Thinking the unthinkable: mindstyle, lexical priming and the psychological profiler in Thomas Harris' *Silence of the Lambs*.

Urszula Clark

University of Aston,

Aston Triangle

Birmingham

B4 7ET UK

U.I.L.Clark@aston.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper considers the construction of the psychological profiler Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris' novel *Silence of the Lambs* through the consideration of mindstyle and lexical priming. The aim of this paper is to consider the construction of the psychological profiler through an analysis of firstly, mindstyle, which derives its categories form cognitive linguistics, and secondly, an analysis of lexical priming, informed by corpus linguistics. Both cognitive and corpus linguistics share the common aim of understanding how individuals process language, and this paper argues that stylistic analysis can benefit from the application of categories drawn from both disciplines. The paper also considers how the introduction of the psychological profiler into the crime genre allows for taboos dealing with sex and violence to be broken and represented.
Key words: crime fiction; psychological profiling; mindstyle; lexical priming

1.0 Introduction

A recent phenomenon in crime fiction is the emergence of a new kind of character, that of the psychological profiler. Like the amateur sleuth and the Private Investigator (PI), they operate outside the institution of the police. Unlike the amateur sleuth and PI, however, their speciality is in 'thinking outside the box', specifically as it relates to particularly violent and horrific crimes. The introduction of the psychological profiler into the crime genre allows for taboos dealing with sex and violence to be broken and represented, and how worldview is ideologically as well as linguistically constructed. Psychological profilers have specialist knowledge and training into the way the criminal mind works which goes beyond that of even the most gifted detective.

This paper considers the construction of the psychological profiler Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris' novel *Silence of the Lambs* through the consideration of mindstyle and

lexical priming. The aim of this paper is to consider the construction of the psychological profiler through an analysis of firstly, mindstyle, which derives its categories form cognitive linguistics, and secondly, an analysis of lexical priming, informed by corpus linguistics. Both cognitive and corpus linguistics share the common aim of understanding how individuals process language, and this paper argues that stylistic analysis can benefit from the application of categories drawn from both disciplines. The paper also considers how the introduction of the psychological profiler into the crime genre allows for taboos dealing with sex and violence to be broken and represented.

2.0 Mindstyle

Mindstyle, a term first coined by Fowler in 1977, subsequently developed by Leech and Short in 1982 and 2007, and Gregoriou, 2007 Semino 2007 amongst others, is the term currently given to identifying how a fictional character's worldview is represented in a narrative. This is achieved through the identification and grouping of linguistic features such as transitivity, emotive lexis and figurative language. Palmer (, in his book *Fictional Minds* sees the representation of character's minds as central to the definition and study of narrative. For Palmer, the notion of 'mind' includes 'all aspects of our inner life' (19) which includes feelings, beliefs and emotions as well as thinking and perceiving. Central to narrative then, is a reconstruction of how characters' minds function, which then enables us as readers to make sense of actions and events. Semino (2007) also identifies Margolin's notion of 'cognitive style', or 'cognitive mental functioning', to be equivalent to that of mindstyle.

An important aspect of mindstyle is the representation of deviance from the norm. In

her chapter *The Stylistics of True Crime: mapping the mind of the serial killers*, Christiana Gregoriou (2007), through her analysis of a true crime book, shows how the discourse used by others to describe serial killers contributes to mystifying them, presenting them as 'other' and in some cases, literally alien. Analysis of metaphor particularly shows how killers are often conceptualised as devils, monsters or vampires, because, unlike in the case of single murders, there is so often so little justification of why they act as they do. Since 'ordinary' people do not behave in this way, they must, according to the discourse, be monstrous, and their reason for killing embedded in some other or outside source, such as Satanism or extraterrestial presence. Such representation, she argues, serves to help alienate such killers and reinforce our schematic expectations. In serial killer narratives, the author claims, the distinction between fact and fiction is a difficult one to make, since there is more than one crime involved, generating multiple storylines and often motiveless murders, and feed into fictional literature.

