

Confluence of Ancient and Modern Techniques: the Theory of Vakrokti and Formalism

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Abstract

Criticism marks a definite break towards the end of the 19th century. It becomes reader oriented. This change has its profound impact on the teaching-learning process also. Emphasis is given on student-centric approach by making them the active participants. Language is considered a base of interpretation of literature. The situation in many Indian classrooms is that the teaching of English is beset with a variety of problems. Stylistics may provide a solution to a good number of problems such as lack of adequate materials, large classes, students' apathy, etc. The two important points are: (a) how the analysis of a poem or of a prose passage could be a thrilling experience, and (b) how much more pleasant it is to learn English language through a close reading of its literature than through the traditional ways of memorization and reproduction. The aspects of modern stylistics had been long back anticipated by Kuntaka in his theory of vakrokti in the late 10th to early 11th century Roland Barthes' well-known essay "The Death of the Author" represents a turning point in literary criticism, challenging the traditional humanistic approach. In this new perspective, the authority of the author is replaced by that of the reader. Interpretation shifts its focus to the language of the text itself—its words, phrases, and sentences. M. H. Abrams, in *Mirror and the Lamp*, describes this shift as a movement from subjective or expressive criticism to objective or textual criticism. According to this view, considering the author's intentions, biography, or historical context while evaluating a work is misleading; W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley famously called this error the "intentional fallacy."

A literary work came to be regarded as a self-contained and independent entity. Literary analysis was no longer limited to elements like theme, plot, characterization, and narrative technique, but also began to emphasize the analysis of words, phrases, sentences, images, and symbols. As the structure or form of a work became central to criticism, this approach came to be known as formalism. To study literary language more systematically, groups such as the Linguistic Circle and the Petrograd Society were established. Key figures associated with this movement included Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, and Yury Tynyanov. However, the Soviet government responded unfavorably to these intellectual developments. Consequently, many of these thinkers left Russia and moved to Czechoslovakia, where they became part of the Prague Linguistic Circle. This group was further enriched by prominent scholars such as Jan Mukarovsky and Rene Wellek.

With the focus on the analysis of language in literary work, it is divided into two types: literary (or poetic) and ordinary (or non-literary). The key difference lies in their purpose—ordinary language is used to convey information or messages, while literary language aims at creating a distinctive aesthetic experience through the use of figurative expression. These unique qualities of literary language are collectively referred to as "literariness." It is this literariness that transforms a text into a work of literature. Therefore, literary criticism focuses not on literature itself, but on the concept of literariness.

In this view, the text as an object becomes less important than its stylistic features. The systematic study of these stylistic aspects is known as literary stylistics.

Whatever is stated by the formalist in the 20th century, has been stated by Kuntaka long back in his theory of “vakrokti”. At the very outset of his work *Vakroktijivita*, Kuntaka lays down briefly his object in writing this treatise on poetics is to establish the idea of Vakrokti which causes extraordinary, disinterested charm in poetry. Vakrokti consists of strikingness of expression different from the established, ordinary mode of speech. Mahimbhatta explains Kuntaka’s standpoint when he says that when contrary to established usages an idea is expressed with a view to attain strikingness, we have what is called Vakrokti.

The term vakrokti has been used from past time. Bana speaks of “gay men experts in Vakrokti.” To quote his actual words ‘Vakrokti nipunen vilasijanet.’ Chandrapida uses it in the sense of “kridalap” or “parihasjalpit”.

The term vakrokti is made up of two elements: 1) vakra and 2) Ukti. The term ‘vakra’ means not straight, direct and ‘ukti’ means speech. So, it is oblique, indirect speech or expression. It is something which is opposed to swabhawokti which implies direct, natural speech. The former is ironical whereas the latter is naturalistic.

The salient features of Kuntaka’s vakrokti theory are as follows:

1. Kavya becomes lively in association with vakrokti.
2. It is also recognized as alankriti that is embellishment of shabda and artha- the physical constituents of poetry.’
3. By vakrokti, Kuntaka implies all the charming elements in kavya such as “dhawani”, “guna”. And all the well-known “alankaras” such as “upama” (metaphor) “rupaka” (simile), etc.

