

Our first PALAs

Mick Short and Katie Wales

University of Lancaster and University of Nottingham

1. Introduction

A pervasive feature of the PALA newsletter, *Parlance*, for some time now has been the ‘My First PALA’ piece, where someone ‘new to the trade’, often a postgraduate student, gives their impressions of what it was like to experience a PALA conference for the first time. Common themes emerge: newcomers often come to our conferences with considerable trepidation, worried that they will be ‘shot down in flames’ when they give their talk and how they will cope. They are then surprised by how friendly the other conferees are, often comparing the PALA experience favourably with other conferences they have attended. They comment on how ‘the great and the good’ in PALA are so approachable and really do want to help. Instead of being attacked at the end of their papers, they discover that most conferees ask helpful questions and make supportive suggestions. They learn that conferences don’t have to be a series of trials by combat and, indeed, can be entertaining and fun as well as being academically rigorous.

Now that PALA is more than 40 years old, we have been comparing those impressions with our (now very imperfect, we have to say) memories of the early conferences, which we think will help newer PALAns understand how our conferences came to have their ‘special feel’.

The first PALA conference was in Nottingham in 1980 and it must be difficult now for stylisticians much younger than us to imagine what the state of stylistics was in the late 1970s, when PALA was just a twinkle in a few academics’ eyes. Stylistics had only just been born as a discipline in the English-speaking world, consisting of a handful of books and a small set of widely-spread journal papers and book chapters. These works were mainly early attempts at the analysis of poetry using linguistic textual analysis or general discussions of the relationship between language and literature and, indeed, whether contemporary linguistics had anything at all to offer to the academic discussion of literary works. At that time, the linguistics available for use in text analysis consisted almost exclusively of phonetics and grammar. Discourse analysis, semantics and pragmatics were not yet properly developed, and so the analysis of prose or drama was virtually unexplored, *pace* Fowler’s (1977) *Linguistics and the Novel*. Stylistics seemed to be regarded by both core linguists and literary critics in the UK and North

America as the sort of activity that should only be practised privately, among consenting adults. An illustration of this state of affairs is the infamous early UK 'debate' between Roger Fowler and F. W. Bateson in the journal *Essays in Criticism*, which Bateson edited. The debate is reprinted in Fowler's *The Languages of Literature* (1971): 43-79. Fowler tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Bateson, that linguists could be helpful to critics by cooperatively supplying linguistic analyses of literary texts and educating 'the next generation of critics in an approach indisputably relevant to their labours and to their greater pleasure' (Fowler 1971: 52). These days, stylistics is more developed and more substantial. It has a wider range of linguistic tools and cognitive approaches to use when analysing texts, a fairly substantial set of works for young stylisticians to read when 'learning the trade' and has a more established reputation, even if most critics and linguists still do not see it as particularly relevant to their work.

In those days it was virtually impossible to present papers at UK literature conferences or publish in literature journals. So we tended to go to the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB) conferences instead, where, in spite of the dominance of Chomskyan theoretical Linguistics at the time, occasional stylistics-related papers could sometimes be heard. This was because LAGB conferences were attended by Geoff Leech, Roger Fowler, Henry Widdowson, Paul Werth and others, who had published on the linguistic analysis of literature, as well as in other areas of linguistics. In the mid-1970s, a stylistics workshop for those interested was set up at LAGB conferences, even though it was only relevant for a minority of conferees. Unfortunately, because the attendees changed quite considerably from year to year, the annual stylistics workshops often became rather desultory general discussions concerning Wimsatt and Beardsley's Intentional and Affective Fallacies, and the relevance or not of linguistic textual analysis to the literary critical enterprise. Eventually, after one of these rather unproductive workshops, we discussed with Ron Carter and a few others the possibility of setting up a dedicated stylistics association, what eventually became the Poetics and Linguistics Association of Great Britain (PALAGB). We also wrote about the idea to other academics we thought might be interested. They were almost universal in their support for our idea.

As young academics we felt that we needed a well-known figure to be our first chair and Roger Fowler agreed to take on this role. Katie became the association's first secretary and newsletter (*Parlance*) coordinator and Ron Carter volunteered to host the first PALA conference at Nottingham University. Mick put an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement* to announce PALAGB's first (1980) conference. Among others, having seen the *TLS* advertisement, Gerard Steen came to give a paper at that first conference and Peter

Verdonk came to the second (at the University of East Anglia). He had telephoned Roger Fowler for advice when he saw the second advertisement and Roger told him to come. When we realised that we had friends in other countries who wanted to join us, we quietly dropped the 'GB' and became PALA.

2. Conferences and their organisation

When we organised our first conferences we were effectively making it all up as we went along. Most of us were young academics, often trying to complete PhD theses while teaching full-time, with a supervisor and few other effective systems of support. When Mick met his supervisor for the first time, for example, he was told to go away for 6 months and 'bone up' on his chosen subject area! Katie's PhD experience was not dissimilar. Postgraduate research work was arguably an even more lonely occupation then than it is now. There were very few other postgraduate students in our departments and almost certainly no-one with an academic interest in stylistics.

Hence, when we came together at the PALA conferences we were essentially trying to work out what to do and where to go. We were all exposed, in our different contexts and different ways, and so always wanted to ask open and supportive questions, to help each other develop our own little community of scholars. We have never felt grand or great because we never have been and, when supervising research students, we have tried ever since to be the supportive supervisors we had ourselves longed for. We have also tried to avoid great schisms and feuds as much as possible. PALA conferences quickly became places for finding PhD examiners, joint authors, and even short- and long-term life partners. We had found our academic friends. Willie van Peer's PhD viva took place during the 1981 PALA conference at the University of East Anglia, with Roger Fowler as external examiner and Geoff Leech as the internal. And, once, in 1988, we had established our first, *samizdat*, journal (see 3 below) we were also on the lookout at conferences for book reviewers and for papers which we thought could be written up for the journal.