So monstrous is the behaviour of such murderers, and outside the patterns of 'normal' criminal behaviour, that this has given rise to a new kind of character in crime fiction: that of the psychological profiler. Once treated with suspicion and distrust by the police, judiciary and public alike, the psychological profiler has gained in credibility, thanks in part, in the UK and USA to TV series such as *Cracker, Criminal Minds,* and *Wire in the Blood*, the latter based upon the novels of Val McDermid. Attitudes towards their work with the police to help solve what appeared to be otherwise seemingly unsolvable crimes in real life have altered likewise, from scepticism to (grudging) respect. The introduction of the profiler has also coincided with a change in the nature of the crime depicted, which has become increasingly more graphic in terms of its representations of

sex, violence and other previous taboos such as cannibalism and paedophilia. The crime

is also very often without motive, seemingly pointless and random, where once motive

formed the bedrock of detection. A profiler, by the nature of their training and work

deals with the workings of the mind, and deeply disturbed ones at that. An explanation

often found in the novels as to the profiler's ability to deal with the workings of a

dysfunctional mind, is that the profilers are themselves disturbed or dysfunctional in

some way. Take, for example, McDermid's character Tony Hill in the 2004 novel *The*

Torment of Others as he muses on the psychological profile of serial killers generally:

The fucked-up childhood was more or less a given too. Of course, it was possible to
have all the markers without growing up to embrace the darkness. Tony knew that only
too well; anyone examining his own past would have found a series of indicators that, in
another man, would have been the first steps on the tortuous routes to psychopathy. For
him, they had provided the foundation of his empathy with those who had ended up on
a different path. He was never entirely sure where the crucial fork in the road had been,
but he had ended up a different kind of hunter. And just as the serial killer had a sure
instinct for his victims, so Tony had an apparent sixth sense for tracking his prey.
(2004:344-5)

Here, conceptual metaphors such as: evil is darkness, life is a journey, fate is a turn in

a crossroad, and murderers are animals to be hunted, all serve to re-inforce our

schematic expectations of the nature of good and evil, and how it is that some people

can end up as serial killers and others as psychological profilers: to use another

metaphor, both are two sides of the same coin. Although such metaphorical patterns are

widely shared by communities of speakers, Kovecses (2000) has suggested that

metaphor use varies from person to person, due to autobiographical experiences and

personal interests. Thus, patterns of metaphor use can be exploited by authors of fiction

to convey a particular world view and cognitive habits of individual characters.

Consequently, whilst the metaphors used by Hill are widely shared ones, their choice

and grouping are shaped by his own (fictional) experiences, which contribute to the portrayal of his particular world view and by his cognitive habits.

2.1 Mind style and the psychological profiler in Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*

Harris's 1988 novel *Silence of the Lambs* is arguably the first novel to feature a profiler, the young trainee FBI agent Clarice Starling. It also has the distinctive feature of featuring a second one, in the serial killer, Hannibal Lecter. Lecter is a psychiatrist by profession, and whilst he helps Starling to build up a profile of another serial killer from inside his cell, he is at the same time profiling her. Starling   is invited by her Section Chief Jack Crawford to interview Lecter, in order to complete a questionnaire, to be used to inform a psychological profiling database that the FBI were compiling for use in unsolved cases. Thereafter, she is caught up in a race against time to find another serial killer, nicknamed Buffalo Bill, who skins the girls he kidnaps and holds hostage, before he kills again. Third person narration is used throughout, although the narrative mode and point of view change from chapter to chapter, with different characters alternating in the role of focaliser.

Readers are first introduced to Clarice Starling at the very beginning of the novel, where she is the focaliser through firstly, free indirect thought and secondly, dialogue with Jack Crawford. Crawford quickly establishes the purpose of his summons:

'Do you spook easily, Starling?'
'Not yet'
'See, we've tried to interview and examine all the thirty-two known serial murderers we have in custody, to build up a database for psychological profiling in unsolved cases.

Most of them went along with it – I think they're driven to show off, a lot of them. Twenty-seven were willing to cooperate. Four on death row with appeals pending clammed up, understandably. But the one we want the most, we haven't been able to get. I want you to go after him tomorrow in the asylum.'
Clarice starling felt a glad knocking in her chest and some apprehension too.

