

Structure versus style

The disappearance of stylistics in the Netherlands 1940-1970

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1.0 Introduction

To discuss the subject of ‘stylistics in the Netherlands’ is in fact a bit of a paradox, because in Netherlandic literary studies, there simply is no tradition in stylistic research of literary texts. It is not a regular part of Dutch literary studies. Leech & Short’s well-known *Style in fiction* (2007) is relatively unknown, let alone recent developments in cognitive stylistics and cognitive poetics. There is no ongoing debate on theory, definitions, methods and new approaches in literary stylistics. Luckily, this situation is now changing. In 2007, the Leiden University research group Stylistics of Dutch received funding from NWO (the Dutch Research Council) for a five-year project, the aim of which is to re-introduce stylistics of literary and non-literary texts as a regular discipline in Netherlandic literary studies.¹ As the literary PhD-student of this research group, one of the main goals of my first year of research was to make an inventory on literary stylistics in the Netherlands and to look for reasons why it never became a regular part of Netherlandic studies.

In this article, I will explain why stylistics on a linguistic basis disappeared from Netherlandic studies, after a very promising start in the nineteen forties and fifties. In Holland, a very strict definition of the terms ‘structure’ and ‘style’ was construed in the nineteen-sixties. As a result, a very strict distinction was made between *stylistic* research on the one hand and investigating the *structure* of a novel on the other hand. This has led to a focus almost exclusively on research into the *structure* of novels; stylistic research virtually disappeared from Netherlandic studies.

Interestingly, my research has shown that we are not dealing with a simple ‘national matter’ here. The factors which in Holland led to the disappearance of stylistics as a discipline are also present in the main international approaches to stylistics – but in a different way, because outside Holland there obviously is a very much flourishing discipline of stylistic research. I will discuss this in the second part of this article. I will argue that the distinction between ‘structure’ and ‘style’ is also present in international stylistic research and that its origins can be traced back to the Russian Formalist view on literature (foregrounding theory, Roman Jakobson). I would like to present the hypothesis that this has led to a selective viewpoint in stylistic research; a bias towards

certain types of text (poetry or short prose) and also a bias towards which stylistic features are being investigated (a focus on foregrounded elements).

2.0 The disappearance of stylistics in the Netherlands

In the history of Dutch stylistics, three researchers advocated stylistic research and practiced it during their careers, mostly in the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties: W.Gs. Hellinga in Amsterdam, C.F.P. Stutterheim in Leiden, and G.S. Overdiep in Groningen. I looked into their methods, their approaches, their international sources, and looked for reasons why they did not continue their work in stylistics, nor anybody else did. These three researchers belonged to the last generation whose professorship covered the entire field of Netherlandic studies (i.e. linguistics *and* literary studies). All of them took a special interest in stylistics, precisely because this area of research discipline involved both linguistic and literary studies, which were already developing into two separate disciplines at that time, much to their regret.

2.1 G.S. Overdiep

Gerrit Overdiep was professor in Dutch literature and Linguistics at Groningen University from 1929 until his death in 1944. Stylistics formed the core of his scientific work. There are little or no references to work of other scholars in his articles and books. It is therefore hard to determine which books, methods and authors influenced his thoughts on style. We do know that he spent the years 1914-1919 in Switzerland, for health reasons. During his stay there, he came into contact with the works of the linguists Charles Bally (1865-1947) en Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Both saw 'style' as the choice between different possible expressions, in which each option has its own connotations (*children, kids, youth, offspring*, etc.). Overdiep employs the same structuralistic definition, but his work also leans on the work of the early twentieth-century German stylisticians Karl Vossler and Leo Spitzer, who try to discover the personality or emotional condition of the author from the stylistic traits he uses.²

Overdiep's intention was to build up a complete description of the Dutch standard language system. For him, the stylistic analysis of an individual text was not a goal in itself: it was just a small step towards the description of the whole Dutch language system. He focused on the *Dutch* language, but because his approach was in fact language-independent, I will illustrate it with an English example. First of all, in the approach advocated by Overdiep, the language of one literary work should be analysed, for example *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. Then the other novels Dickens wrote should be analysed, and then his publications in other genres, like essays, letters, newspaper articles, etc. etc. Then the same should be done for all of his contemporaries. On that basis, a description of the language of the mid-nineteenth century could be construed. This general description would then function as 'the norm' for that period. Then, *Oliver Twist* could again be analysed by comparing its style to this 'general norm', and the uniqueness of the novel could be explained.