At those first conferences we were all delighted to discover that there really were other people out there who wanted to develop this strange new area of stylistics. Indeed, we soon found that literature academics in countries where English was not spoken as a first language were rather more receptive to the stylistics approach than our native-English speaking colleagues. These days, because universities and research councils are more financially

supportive of academic conferences than they used to be, PALA conferences typically have more than 100 conferees and can be rather grand affairs, with grand receptions and dinners, and with many academics staying in hotels. Receptions are subsidised by publishers, the host university and other organisations. But our first conferences were much smaller and run on a shoestring, with maybe 20 or 25 participants. There was very little money to support academic travel in those days and so the early conferences were in England and ‘as cheap as chips’ to attend. Our first conference outside the UK was at the University of Amsterdam in 1990, run by Peter Verdonk, who arranged free or very cheap Amsterdam accommodation with people he and his colleagues knew, so that conferees didn’t have to book hotels if they didn’t want or couldn’t afford to.

We had purposely kept the annual association dues and conference fees very small too, so that with cheap and very basic accommodation, PALA conferences were not too expensive for postgraduates to attend. And soon we dropped annual association fees for students altogether. The small cohort of conferees early on meant that everyone heard all the papers presented, and discussions of common themes and issues could range across the whole weekend and in the bars in the evenings. This is something we miss in our modern conferences and is one of the reasons why we developed the smaller one-day symposiums and the Special Interest Groups at the conferences themselves. These innovations have helped PALA members explore new and developing interests together in detail.

As PALA had little of its own money in the early days, we asked each conference to break even, at least, and hopefully to make a small profit. In turn, the profit raised could then be used to give financial support to student conference presenters. Then, once the universities started to see vacation conferences as an income generator and conference fees rose, suddenly, and rather ironically, there was an opportunity for PALA conferences to make more profit and so subsidise students even more. The universities and research councils now had to provide proper conference travel and accommodation support for staff and sometimes research students too (in the early days most academics merely paid for travel and accommodation from our own pockets).

The universal university *quid pro quo* for extra financial support quickly became having a paper accepted for conference delivery. This had the unfortunate effect of reducing to virtually to zero the number of people from outside the university holding the conference who came out of interest, even when they had no paper to deliver. But that disadvantage was

matched by an significant accidental advantage for us, namely that 5% of a large sum is rather more than 5% of a small sum. PALA conferences started to make larger profits, which could then be used to provide more financial support for students and other useful things, like the conference prizes (though these have often been supported by publishers too) and the PALA one-day symposiums. As PALA conferences have become more international we have all been lucky to enjoy visits to amazing places, with wonderful excursions and truly memorable evenings. Castles, dinner (with entertainments) while sailing down the Danube, cocktails in Manhattan . . . What's not to like?

3. Our Journal

After we had established the PALA conferences, we soon decided that we needed a journal too, as there weren't many opportunities for us to publish our conference papers etc. Katie, very generously in Mick's view, gave up the newsletter title, *Parlance*, so that it could be used for our first journal, which was effectively an in-house *samizdat* publication, which was given away to members, relevant university libraries, conferees at subsequent conferences and new stylisticians we found elsewhere. Each issue was edited by a different person and the physical production and shipping of it was handled at Lancaster.

Once we had enough issues of the *Parlance* journal to count as an established track record, Katie, Mick and Tony Bex approached the publishers Longman (with whom Katie and Mick already had an established book-publishing relationship) to see if we could interest them in the establishment of a fully-fledged international journal. This discussion eventually led to the first issue of *Language and Literature* in 1992 (so the Aix conference marks the journal's 30th birthday) and many long nights reading and judging article drafts and giving detailed comments to help authors with their final drafts, a rather picky editorial tradition which still continues. We chose the more general title for the journal as it was more transparent in meaning than 'Parlance' and also happily meant that the name *Parlance* could go back home, to the PALA newsletter. Mick became the journal's founding editor and Katie and Tony were the founding assistant editors. In addition to articles, book reviews and lists of books received for review, we established a Notes and Discussion section in the first volume as we wanted the journal to have an interactive feel. In volume 8, 1999, by which time Katie had become the editor of *Language and Literature*, Katie introduced an annual article entitled 'The year's work in stylistics', which surveyed each year's work in the field, as an aide for other academics and

postgraduate researchers. The idea for this grew out of Peter Verdonk's helpful annual bibliography of stylistics publications in the *Parlance* newsletter.

4. Fun

Because we all quickly became our friends as well as colleagues, at the PALA conferences we soon established the 'PALA pub' tradition, an assumption that we would all meet up in the evenings in the same campus bar or the same pub/bar in town, to carry on our discussion and debates in a more informal setting. And everyone was also up for the early introduction of songs, sketches and other fun things in the evenings. In addition to the relatively informal feel to the journal, this led, in turn, to the tradition of after-conference-dinner entertainments which have become a popular established feature of PALA conferences. There have been some wonderfully silly evenings. For Mick, the crowning glories of the entertainments were the Noh Theatre version of *Gone with the Wind* at Kansai Gaidai university in Osaka and the 'silent movie' sketch at the University of Joensuu, in which a dastardly literary scholar was thwarted by a young hero-stylistician from tying a beautiful young scholar to the tracks as a steam train approached. For Katie, the highlights were the silly conference dinner quizzes (which she started) based on what had happened in each conference, being stylistics' Ginger Rogers to Mick's Fred Astaire and her and Mick's 'bull fight' in Granada. Long may the PALA conference, its silly entertainments and its special supportive character continue!

Reference

Fowler, Roger (1971) *The Languages of Literature: Some linguistic contributions to criticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.