

WHAT'S LITERATURE TO YOU ?

OR YOU TO LINGUISTICS ?

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In an academic paper the ideal is that one takes a restricted or specialised topic within a wider subject area and then says something quite original, which can then be followed up and developed by others. What I am attempting to do in this paper is far broader, and far less satisfactory, namely to make links, in a very short time, between subjects as broad as 'language learning', 'literature' and 'linguistics'. It is highly unlikely that I can say anything distinctly original about any of them. The direction I am taking, however, is that where the three, or any two, have been clearly separated and compartmentalised, this is a fault, and should be rectified. Moreover if the linguist and the literature teacher have each thought of themselves as 'coming at' or assisting the language learner, but from different directions, this too is a fault. That is, the process is triangular, each assists the other. There is, of course, nothing new in asserting the relevance of linguistics to literature, as anyone who has dealt with stylistics, however marginally, will know. But this brings me to my only original point, namely that literature might give new directions to linguistics, and particularly to the teaching of linguistics, and even more particularly to the teaching of linguistics at undergraduate level in Thailand.

While literature, and for the moment we can take that to mean Literature with a capital L, that is, texts which have become part of the canon, or, if written more recently, are in the process of doing so, either by frequent inclusion in anthologies or literature courses, or by comment and reference in the industry of survey and criticism ; to reformulate : while literature in this sense is familiar to linguists, it is by no means invariably the case that linguistics is equally familiar to the group who might classify themselves as literary critics. The

latter might indeed consider linguistics a sterile and dehumanising approach to their subject. For linguistics cannot readily admit of their description of items from the canon as 'fine writing as a source of pleasure' (I have stolen the phrase from an exponent of the school) simply because 'fine writing' is a value judgement without verifiable proof, and what is a source of pleasure to him not be a source of pleasure to me. Worse still, literary critics have a quite remarkable propensity to follow their leader, and accept earlier judgements of what is fine writing and a source of pleasure, from the established works of lit.crit., which is itself a sort of sub literature. Of course I gave away my own position in the phrase 'the industry of survey and criticism'. 'Industry' here is a loaded word, implying at least some measure of disapproval.

The first problem, however, is that where linguists have turned their attention to literary text they have begged the question of 'What is literature?'. In fact it is quite common to find, quite early in a stylistic text, some such phrase as 'Let us leave aside for the moment what is literature' and thereafter their analysis can continue. While any linguistic analysis will reveal that any text is in some way marked or special, such analysis could scarcely be helpful if every text constituted a category of only one item. Alternatively, English for Special Purposes faced a dilemma here when its proponents discovered that, in syntax especially, its texts were scarcely more marked than many others. (Hutchinson and Waters 1987) What then was so special?

Linguistic analysis of literature, however, has tended to see literature as 'that which is different', or which combines or incorporates multiple features of lexis, syntax and discourse to generate new ways of saying

things, and, in the words of Lott (1988), who acknowledges particularly the work of Widdowson (1975) and Akhmanova (1976), of 'giving new values to established language items'. Now 'that which is different' about literary text is generally referred to by the term 'deviance', and although this term belongs to the discipline of stylistics, it could at least be argued that the concept is little different from John Keats (1818 - Letter to John Taylor) phrase 'I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess'. You will note that Keats said 'surprise', not 'please'. The language of literature, and I emphasise the L A N G U A G E, surprises in some measure. That is the effect of deviance. The literary critic acknowledges it, but only as an intrinsic quality of his material, which he then goes on to evaluate in quite different terms. The linguist recognises deviance but is not surprised by it. He is professionally equipped to look into it, and do his tests on it, the clinical physiologist rather than a physician, because it is none of his business to heal. It requires training, however, to be able to detect deviance, and it is the linguist who sees not only how, but also why, it is funny when the man goes up to the lady at the bus stop and says 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness', in the apocryphal example quoted by Mick Short.

If we follow this argument, however, to its logical conclusion, we shall only succeed in making literature an elitist preserve for the highly trained, this time the linguists rather than the lucky few who have sat at the feet of the arbiters of literary greatness. Yet we know that literature is not an elitist preserve, and that it can and does reach thousands of people, who read it for pleasure rather than for study. Of course, the vast majority of these will never have heard of deviance, at least not as a feature or quality of literature, though they will have noticed that the literary text is different from their newspaper, or any technical or trade texts which they may have to read - and it is just that difference which they enjoy, and which makes them want to read more. This qualitative difference may simply be that literature has a higher degree of inferability (Short 1986), though that again does not make the study of literature easier for the non-native speaker. I nevertheless think that 'language based' approaches to literature need to keep in mind the question 'What is literature?' which I mentioned above as a problem. My own attempt (see attached sheet, Long 1987) is crude, but reasonably effective

at the level at which I was teaching. Among many foreign learners difference, or deviance, is not recognised at all. A text is a text, to be struggled through, though in the case of poetry the text has certain features like shape, or rhyme, which distinguish it. And where is the learner to get help in this struggle, and certainly a struggle it is, with literary text? Generally not with the language teacher, who is typically concerned more with regularity and consistency than with deviance; and not with the literature teacher, who at intermediate levels is most often concerned with features of plot, to enable learners to answer such questions as 'who is Colonel Sanders and what part does he play in the story?', and at advanced levels making generalisations about Colonel Sanders and treating him as a person with historical reality, and comparing him with other figures created by the same or other authors.