'Who's the subject?'
'The psychiatrist – Dr Hannibal Lecter ,' Crawford said.
A brief silence follows the name, always, in any civilized gathering.
Starling looked at Crawford steadily, but she was too still. 'Hannibal the Cannibal', she said.
'Yes'

p.287

Lecter's nickname and Starling's reaction to it is sufficient to trigger to the reader a hint at the nature of his crimes, which can be seen to be activating and drawing upon schemata activated by the word 'cannibal'. Semino (2002:104) makes the point that once a schema is activated, '…it drives further processing by generating expectations and inferences, and by guiding the identification of the component elements of the input and establishment of relationships between them..'. As the novel unfolds, this schema is re-inforced through subsequent dialogue between Starling, Crawford, Frederick Chilton, the administrator at the psychiatric hospital and Lecter himself, as well as Starling's free indirect thought.

Clarice also asks Crawford 'why me?' to which he replies because she's available, a reply she accepts. Portrayed as bright, ambitious (the glad knocking in her chest), but also young and naïve, since as the novel unfolds it is clear that Crawford uses Starling's youth and good looks as metaphorically, bait, a way of getting through to Lecter. This is re-inforced when Clarice goes to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane to visit Lecter. Dr Chilton, the administrator at the hospital, in briefing Clarice on her visit, describes Hannibal as a 'pure sociopath' and outlines the procedures for talking to

him, which include passing nothing to him but soft paper. Chilton also tells her that Lecter is never outside his cell without wearing full restraints and a mouthpiece. This has been since he was treated by a nurse; 'When the nurse bent over him, he did this to her'. Chilton handed Clarice Starling a dog-eared photograph. 'The doctors managed to save one of her eyes. .. he broke her jaw to get at her tongue. His pulse never got over eighty-five, even when he swallowed it' (p.292). In this way, our mental picture of Lecter is already established by schema associated with murder, cannibalism and sociopathology, generating expectations and inferences associated with those terms.

One of the ways in which the mind of the criminally insane is represented in these novels, is through peculiarities in conversation. For example, during her first visit to the Baltimore prison, one of the better behaved inmates called Alan, acts as Crawford's As Starling gives Alan her coat:

He rolled his tongue around in his cheek as he took Starling's coat.
'Thank you' she said
'You're more than welcome. How often do you shit? ' Alan asked.
'What did you say?'
'Does it come out lo-o-o-o-nnng?'
'I'll hang these somewhere myself'. (p.290)

As Semino (2007) has argued, flouting, breaking or infringement of Gricean maxims as illustrated above, and also the inability to follow conventions of Politeness Theory (e.g. Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983)) provides evidence of 'cognitive impairment'; namely, as Semino says, the 'inability to assess what normally counts as the 'appropriate" level of detail in communication'. It is in this way, through such inability, that other inmates at the prison such as Alan are shown to be criminal, rather than through the use of metaphor or any other literary device. Indeed, a striking feature

of *Silence of the lambs* is a virtually complete absence of metaphor and embellishing description.

Through Clarice, we as readers are introduced to Hannibal Lecter: his first appearance is when Clarice first visits him in his cell, and we encounter him through her eyes:

Dr Lecter's cell is well beyond the others, facing only a closet across the corridor, and it is unique in other ways. The front is a wall of bars but within the bars, at a distance greater than the human reach, is a second barrier, a stout nylon net stretched from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. Behind the net Starling could see a table bolted to the floor and piled high with softcover books and papers, and a straight chair, fastened down. Dr Hannibal Lecter himself reclined on his bunk, perusing the Italian edition of *Vogue.* He held the loose pages in his right hand and put them (p.294).

Here, two schemata are activated that are incongruent with one another; the description of a prison cell generates expectations of imprisonment, whilst the reference to *Vogue,* and the Italian edition at that, connotes culture and refinement. The incongruence between Hannibal the civilised, educated and urbane and Hannibal the evil killer and sociopath is marked, achieved by characteristics of the 'normal' contrasted with the 'abnormal', and often in the same sentence. For example, at the end of her first visit to Lecter, Miggs, a patient in the cell next to Lecter's, gets Clarices's attention and then flicks semen at her. Lecter says: 'I would not have that happen to you. Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me.' This is followed immediately by Clarice's thought: 'It was as though committing murders had purged him of lesser rudeness' (p.301). Uniquely amongst the prison's inmates, Lecter's dialogue as we encounter it though his conversations with Starling, conforms to Gricean maxims and politeness theory, reinforcing the contrast between and paradox of Hannibal the human and Hannibal the cannibal.