“Atishoyokti” in Bhamaha’s view is practically an example of vakrokti. According to Dandin, “Vakrokti originates in Atishoyokti. “Slesha” (pun) too adds charm to vakrokti. So, vakrokti is a striking mode of speech, based on “slesha”, differing from plain matter of fact, ordinary mode of speech. So, it is marked by deviance. Bhamaha goes to the extent of saying that vakrokti is present in all ‘alankaras’. This insistence on vakrokti emphasizes two characteristics:

1. Words used in poetry have different connotation than those used in ordinary speech.
2. The poet seeks to express himself in striking mode or combination or relation of things that lie beyond the reach of ordinary matter of facts.

In *Vakroktijivita*, the term vakrokti is used in this sense. According to Jayaratha, vakrokti is the soul of poetry which is marked by “kavipratibha.” Even Cleanth Brooks says that poetry is characterized by paradox which in practical term implies ironical contemplation.

Formalism as well as the theory of vakrokti view literature as a specialized mode of language. It distinguishes between the literary or poetical use of language and ordinary or practical use of language. In the view of these critics, literary language is always self-focused. It draws the attention of the reader toward itself, toward its formal features. Formalism and vakrokti lay emphasis on the linguistic study of literature, which is also called literary stylistics. It is literariness that makes a given work a literary work. Naturally, the object, that is literature, is not important, but the stylistic features of the object are important.

It was in 1917 that Victor Shklovsky published his essay, “Art as Device”. Terry Eagleton considered this year as the beginning of the modern literary theory. Almost at the same time, the Moscow Linguistic Circle was formed and Russian formalism flourished during 1915-1930. Due to the political changes in

the Soviet Union, some of the members moved out. Prague became the centre for the Prague School theory of language. It included some Czech and Russian linguists. The prominent figures of the school were Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovsky, and Boris Eikhenbaum. They were interested in establishing a 'scientific' basis for the theory of literature and in explaining how aesthetic effects were produced by the special use of language and literary devices. (Krishnaswami 7)

Defamiliarisation/ Foregrounding: Its Nature and Kinds

The formalists rejected the expressive aspect of texts and focused their attention on the literary elements in it. The key-concept in the formalist approach to literature is 'defamiliarisation'. According to the formalists, literature is basically a specialized mode of language. So, they made a distinction between the literary, that is, 'poetic' use of language and the ordinary, that is, 'practical' use of language. Therefore, the study of literary language differs from that of practical use of language. It is focused on the distinctive features which the formalists cumulatively call "literariness". According to Roman Jakobson, "The object of study in literary science is not literature but 'literariness', that is, what makes a given work a literary work." (Abrams 273-74) In the words of Lemon and Reis "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (32.)

Jan Mukarovsky states that literariness consists in foregrounding which Victor Shklovsky designates as 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarisation'. The term 'foregrounding' is derived from the Czech term 'akualisace' used by the Prague School of Linguistics in the 1930. Originally, it is a concept in painting where it is used as a means of achieving significance. The method is effectively employed in photography and, of course, in literary language. If we assume that poetic or literary language is somehow or in some sense different from ordinary language, then we can say that ordinary language is the background against which poetic language is foregrounded. As a result of this, literary language becomes "special" language. Mukarovsky observes: "... the language of literature itself is foregrounded against the background of conventional linguistic forms of expression." (Krishnaswami 110)

The opposite of foregrounding is 'automatization'. It is a process by which a previously foregrounded expression loses its aesthetic value for later readers. New linguistic elements then tend to be foregrounded. Foregrounding serves as an attention calling device in a literary passage through the use of repetition, emphasis, unexpected lexical collocations, syntactic inversion, etc. Important stylistic effects are created by unusual collocations which result in collocative clash leading to foregrounding, especially in poetry (e.g., edible smell, colour of the tastes.) In Richards's phraseology, these are called "Synaesthetic Effects". It is based on the principle that poetic language seeks in its combinatory relationship. This is restated in Roman Jakobson's well-known dictum: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination." (Sastri15) In poetry, we see a particular drive towards the strange and away from the familiar in its lineation of words, its rhythmic patterning, and its choice of language. (Guerin 371)

