

Literariness in non-literary texts: application of literary stylistics to comic dialogue

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0. Introduction

This paper discusses how literary stylistics works in the textual analysis of non-literary texts. To support my argument I effect stylistic and narratological analyses of 'non-literary' text: professional comic dialogue. By so doing, I wish to emphasize that predominant features of 'literary language', such as deviation and metaphor, are also fundamental to some non-literary genres. I shall also argue, from a pedagogical point of view, that awareness of literariness in non-literary language can be of significant help to students when they come to tackle more sophisticated 'canonical' literary texts.

1 . What is literature in a classroom?

This question is concerned with what literature is and what kinds of texts should be *taught* in a classroom. According to Widdowson (1999), Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin are key figures in this topic. For them literature is nothing but literature, not something else:

[...] *belles-lettrist* critics [...] looked to Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin for guidance, and [...] saw literature as the repository of moral and spiritual values which could be mobilised on behalf of an all-round 'human' education and of the enhancement of the national culture. (Widdowson 1999: 45)

Similarly, Picken (2007: 6) argues that the texts which are 'demonstrably valued as literature' and 'have a valid claim to literature' should be 'widely commented on by literary specialists' (Robert Frost's poems are referred to as an example).

In Japan, a similar view is suggested by Tsubouchi Shoyo, the author of *The Essence of the Novel* (1885).

It has long been the custom in Japan to consider the novel as an instrument of education[...]. In actual practice, however, only stories of bloodthirsty cruelty or else of pornography are welcomed, and very few readers indeed even cast so much as a glance on works of a more serious nature. Moreover, since popular writers have no choice but to be devoid of self-respect and in all things slaves to public fancy and the lackeys of fashion, each one attempts to go to greater lengths than the last in pandering to the tastes of the time. ('Preface to *Shosetsu Shinzui*', in Keene 1956: 57)

In actuality, in Japan popular fiction predominantly forms the major and common trend of contemporary literary works, and even *belles-lettrist* novelists often may have to find a point of compromise only to pander the tastes of the time. In this sense, the argument made by Tubouchi may possibly be considered to be one that is unacceptable.

But in reality this may not be the case. According to my own survey, many students seem to regard literature as *serious* reading materials, such as poetry and novels. It is

surprising enough to know that, from the viewpoint of these students, picture books and manga are not included in the heading of literature. One of the reasons for this may be that this survey was conducted in the classroom. In other words, the literary texts worth being taught are novel, poetry, and drama. The fact that some students regard critical essays as literature may also support this view.

In reverse, in the field of English education in Japan, books of an increasing variety of genres are integrated into literature:

So while conversational skills were valued post-1980s, stories never wholly faded from either L1 or L2 education. Book reading with or for young children was encouraged to build bonds with care takers. Elementary schools provided short daily book reading time to help pupils' extensive reading in L1. Publishers expanded the selections of graded readers in L2. A strong yen made imported English picture books (leveled readers) more reasonable in price. These conditions enabled even lower level EFL learners to read stories in English. The joy of reading stories in L2 is no longer a privilege restricted to advanced learners. (Teranishi et al. 2012: 228. The underlining is Teranishi's.)

Many EFL learners and teachers realize the need for extensive reading, as opposed to intensive reading and word-for-word translation. To practice extensive reading, in most cases EFL learners are recommended to read 'easier' reading materials than their own current levels, and as the result of this 'graded readers' have gained much wider popularity than before. Although graded readers consist of a variety of genres, it is also true that retold versions of classical literature are often used in extensive reading classes. The question to consider is whether they are literature or not. Here it will be instructive to compare two versions of *Washington Square* (1880), both of which describe the scene in which Morris confesses his love for Catherine. The following is the original version:

Catherine received the young man the next day on the ground she had chosen – amid the chaste upholstery of a New York drawing-room furnished in the fashion of fifty years ago. [...] What Morris had told Catherine at last was simply that he loved her, or rather adored her. (James 2007: 56-57)

In the retold version, the same scene is described as follows:

The next day Morris came to the house. He told Catherine that he loved her. (James 1999: 15)

Obviously the retold version is written in a much simpler form than the original. It may read oversimplified even to L2 learners. More significantly, the narrator's opinion, or what Labov (1972) defines as evaluation, is omitted and literariness disappears from the text. In an English writing textbook for EFL students, Boardman (2008) argues that a writer's opinion or point of view is essential for good, enjoyable writing. While the retold version is much easier to read, it may also deprive readers of joy of reading.