In short, Overdiep's argument was that first nineteenth century language in general should be described. Only then the individual stylistic elements of an author could be evaluated, by comparing them to the standards of the language of that time. But still this

would not be the end of his project: in his opinion, this should be done not only for nineteenth century language, but also for the twentieth century, the Age of Renaissance and the Middle Ages (Overdiep 1929). And not only literary texts should be considered, also non-literary and oral language use. Overdiep was very passionate about his approach, and he – understandably – encouraged his fellow-scholars to follow him. But it is easy to see why he did not have that much influence. His project was simply too large to be realized, and it is in fact an illusion to think that a complete description of ‘the standard language’ can be realized. In sum, Overdiep’s definition of style, his exhausting method, the profusion of detailed descriptions in his articles and also his controversial personality did not help to propagate his stylistic method.

2.2 C.F.P. Stutterheim

Unlike Overdiep’s research project, stylistics was never the main subject of interest for his fellow professors Stutterheim and Hellinga; they published mostly on other subjects, and only paid attention to style for a small part of their career. Stutterheim was professor in Dutch Linguistics at Leiden University from 1956 until 1972. His main publication on the subject is *Stijllee* (Stutterheim 1947), an introductory text in stylistics. Stutterheim’s theoretical approach did not consist of developing a new and sound method of stylistic analysis. He rather focused on discussing theoretical and practical problems in the work of other stylisticians, and in doing so he hoped to come to a better understanding of the concept of ‘style’. In *Stijllee*, he defines ‘style’ as ‘the adequate expression of an emotion’³ In his explanation of this definition it soon becomes clear that this does not mean that he endorses a psychological approach to style (like the early twentieth century German stylisticians Karl Vossler and Leo Spitzer). Stutterheim makes it clear that his interest is with what style-elements express in *one particular novel* of an author, and he stresses that it would take a lot more work (investigation of several novels of the same author) to discover the ‘personal style of an author’. He warns that there is not a one-to-one relationship between style and personality, nor between ‘form’ and ‘content’. Nevertheless, Stutterheim does speak of the ‘wholeness’ or ‘Gestalt’ of a literary work, which in last instance is created by the personality (Gestalt) of the author. In this respect, he is still a representative of the ‘older’ generation stylisticians (Vossler, Spitzer, Overdiep), as opposed to a younger generation researchers (like Hellinga – see below), who shifted the attention from a psychological approach to a method of analysis that focuses solely on the work itself: the *close reading*, which in the Netherlands was called ‘structuuranalyse’ (structural analysis).

2.3 W.Gs. Hellinga

Wytze Hellinga, professor in Dutch linguistics at the University of Amsterdam from 1946-1978, can be seen as a forerunner of the Dutch *close reading* theory that developed fully in the nineteen sixties. His view on style closely resembles a structuralist approach to literature, like for instance Wolfgang Kayser (1978). Hellinga’s main publication on style was *Kreatiewe analyse van taalgebruik* (1955), a book which he wrote in collaboration with his South-African colleague H. van der Merwe-Scholtz. This book consisted of a theoretical introduction and an extensive *close reading* of a famous Dutch poem by J.H. Leopold (1865-1925). Hellinga calls his approach to style

‘linguistic’, but this term is mainly used in opposition to a biographical or psychological approach to literature, which he explicitly rejects. ‘Linguistic’ can therefore be seen as a programmatic term, meaning ‘a focus on the literary work itself, without reference to the author’. It does not so much refer to the method used in analyzing the poem. The method Hellinga uses is mainly based on Russian Formalist foregrounding theory: an analysis of salient aspects of the text in rhyme, metre, sound, words, grammar and syntax. This structuralist approach to literature became the mainstream way of studying literature in the nineteen-sixties.