In a subsequent interview between Lecter and Starling, she offers him a deal: in return for information about Buffalo Bill, Hannibal would be moved to a cell with a view and access to medical journals and case notes. He accepts her offer, on the condition that 'I tell you things, and you tell me'. Thereon in, their dialogue about Buffalo Bill's crimes is interspersed with Hannibal asking Clarice about herself, as they trade bits of information between them: he about Buffalo Bill, she about herself. Through their dialogue, Lecter profiles Clarice, recognising her as a damaged human being. As a result of his questioning, we discover that Clarice's father was murdered when Clarice was young. Her mother, unable to cope, sent her to live with her mother's cousin and husband on their sheep and horse ranch in Montana. Clarice was allowed to ride one of the horses, but what she did not know was that all the horses were old and destined for slaughter. Once she found this out, she ran away with the horse and, rejected by the cousin, ended up in a children's home. Like Tony Hill in the quote on 1. above, Clarice Starling has all the markers of delinquency, but also like Tony Hill, has chosen a different path.

During their interviews, Hannibal's teasing out aspects of Clarice's past is a key feature in the way the narrative develops, as the trading of information becomes a key feature in encounters between Lecter and Starling. On one visit, Starling asks Lecter to give his opinion, in other words his profile, of Buffalo Bill. During their conversation, he asks her about Montana, and when she talks about running away with her horse he asks: 'How far did you get?' to which she replies: 'I got as far as I'm going until you break down the diagnostics for me' (p.399). he does so, but then refuses to tell her more until the next time she sees him.

Communicative behaviour, however, in these novels, not only accounts for characteristics specifically to do with the criminally insane, but also issues to do with gender, and especially power between the sexes. A further dynamic at play in the novel is between Clarice as a women and the men she encounters. She is the only significant female character in novel, the others being Crawford's dying wife and Buffalo Bill's victims, especially the last, Catherine Martin and her mother, a state senator. Crawford is her boss who leads her to Chilton, Chilton provides access to Lecter, and Lecter gives her Buffalo Bill. In her first encounter with Chilton, he says:

'Crawford's very clever – isn't he? – using you on Lecter'
How do you mean, Dr Chilton?
A young women to 'turn him on'', I believe you call it. I don't believe Lecter's seen a woman in several years – he may have gotten a glimpse of one of the cleaning people. We generally keep women out of there. They're trouble in detention.'
Well fuck off, Chilton 'I graduated from the University of Virginia with honors, Doctor. It's not a charm school.' (p.292)

In the dialogue above, Chilton's words are a potential face threatening act (FTA), signifying a patronising attitude towards women and latent misogynism, whereas although Starling's initial response belies her youth and naiivity, the second unspoken thought throws his words back in his face by the swearing and the spoken stating her academic credentials are by way of countering her youth. Both statements, as free thought and direct speech, work together to reveal a feisty and gutsy women, not afraid to stand up for herself. Indeed, much of the dialogue in the novel between Chilton and Starling follows a similar pattern to the one above, a bat and ball of FTAs and defence, which signify the power play between the two characters, as much as the trading of information between Lecter and Starling.

3 Mindstyle and lexical priming

At a textual level, cohesion works to weave a text together, and plays a significant part in creating text worlds and the mind styles represented in them. One aspect of cohesion which has attracted much recent attention is that of collocation, and the emergence of lexical priming, which has in turn been enabled by work undertaken in corpus linguistics. The theory of language most often subscribed to by lexicographers is that lexical items are isolated units, organised by syntax, realised by phonology or graphology and cross-referenced by text. Adolphs and Carter (2002), drawing upon John Sinclair's work, state that: 'Corpus-based linguistics has illustrated that the word as a lexical unit may be too narrow a concept and that the meaning of individual lexical items, at least in part, affects and is affected by those words that habitually co-occur with them in language use'. Hoey (2005) also points out that corpus linguistics has shown such a theory of language to be suspect, stating that: '…the first great feature standing against it is collocation'. Collocations, he claims, are 'both pervasive and subversive'. Both John Sinclair (2004) and Micheal Hoey in their work on language processing refer to Catherine Emmott's concept of primed frames (1997). This argues that some form of mental representation of the text so far must be building up in the mind of the reader and be available for interpreting a text at any given point. This form of mental representation occurs as a result of frames being primed for us as readers to draw upon, thereby allowing us to process texts more effectively.