So which is a more suitable teaching material for EFL students, 'literary texts' with

weak literariness or ‘non-literary texts’ with strong literariness? Of course non-literary texts with weak literariness and literary texts with strong literariness are also available. Subsequently it comes to the further question: which one is best for the classroom use. In the section that follows, I shall argue that to stylistically read and analyze non-literary texts with strong literariness should be an important process in learning to read *belles-lettrist* novels.

2. Literariness and creativity in language

This section reconsiders the definition of literary text and literariness from a stylistic point of view.

2.1. A stylistic perspective: literary language as a cline of literariness

In this issue, Carter and Nash’s argument will turn out to be quite instructive, as shown in the following extract:

[...] the opposition of literary to non-literary language is an unhelpful one [...] the notion of literary language as a yes/no category should be replaced by one which sees literary language as a continuum, a cline of literariness in language use with some uses of language being marked as more literary than others [...] one crucial determinant of a text’s literariness is whether the reader chooses to read it in a literary way, as a literary text, as it were. (Carter and Nash 1990: 34-35. The underlining is Teranishi’s.)

Firstly, literary language should be considered a continuum, a cline of literariness in language use. Second point is also significant: whether or not the reader chooses to read a text in a literary way, as a literary text.

Carter and Nash (1990: 38-42) also define several standards of literariness, such as ‘Medium Dependence’, ‘Re-registration’, ‘Interactions of Levels: Semantic Density’, ‘Polysemy’, ‘Displaced Interaction’, and ‘Discourse Patterning’. For example, ‘Interactions of Levels’, which they regard as the most significant standard, means that a variety of levels of text, such as semantic, phonetic and syntactic ones, interact to reinforce meanings in texts and to emphasize the theme of the work.¹

2.2. Types of creativity

The issue of literariness has much to do with the issue of creativity. According to Swann et al (2011), the creativity is one of the most exciting and interesting issues in literature and language studies and the field that has been rapidly developing into a variety of directions. Carter (2011) divides creativity into three types. The first type is the traditional one. In the following extract, metaphor is discussed.

[...] the existence of a metaphor or metaphor set within a single paragraph may result in some striking local effects and may indeed underline [...] the continuum between everyday language and literary language [...] but the creative power of the metaphor is only ever fully realized if it has resonances across the whole work and can be seen to reinforce meanings in more than one place in an interrelated and mutually reinforcing and mutually deepening texture of meaning creation. [...] it is this kind of effect that characterizes creativity that is likely to be more universal and

enduring from creativity that is likely to be more ephemeral. (Carter 2011: 336-337)

On the other hand, creativity 2 is concerned with ordinary language:

[...] ordinary, demonic, common language is artful and has continuities with and exists along clines with forms that are valued by societies as art. (Carter 2011: 337)

Creativity 3 develops into the same direction but discourse is the key word; it is the case in which, while language or style may not be creative, the interaction between speakers produces creative effects. The third type can be defined as ‘creativity as a dynamic process’, ‘creativity as a completed product’ or ‘a more discourse-based view of creativity’. (Carter 2011: 340)

The text chosen for analysis is comic dialogue, which is close to ordinary language, rather than pure literature. Therefore, creativity 2 and 3 should be more relevant, though creativity 1 still should not be ignored.

3. Textual analysis: in comparison with modernist writing

In this section I would like to analyze a Japanese comic dialogue (the dialogue between the fool and the straight man of a pair of stand-up comedians) and examine its similarities with English modernist writing. I shall argue that the comedians pursue the potential of language to the full like some modernist writers, such as Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf.

3.1. Modernism as negation of realism

Before the textual analysis, it will be necessary to agree, even roughly, on what the features of modernist writings are. Needless to say, there have been thus far numerous attempts in the definition of modernism, but here I shall give it a definite interpretation as the reaction to realism or pre-modernism. In other words, modernist writings can be regarded as scepticism about language. To borrow Morris’s (2003: 9) explanation, ‘human beings [*cannot*] adequately reproduce [...] the objective world that is exterior to them’ and ‘their own subjective responses to that exteriority’. Reflecting this, some modernist writers use language for verbal display, rather than as a means of communication. I shall argue that both doubt about and potential of language are reflected in the language of the comic dialogue.²

3.2. Analysis

For the analysis I have focused upon intricate literary, narratological, stylistic and conversational techniques the comedians use, so that the similarities between their performance and modernist writings can be appreciated. Through the analysis I have identified some literary language features, which helpfully render their performance sound entertaining. (For the full analysis, see appendix).

