke 2005: 193).

Image schemas and cognitive metaphors, which are concepts from cognitive linguistics, help Burke account for Bidney’s interpretation in ways that Bidney himself was probably unaware of. Criticism itself can thus become an object of analysis since the published responses critics have to texts can be analyzed with the methods of cognitive stylistics. While this may not seem like a new idea given its popularity in reception theory, my point is that cognitive stylistics is not limited only to analyzing primary texts. Indeed, this point is also made by Semino and Culpeper:

Traditional stylistic analysis...tends to make use of linguistic theories or frameworks in order to explain or predict interpretation. What is new about cognitive stylistics is the way in which linguistic analysis is systematically based on theories that relate linguistic choices to cognitive structures and processes. This provides more systematic and
explicit accounts of the relationship between texts on the one hand and responses and interpretations on the other (2003: ix).

Although cognitive stylistics may not be “more systematic” than stylistics simply because stylistics itself is already rather systematic, cognitive stylistics does have something to offer critics interested in reception theory. While reception theorists may focus on what the responses to a given text were, in cognitive stylistics the focus could be on how readers responded as they did and why they did so. That is what Burke’s discussion of Bidney’s interpretation makes clear, and it is why the reading mind is of great interest to those in cognitive stylistics. In sum, the day that findings from cognitive science become irrelevant to literary studies will be the beginning of the end of cognitive rhetoric, cognitive poetics, and cognitive stylistics. However, if that day ever comes, it will not come anytime soon. That is why the future of cognitive stylistics in particular, and thus the future of stylistics in general, looks rather bright from our current vantage point.

Bibliographic

Works Cited


**Documents annexes**
Il y a 1 document annexé à cet article.

- BSSA28-HAMILTON.pdf

**Notes de base de page numériques:**
1 Burke also mentions testing subjects to get reading data from them, a sign that cognitive stylistics might indeed become more empirical in the future. As Burke admits in the conclusion of his essay: “More analyses must be conducted, with larger samples of texts that are preferably put to respondents beforehand in order to test the inter-subjective validity of the cognitive intuitions of the analyst” (2005: 193). Although I cannot predict just how empirical cognitive stylistics may become in the future, there are signs that it may become even more involved with empirical methods than is already the case generally.

2 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Société de Stylistique Anglaise Biannual International Conference, which was held at the Université de Rouen in November 2005. I am grateful for the insightful feedback that colleagues there gave me regarding this essay. I would also like to thank Mireille Quivy and her co-workers at the Université de Rouen for being such generous hosts during the conference.

**Pour citer cet article :**

(Consulté le 27 août 2012)


**Quelques mots à propos de:** Craig HAMILTON

Université de Haute Alsace