The work of Sinclair (1991) and Stubbs (1996) amongst others has shown how it is possible to reveal that whole clauses are made up of interlocking collocations, to the extent that the sentence becomes a reproduction with variation of a previous sentence (Hoey 2005). Hoey goes on to argue that in such cases, the sentence exists because of its collocations, rather than simply using collocation:

…The ubiquity of collocation challenges current theories of language because it demands explanation, and the only explanation that seems to account for the existence of collocation is that each lexical item is <u>primed</u> for collocational use. By <u>primed,</u> I mean that as the word is learnt through encounters with it is speech and writing, it is loaded with the cumulative effects of those encounters such that it is part of our knowledge of the word that it co-occurs with other words.
Hoey(p1)

However, Hoey argues that lexical priming accounts for more than just collocation: it also accounts for grammatical category, semantic associations/prosodies and colligation, and an individual cannot be said to have properly acquired a lexical item unless it has all this priming. To give Hoey's example, *result* is primed for collocation with *good,* it is primed for use as a noun or as a verb, it is primed for semantic association with positiveness (*a good result, a great result, an excellent result* etc) and it is primed for use in certain grammatical contexts, e.g.. definiteness (*the result* v *a result).* Collocationally, groups of words are selected together, used colligationally, in particular constructions. Lexical priming then, is part of the psycholinguistic process that accounts for choices which have been made at any particular time for a particular purpose.

Grammar and semantics then, are thus the products of cumulative primings, of all the lexis encountered by an individual, with regulating or controlling factors that bring our

primings in line with each other. One such mechanism is self-reflexivity, but the other is culture, through firstly education, secondly through literary and religious tradition, thirdly through the mass media and finally through dictionaries and grammars, which enshrine and enable a degree of harmonisation of priming. Consequently, a theory of lexical priming, is one which accounts for individual linguistic patternings whilst at the same time takes account of the social and cultural dimension of meaning in ways currently lacking in cognitive linguistics. It is individuals as language users who are primed to use lexis, and because individuals are different then the same word can be primed differently for different individuals. At the same time, gatekeepers of language such as lexicographers and the education system ensure some degree of homogeneity at any given moment in time. Thus, in creating fictional worlds and minds, selection of lexis occurs in much the same way as selection of metaphor, in that once selected, all the information it has accrued, all the priming it bears is also available to the reader. Lexis brings with it priming associations, and can be exploited by authors of fiction to convey a particular world view and cognitive habits of individual characters.

For example, textually, lexical items used as proper nouns, such as *Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Clarice Starling,* are primed to occur in chains making use of pronouns and co-referents. Thus, in *Silence of the Lambs,* Clarice Starling is introduced in the first page of the novel by that name, and thereafter as 'Starling, Clarice, M', 'Starling', 'Clarice' or 'she'. Her boss, is Section Chief Crawford, Special Agent Crawford, Crawford or 'he': rarely 'Jack'. Crawford's superior status is thus reinforced in the chains where he is mentioned alongside alongside other characters, with the exception of his own private musings. Equally, Clarice Starling's junior status is

reinforced by the lack of any other marker such as Dr, section chief or boss.