The most marked language use is deviation. For example, the use of ‘bucchin’, which is an onomatopoeia used in Japanese when something is broken or cut, is deviated from our common usage. In Japanese slang, it is used when someone ‘snaps’ or gets angry, like ‘bucchin to kita’. It is rather uncommon, however, for someone to say ‘bucchin’ to someone else as shown in this dialogue. Along with the context in which the speaker repeatedly misses the chance to say what he should have said, the

deviated use of ‘bucchin’ helps their performance to be remarkably amusing.

On the other hand, the technique associated with modernist writing may be the embedded narrative structure. Based upon the distinction between *story* and *discourse*, it will be clarified how unusual this narrative structure is: while the story may be simply that the speaker’s friend had his bicycle stolen, the discourse is much more extended, about 4 minutes or 900 words. There seems to be some similarity between this unusual narrative structure and that of Virginia Woolf’s “The mark on the wall”, for instance.

Hyperboles and oxymora also contribute to the comicalness of the dialogue:

‘I wouldn’t care even if I died for my mission to find someone else who could fight against him for me.’ (hyperbole)

‘[...] with impetus to grasp my hair and kick me in the stomach, he was standing still for a while.’ (oxymoron)

In short, they use language as decoration, rather than for communication, and this fact may remind you of metaphoric expressions used by Joseph Conrad:

Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, **as though** they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air **like** a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, **as if** by enchantment, streams of human beings -- of naked human beings -- with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility. (Conrad 1985: 98-99. The underlining is Teranishi’s.)

4. Conclusion: with some pedagogical implications

In this paper I have conducted a textual analysis of a Japanese comic dialogue by focusing upon literariness and creativity in their language use. In this concluding section I would like to refer to some pedagogical implications related to this study.

Firstly, in using literature for EFL learners (especially, Japanese students), it is important to consider their aptitude and proficiency. That is, while many Japanese like literature in a broader sense, their understanding of not only English language but also literariness is not always adequate enough to tackle such serious literature in English. My argument is that to learn to be more sensitive to literariness in non-literary text can be a significant stage in preparing the students to read literature, even in a foreign language. Secondly, to understand how language works and to explain it from a stylistic point of view can be a valuable exercise in preparing students (and ourselves) to appreciate ‘authentic’ literary texts, as well as non-literary texts. Finally, the appreciation of literariness in both literary and non-literary texts should give us opportunities to reconsider what literature is and what literary language is.

The current study is still at the initial stage and further studies will be essential to make this research more meaningful for literature and language study and education.

Notes

¹ For more standards of literariness, see also Saito (2000) and Wales (2011), for instance.

² For the definition of modernism, see also Childs (2000).

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Appendix: Transcript of the comic dialogue
(translated by Kuniko Miyakami and Masayuki Teranishi)