You may note that I have not mentioned such approaches to literature as survey courses or background courses at all, as I am propounding closer engagement with text, where such courses are largely a flight **from** the text. Perhaps R.J. Owens, in a paper of some ten years ago, was voicing discontent with traditional ways of teaching literature in the following quotation:

Who here has never tried to write a poem or short story? And when someone does try to do this he or she finds that they have to use the resources of the language in a special way. You don't write poems in the same language that you use for letters, or committee minutes, or lectures. Yet, of course, one uses language. Now, in what way is this language different? How are its meanings, its communicated messages, given verbal forms different from those used for other purposes? I suggest that if EFL students are given the opportunity of studying this special use of language they will learn something about other, more frequent uses of English, and at the same time they will be led towards an essential basic understanding of what literature is about. (R.J. Owens - date not known)

I am a little uncertain about 'an essential basic understanding of what literature is about.' I do not believe it can ever be so neatly packaged. But I do believe that the way of teaching English literature to foreign learners is through closer engagement with text. That

this alone constitutes finding a way into literature **in another language**, for all but a tiny handful who are lucky enough, or clever enough, to acquire the reading skills of educated native speakers. If you agree with this then many literature teachers may need retraining. Similarly, basic courses in linguistics may be restyled, refocused, and applied to literary texts. Later, as teachers themselves, the people with this training can use interactive techniques to get learners to see any features in a text which are special, different or deviant, and supply just as much terminology as is necessary. Applied linguistics if you like, even to the point of, in extreme cases, making a paraphrase of the literary text and showing by comparative methods that it is easier to remove the literariness than to insert it, while at the same time teaching linguistics. I am afraid that this is not how linguistics is taught, and that while literature remains a struggle, obscure, Milton's *Outer Darkness*, linguistics is often a bore because it is not seen to have any direct application.

The thesis then is quite simple : that linguistics will help a non-native speaker to understand literature better ; that such a learner will find linguistics a useful tool, a sort of magnifying glass, to see how language is used to 'generate new ways of saying things.' The learner will respond first to the **language**, and slightly later to the literature, but will not be constrained by test questions about the plot or message. If that is

all that is needed than I recommend that he reads the text in translation. On the other hand, the approach through linguistics will be of considerable help in advanced language learning, as I am assuming that virtually all non-native speaker students of literature would admit to still needing more language in some area.

However there is, as always, a problem. The 'way into literature' that I am recommending is through text linguistics. But how much language, and how much about linguistics, is it necessary to know in advance, if you like as a pre-requisite, to handle discourse in this way? Can the learner 'manage' or get by on a limited knowledge of the lexicon, a less than perfect control of the syntax, and only a sketchy acquaintance with semantics? The only complete answer, of course, is to try it out ; a 'coal-face' situation with teacher and students. I would suggest, however, that there is always something which the teacher can do to help, given standard 'intermediate' levels of language competence among tertiary level students in Thailand. To illustrate this I append three texts and will demonstrate their use according to the time available. The remaining question to be answered, which is something I cannot do, is whether linguistics training, either here or overseas, has equipped the teacher to handle text in this way.

Text 1

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning :
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.
(by Stevie Smith)

Text 2

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows ; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex Marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships ; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards ; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin ; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little , prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

from **Bleak House** by Charles Dickens

Text 3

In a lonely hamlet a few miles from the town - so lonely that what are called lonely villages were teeming by comparison - there lived a man of curious repute as a forecaster or weather-prophet. The way to his house was crooked and miry - even difficult in the present unpropitious season. One evening when it was raining so heavily that ivy and laurel resounded like distant musketry, and an out-door man could be excused for shrouding himself to his ears and eyes, such a shrouded figure on foot might have been perceived travelling in the direction of the hazel-copse which dripped over the prophet's cot. The turnpike-road became a lane, the lane a cart-track, the cart-track a bridle-path, the bridle-path a foot-way, the foot-way overgrown. The solitary walker slipped here and there, and stumbled over the natural springes formed by the brambles, till at length he reached the house, which, with its garden, was surrounded with a high, dense hedge. The cottage, comparatively a large one, had been built of mud by the occupier's own hands, and thatched also by himself. Here he had always lived, and here it was assumed he would die.

from **The Mayor of Casterbridge**
by Thomas Hardy

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(Almost) every poem has a ' story ' (narrative) or message, but it is a feature of poetry that it does not give this message in the same language forms that we use in ' everyday ' communication, either spoken or written.

The unusual or deviant features may be

- a) rhyme
- b) shape, which includes lines and stanzas
- c) grammar/syntax
- d) lexis
- e) word order
- f) sound patterns (which are unlikely in the more improvised/unpolished medium of the spoken language)
- g) a greater concentration of literary ' tropes ' (that time of year thou may'st in me behold)

One poem may include SEVERAL of these features. Equally important, one poem, or even one line of a poem, may have more than one meaning.