3.0 ‘Structure’ versus ‘style’

The flaws in methodology with Overdiep, and the selective attention paid to stylistics by Stutterheim and Hellinga, whose main interest lay with other areas of Netherlandic studies, may explain why stylistic research was never very influential in The Netherlands. However, this does not provide a conclusive explanation why stylistics as such disappeared almost completely from Dutch literary studies. Why was the word ‘style’ hardly ever mentioned in research, let alone the phenomenon being investigated? Hellinga still called his approach ‘linguistic’ and ‘stylistic’, but these terms are absent in the generation of scholars after him. This probably has to do with the paradigm shift that took place in the late nineteen fifties, early nineteen sixties. These were the years when Literary Studies (‘Literatuurwetenschap’ in Dutch) really developed into a scientific discipline in the Netherlands. There was a flourishing of theoretical studies which were occupied with establishing the ‘object’ of literary studies and the way literature should be studied. Literary studies was strongly opposed to previous ways of interpreting literature. Before the rise of Literary studies, literature was often interpreted biographically, morally and/or psychologically. Literary studies put the focus on the literary work as a work of art and devoted itself to investigating the construction, the ‘structure’ of these works of art. We could see this already in the work of Hellinga discussed above (paragraph 2.3). In Holland this new approach to literature was called structural analysis, and it is closely related to international approaches like New Criticism and *close reading*.

3.1 Style versus structure

An influential Dutch theoretical publication of this period is Frank Maatje’s *Literary studies (Literatuurwetenschap)*, first published in 1970 (Maatje 1974). Maatje’s definition of style and his opposition of ‘style’ and ‘structure’ is very insightful in explaining why Dutch researchers did not engage in the study of style.

Maatje defines ‘structure’ as: ‘The way in which in a literary work a world is created by means of words.’⁴ In contrast, his definition of style is as follows: ‘Style is, foremost, the special relation between somebody’s use of language on the one hand, and the supra-individual language which he uses on the other hand, and this insofar as this relation specifies something about his personality, is ‘characteristic’ for him.’⁵ In this view, ‘style’ is directly coupled to the author: Maatje defines stylistic elements as the recurring linguistic elements a writer uses in his whole oeuvre and which tell us something about his unique personality. The linguistic means a writer uses in *one* particular novel, and which play an important role in the interpretation of the novel, are

called *structural* elements, not stylistic. In other words: an author has a style, a literary work has a structure.

This coupling of style and personality traits of an author has a historical origin. Just think of Buffon's well known axiom: 'Le style, c'est le homme même' (Buffon 1919). Style has often been placed in direct relation to psychology. The question what the style tells us about the personality of the writer keeps on being asked during the history of stylistics. So although style has also been used to refer to linguistic elements in a particular novel, it is in fact an understandable decision of Maatje to call these elements 'structural' in stead of 'stylistic'. Nevertheless, this strict definition could very well be the main reason for the disappearance of stylistics in the Netherlands.

3.2 Foregrounding and poetry

The distinction between 'structure' and 'style' is not typically Dutch. I think it is closely related to the way international theorists approached Literary studies in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. As I was reading about the history of Literary studies and the great influence Russian Formalism had on it, I discovered that this distinction between 'style' and 'structure' is already present in the Formalist approach to literature. This can be seen in the work of Roman Jakobson, for instance in his groundbreaking lecture on 'Linguistics and poetics' in 1958 (Jakobson 1996).

The volume *Style in Language*, published in 1960, which contains the articles of the Linguistics of Writing conference of 1958, can be seen as one of the founding documents in English of 'literary linguistics'. (Sebeok 1960) At this conference, Roman Jakobson presented his famous lecture on 'Linguistics and poetics'. In this lecture, he presented his 'communication model' and introduced the five communicative functions, of which the poetic function is the most important one. Jakobson explicitly advocates a 'linguistic approach' to literature, as opposed to a psychological or biographical approach.⁶ This reference to a linguistic approach makes it interesting to investigate what he exactly means, and what his view of style is.

According to Jakobson, in the poetic function, the message focuses attention on itself (Jakobson 1996, 15). It does so by the principle of equivalence.⁷ The presence of 'equivalent' features – or parallelisms, as they are also called – is what is essential for a literary text: rhythm and metre, equivalence in sound (alliteration, rhyme) and in word and grammar. These equivalences of formal aspects will also have a semantic function. 'Words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning.' (Jakobson 1996: 28)

The first noticeable element in this theory is that attention is only paid to elements which are deliberately foregrounded. Secondly, almost all analyses Jakobson makes, involve poetry, not prose. This is understandable, because poetry is often characterised by special (deviant, foregrounded) language use. Roman Jakobson himself realised the difficulty of analysing poetry and prose that does not make use of special literary forms or verbal devices, where language is seemingly unostentatious and nearly transparent. A few quotations from his article will make it clear that in his view, analysis of texts without special language use, is difficult. He says:

“‘Verseless composition’” [...] where parallelisms are not so strictly marked and strictly regular as “continuous parallelism” and where there is no dominant figure of sound [...] – present more entangled problems for poetics, as does any transitional linguistic area. In this case the transition is between strictly poetic and strictly referential language.’ (Jakobson 1996: 31)

As we can see in this quotation, ‘verseless composition’ is positioned somewhere between ‘poetic language’ and ‘strictly referential language’. Jakobson does give an example of a successful analysis of *prose* texts:

‘[...] Propp’s (1958) pioneering monograph on the structure of the fairy tale shows us how a consistently syntactic approach can be of paramount help even in classifying the traditional plots and in tracing the puzzling laws that underlie their composition and selection.’ (Jakobson 1996: 31)

This struck me as curious. Stylistic analysis of *poetry* leads to attention for parallelisms in sound, word and grammar; but when we want to look for equivalences and foregrounded elements in *prose*, suddenly we are focusing on the *structure* of the fairy tale, not on its *style*. This is a direct consequence of Jakobson’s focus on principles of ‘equivalence’. But this viewpoint, in which one focuses on foregrounded elements, on parallelisms, does lead to selective attention for certain types of texts, namely: texts in which these elements occur frequently: poetry. Jakobson relates the analysis of prose texts (with less conspicuous stylistic elements) and poetry to the difference between metaphor and metonymia:

‘It is no mere chance that metonymic structures are less explored than the field of metaphor. Allow me to repeat my old observation that the study of poetic tropes has been directed mainly toward metaphor and that so-called realistic literature, intimately tied to the metonymic principle, still defies interpretation, although the same linguistic methodology that poetics uses when analyzing the metaphorical style of romantic poetry is entirely applicable to the metonymical texture of realistic prose [...].

Textbooks believe in the occurrence of poems devoid of imagery, but actually a scarcity of lexical tropes is counterbalanced by gorgeous grammatical tropes and figures. The poetic resources concealed in the morphological and syntactic structure of language – briefly, the poetry of grammar and its literary product, the grammar of poetry – have been seldom known to critics and mostly disregarded by linguists but skillfully mastered by creative writers.’ (Jakobson 1996: 31).

‘Realistic literature’ still defies interpretation, Jakobson writes here. Poetry or prose devoid of foregrounded elements cannot be investigated, he seems to say, and in the second part of this quotation, he even goes so far as to *deny* the existence of poetry/prose without foregrounded elements: if there aren’t any lexical tropes (like metaphors) in a text, there will be grammatical figures and they too can be investigated. To illustrate this, Jakobson uses the grammatical figures and tropes in the funeral speech of Anthony for Caesar from Shakespeare (Jakobson 1996: 31-32). What we can learn

from this is that for Jakobson prose which does not contain any grammatical figures or lexical tropes, in other words: ordinary language, is not an object of study for him.

3.3 Deviance and foregrounding

Due to this orientation, which is already present in Jakobson's analyses, stylistic research over the years has mostly focused on 'deviance', 'foregrounding' or 'prominence' in poetic language use.⁸ This creates a dichotomy between 'ordinary' language use, and special 'literary' language use (characterized by prominent features). In this distinction, the fact that 'ordinary' language use is also a specific and meaningful choice from the enormous amount of linguistic possibilities in the language system, is overlooked. Style as deviance is only a (small) part of the definition of style. In my view, style is foremost the choice an author has made: this choice can be in accordance with the rules of the language used, or not. Both options create their own stylistic effects, not just the second option.

The focus on foregrounded elements in a literary text can perhaps also explain why stylistics seems to have been most influential in the study of *poetry*. The majority of stylistic analyses in Holland has been done on poems, and I can imagine that the same goes for other languages and countries. This would be understandable, since poetry is often characterised by deviance from ordinary language use. And of course, a poem usually is much shorter than a prose text, and therefore a much easier subject for an extensive analysis. But because of this, maybe 'ordinary' sentences in 'ordinary' prose have received less attention than it deserves.