- Both: Hello, we are punkbooboo. We beg your kindness during our performance.
- Left: These days I am feeling that Japan has become a dangerous country.
- Right: That's true. We quite often hear horrible news.
- (1) Left: There are many crimes, aren't there. (1) Talking about myself, the other day I was involved in a crime at a convenience store. (* Embedded narrative starts.)
- Right: What? It's serious, isn't it? What happened?
- Left: While I was browsing through a book, I found a young "Niichan", or a young bro (meaning a young man or an elder brother) shoplifting.
- Right: How stupid! Unbelievable.
- Left: Unforgivable, isn't it?
- Right: Indeed.
- Left: (2) So "What are you doing here?", I was wondering when I should say this. (*Creative speech and thought presentation.)
- Right: You were just wondering, not actually said so.
- Left: (3) No, I didn't. Then the bro noticed me. "Hey, what are you looking at me for? It's none of your business. Get out!" I saw that he looked as if he were saying so. (*Creative speech and thought presentation; Metaphoric expression)
- Right: Oh, I see. You saw it from the look on his face, but he actually didn't say that.
- Left: No, he didn't. So "completely **'bucchin' (mad about it)", that's what I said myself.
- Right: Oh, you did! You said "completely mad about it!" Then those around you were startled by it, weren't they?
- Left: Then, the bro all of sudden is going to turn around and beat me, perhaps. (4) This might happen to me, and don't you think it possible, do you? (*A possible world?)
- Right: Oh, yes I do. That's likely to happen.
- Left: So I was wondering what I should do with it. "Now is the time for action", which is the title of the book I was browsing, immediately I put it back on the bookshelf.
- Right: Oh, it is the book title.
- Left: Exactly, and giving that bro a hard look, I confidently left the bookshop to turn my steps to the convenience store where he was.
- Right: What? A different shop?
- Left: Yes, different one.
- Right: A different shop? The bro was in the convenience store?
- Left: Yes, I had been looking at the situation from the bookshop across the street.
- Right: That is, (5) so far you had been watching the situation alone at the bookshop on the other side of the street, and said to yourself "completely mad about it!" Is that all you had done so far? (*Confirmation of context, which makes this dialogue different from modernist fiction.)
- Left: So far, exactly.
- Right: Nobody noticed you?
- Left: Bravely I entered the convenience store. (6) I wouldn't care even if I died for my mission to find someone else who could fight against him for me. (*Hyperbole)
- Right: You did, you didn't fight yourself.
- Left: Then I found (7) absolutely very strong at first sight, I mean, an old man drinking that very strong sake. (*Hyperbole)
- Right: Oh, strong sake, not a strong man.
- Left: Yes, strong sake.
- Right: He is just a drunk.
- Left: He got dead drunk.
- Right: A hopeless old man, wasn't he?
- Left: (8) Now I will take it, because I am a man. I will fight it out. That I heard the old man

saying himself, you see. (*Hyperbole?)

Right: What? It was the old man who was saying so? Oh, no. A terrible old man, isn't he?

Left: You couldn't count on the old man, so I had to make up my mind to stand up for the situation. "Hey, man, stop it. I'm warning you, you know." And that I told him.

Right: Oh, you did say this.

Left: Truly.

Right: You said so !

Left: (9) Then with an evil smile on his face, "It's you that talk rubbish." That's I was told.

Right: Oh, he is disgusting.

Left: I got furious too. So I wildly grabbed him by the collar and said, "I am not talking to you, old man, you know that, don't you." (*Creative speech presentation)

Right: What? Was it the old man who tried to pick a fight with you? He had nothing to do with this. How stupid! The hopeless old man.

Left: I couldn't help wondering (10) what on earth made him a clerk at a convenience store, because he was such a mess, you know. (*Cataphora)

Right: The old man is a store clerk?

Left: Absolutely.

Right: What is he doing? He is stupid, the old man. It's disgusting.

Left: While arguing with the old man, I saw the bro trying to leave the spot, so I stood in his way. (11) "Hey, it has got to stop. You know what you are doing. Shoplifting is a crime without doubt, you see". The very moment I was about to say this. (*Creative speech and thought presentation)

Right: You should have said so. It is such a long speech, though.

Left: (12) The very moment I was trying to say "Enough is enough" to him. "Gee, you really scare me," he didn't declare so actually (*Creative speech and thought presentation), but (13) with impetus to grasp my hair and kick me in the stomach, he was standing still for a while. (*Metaphor; Oxymoron)

Right: That means he didn't do anything.

Left: (14) If my bro behaves in that way, as for me who is his younger brother in reality (*Cataphora), I cannot bear it any longer.

Right: What? Your brother?

Left: Yes, my brother.

Right: Your own brother?

Left: I have been calling him "bro" all through. You know that, don't you.

Right: You should have stopped him, because you know it is a crime without doubt, you see.

Left: Of course I did. (15) In short, what I am talking is that while I was doing this and that, I had my bike stolen. (*Hearing the "15main story" for the first time, listeners here realize that the story told so far is incidental.)

Right: Don't talk around the topic. Get to the point.

Left: It is out of point, isn't it?

Right: Indeed.

Left: (16) I happened to hear this story from my friend. (*Here listeners know that what he has told is an embedded story, originally told by his friend. (cf. *Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim*))

Right: Everybody here thought it was your story. Oh, come on, mate. Give me a break.

Both: Thank you very much.

(**'bucchin' is an onomatopoeia used when something is broken or cut. In Japanese slang, it is used when someone 'snaps' or gets angry, like 'bucchin to kita'. It is strange, however, for someone to say 'bucchin' to someone else as in this dialogue.)