Another example is the word 'cannibal' in the following extract used above:

'Who's the subject?'
'The psychiatrist – Dr Hannibal Lecter ,' Crawford said.
A brief silence follows the name, always, in any civilized gathering.
Starling looked at Crawford steadily, but she was too still. 'Hannibal the Cannibal', she said.
'Yes'

As readers, the words 'Hannibal' and 'cannibal' are encountered here for the first time. In this context, the word 'Hannibal' has no immediate association with cannibalism: if anything, depending upon our education and age, it associates with a particularly aggressive African Barbaric General who led an expedition of elephants to conquer Ancient Rome, or a cartoon character. However, it is clear, by the narrative comment following his name, that this is certainly not the first time Starling has heard it, and it immediately triggers in her the association of the nickname that she gives. Thereafter, the collocational connection is made for us between Hannibal and cannibalism, drawing upon our own understanding of both words 'Hannibal' and 'cannibal' and their semantic associations. Such inference is more than likely going to be negative, with feelings of repulsion and literal unspeakableness, since cannibalism is very much taboo in Western society. Indeed, upon first reading the words 'Hannibal the cannibal', as a reader, one is more likely to infer that 'cannibal' is being used in a metaphorical, rather than a literal sense, it is more likely to have been encountered in this way. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that 'cannibal' is being used in a literal sense and thus our priming of the word shifts.

Such inference can be checked against a reference concordance. The example given is taken from the Aston corpus of 52 million words, made up of various sub-corpora including literary texts, speeches and emails held at Aston University:

1. Fitzhugh describes how " [t] he African enslaved , is . .	**cannibal,** caught , christianized and
2. it would mean that he would become a savage or **cannibal** himself - or at least be victimised by them .	
3 back to Africa , they would become savages and **cannibal,** or eaten by cannibals . " His slavery here	
4 Spanish : anchovy , armada , cargo , sherry , loan	**cannibal,** cockroach , potato (The Spanish
5 and her boarder , better off for teeth than a family,	**cannibal.** Then she got rid of the Homais
6 kind of admiration , such as that with which a when hungry	**cannibal** might regard his intimate friend ,
7 a chosen missionary , and that young lady to a	**cannibal** in darkness.
8 ! Don't say that ! " Conseil answered . " You a you , I	**cannibal**? Why , I'll no longer be safe next to
9 even so , my boy . " " A person can be both a replied	**cannibal** and a decent man , " Conseil
10 the fagot and the stake ; nay , even the	**cannibal** maws of the South Sea Islanders .
11 ' s cow , the gentle cow , forced to be a	**cannibal,** to eat its fellow creatures

From the lines, we can see the following potential associations:

caught, christianized, enslaved, African

victimized, savage

eaten, savages, slavery

teeth

hungry

missionary

no longer safe

maws of South Sea Islanders

eat

become a savage or cannibal

forced to be a cannibal

These can be broken down into three sub-sets of potentially associative collocated lexis:

Eaten, eat, teeth, hungry – to do with food and eating

Caught, victim, no longer safe – to do with danger

African, enslaved, savage, maws of South Sea Islander - to do with race

Christianised, missionary – to do with religion

become a savage or cannibal, forced to be a cannibal - transformation into a negative state.

Thus, the collocates work together to trigger, through the word 'cannibal', a picture of victimisation, of being eaten, and of being transformed into something negative, anti-Christian and black.

Eight out of the eleven examples above all use the indefinite article, which would lead to the assumption that the word 'cannibal' is normally primed for indefiniteness and vagueness, its use metaphorical, rather than literal. In the text, the definite article is used, thereby preparing us for the priming to be cracked and reformed as we read on in the text from an initial assumption - immediately placed into question by the definite article - of 'cannibal' being used metaphorically to its being used literally. Part and parcel of literariness, it can be argued, is that words are primed which trigger particular semantic associations but are then cracked or 'switched off' (to use Hoey's term) to produce new and different meanings.

4 Conclusion

It is clear that whilst cognitive linguistics has generated categories of stylistic analysis that concentrate upon the process of reading, such analysis still relies mainly upon intuition. A study of lexical priming in a text adds an important layer of analysis, since it allows us to tap into a level of awareness in the character's mind which so far has been difficult to describe, and to check intuition against large banks of data. It also provides a linguistic basis or link for the activation of cognitive schemata or frames between individual words and the schema or frame they trigger in a reader's mind. The complementary analysis of mindstyle and lexical priming suggested in this paper can add to the level of insight that can be achieved not only about individual characters but also about the actual processing of texts and their wider social and cultural backgrounds against which they are situated.

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