4.0 Conclusion

In sum, the definition of style as the personal characteristics of an author, and the strict distinction between 'structure' and 'style' stood in the way of the development of a stylistic research discipline in the Netherlands. It is still unclear why this has been the case in Holland, whereas stylistics flourished in the rest of the world, in spite of these and similar theoretical difficulties. Furthermore, Russian Formalism has led to a focus on salient aspects of a text, foregrounded elements. These are best investigated in short texts (poetry or short prose). In large novels, the sheer quantity of material to be investigated naturally leads to attention for a selection of (foregrounded, prominent) stylistic elements.

Even Leech & Short themselves have to admit – in the 2007 edition of *Style in fiction* – that their checklist has hardly been used for the analysis of entire novels or texts: 'It is a besetting weakness of the stylistics of fiction that it is partial, if not fragmentary: we find ourselves analysing a selection of linguistic features only, or analysing a small excerpt from a larger text.' (Leech & Short 2007: 305) In the 2007 edition they try to make up for this omission by giving an example of give an example of a stylistic investigation of a complete short story: *The Bucket and the Rope* by T.F. Powys. Although they give a very extensive structural, narratological and stylistic analysis, it still struck me as curious and also very characteristic for the focus on foregrounded elements in stylistics that they chose this particular story. What I mean is this: it is fairly obvious that there is something special with the thought representation of the

Neanderthal-person in William Goldings *The Inheritors* (Halliday 1971), or that there is something peculiar about the way reality is described when the main perspective is with a bucket and the rope, who discuss but do not completely understand what happened to their owner (Leech & Short 2007: 305-343). These characters cannot interpret the events the same way we do, which shows itself in the peculiar (foregrounded) language they use.

But I would like to see more stylistic analyses of texts which at first sight do *not* show any obvious signs of special language use or deviant main characters. In my own research project I will focus on less conspicuous linguistic elements, like sentence length, the ordering of main- and subordinate clauses, topicalisation, the use of connectives, the use of present or past tenses, adverbs and adjectives. An introduction of this new linguistic approach to stylistics and a brief insight into what results it could yield has been given by Anbeek & Verhagen (2001) in an article that was very much inspired by Leech & Short's *Style in Fiction*. In this article they compare two modern Dutch novelists, J.J. Voskuil and A.F.Th. van der Heijden on aspects like sentence structuring, connectives, aspect and tense. Their coupling of these elements on the micro level of the text to the interpretation of the novels (macro level) is very insightful to the role inconspicuous linguistic means play in steering the reader to a certain view on the events portrayed. It is my strong belief that inconspicuous linguistic means like sentence structuring and the use of connectives are just as vitally important in contributing to the creation of a specific meaning in the minds of the readers as other, more conspicuous stylistic elements. I will develop this approach in the next few years by analysing six modern Dutch novels and I hope to present the results of my investigations at a future PALA-conference.

Important problems still need to be solved. How can we make the step from stylistic analysis of short stories to the analysis of entire novels? I do believe that it is possible in principle to use the entire Leech & Short (2007) checklist on large texts, but the problem of selection (of textfragments and/or stylistic features to be analysed) is an important one and there are no clear guidelines on how exactly this should be done. As I have argued above, the selection of elements to be studied, should not limit itself to salient, foregrounded textual features. It is open to debate that as a result of foregrounding theory, stylistic research has sometimes focused too much on (already) salient aspects.

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Endnotes

¹ See www.stylistics.leidenuniv.nl

² See for example his ‘stylistic studies’ on word order (subject – verbum finitum) and topicalisation in Joost van den Vondel and early twentieth century novelists (Overdiep 1926 and 1927).

³ “Stijl is de adaequate uitdrukking van een gevoel” (Stutterheim 1947: 36)

⁴ “Structuur is de manier waarop in een literair werk een wereld wordt opgebouwd door middel van woorden.” (Maatje 1947: 115)

⁵ “Stijl is, in de eerste plaats, de bijzondere relatie tussen iemands taalgebruik enerzijds en de boven-individuele taal waarvan hij zich in dat taalgebruik bedient anderzijds, en wel voorzover die relatie iets zegt over zijn persoonlijkheid, ‘karakteristiek’ voor hem is.” (Maatje 1974: p. 59.)

⁶ This is in fact the same situation as in the case of Hellinga (paragraph 2.3).

⁷ See Jakobson’s famous definition: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” (Jakobson 1996: 17)

⁸ ‘Prominence’ is the term used by Mark Halliday (1971).