We are foregrounding our language in some sense against normal language when we say "Never, never, never, never, never" (*King Lear* vx.iii-307) or coin a new expression. There are two major differences between the foregrounded language in its day-to-day use and literary use: (a) Foregrounding devices are not consistently or systematically employed in ordinary language as they are in literary language. It is said that the function of poetic language consists in the maximization of foregrounding. (b) Foregrounding is always aesthetically purposeful in poetic language as it may not be in our everyday use of the language even when it is deviant. Shklovsky opines, "The technique of art is to make the object

‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” (Selden 32) Foregrounding has often been equated with linguistic deviation. While deviation is a major means, there can be other means of foregrounding as mentioned earlier. The best example is ‘poetic licence’ meaning the liberty with which the poets or writers take departure from the rules and conventions of standard written and spoken language and in the matter of use of newly coined words, when it suits them. The different kinds of deviation are as indicated below:

Orthographic Deviation

Orthographic deviation is perhaps the easiest to perceive though it is not as commonly practised as the other kinds of deviation. This type of deviation includes both spelling and punctuation. The example of spelling is archaisms, which indicate the use of words and expressions that have become obsolete in the common speech of the present times. Spenser in “The Faerie Queen” employed archaisms mostly from Chaucer’s medieval English to recreate medieval chivalric romance

Regarding punctuation, one notices the relative or complete absence of punctuation-mark in Arun Kolatkar’s poem *Jejuri*.

Ambiguity

One can attract the reader’s attention by using ambiguous language. In *Antony and Cleopatra* when Cleopatra says to the asp,

Come, thou mortal wretch, With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate Of life at once untie. Poor venomous fool, Be angry, and dispatch.

her speech has highly multiple meanings. Here, “mortal” means “fatal” or “death dealing”. Similarly, asp is itself mortal, or subject to death. “Wretch” conveys both contempt and pity. Actually, Cleopatra visualizes the asp to be, her baby at her breast, that sucks the nurse asleep; and “dispatch” also communicates both - “make haste” and “kill”.

Portmanteau Words

Portmanteau words also can be used as a foregrounding device. The famous oft quoted example occurs in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*:

’Taws billing, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gamble in the wabe.

Here, “slithy” is made up of words “lithe” and “slimy”. James Joyce, in his dream narrative *Finnegan’s Wake*, while describing the feeling of fear of the young girls has used the words- “yung” and “easily freudened”. The word “freudened” is the combination of some part of “frightened” and “Freud” and, similarly, “yung” is the fusion of “young” and “Jung” The word “intrinsicate” in Cleopatra’s speech in above is also the blending of “intrinsic” and “complicate”.

Sound Devices

Alliteration (inclusive of consonance and assonance) and onomatopoeia provide musicality and catch the attention of the reader.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds when they occur either at the beginning of words or at the beginning of stressed syllable within a word. In old English, it is used as a principal device of versification. It is a verse line which is divided into two half-lines. Each of them consists of two strong stresses. The decisive pause in the line, indicated by a comma, is known as *caesura*. The stressed syllables in the first half-lines alliterate with the stressed syllables in the second half line. See the repetition of /s/ sound in the stressed syllables in the opening lines of William Langland's *Piers Ploughman*.

In a 'somer' season, when 'soft was the' sonne.

However, in later English poems, alliteration has been used only for special stylistic effects such as to reinforce the meaning, to link related words, or to provide tone colour and enhance the powerfulness of uttering the words. Shakespeare in his Sonnet No. 30 has repeated the /s/ and /w/ sounds, thus: **When to the sessions of sweet silent thought**

I summon up remembrance of things past,

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound in the stressed syllable. In Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn", /i/ and /ai/ sounds are repeated in the opening lines:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,

Thou foster child of silence and slow time.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia designates a word or a combination of words, where the sound seems to resemble closely the meaning it denotes. It short, in onomatopoeia the sound echoes the sense.

It cracked and growled and roared and howled

Like noise in a sound.

Here, 'howled', 'growled' are significant words, and they are not used for their own sake. They do add a certain supernatural flavour to the poem.

Unusual Lexical Collocations

Important stylistic effects are created by unusual collocations which result in a collocative clash, one of the foregrounding devices, especially, in poetry. Examples are found in the form of the figure of speech called oxymoron, e.g., "pleasurable sorrow", "the sadly pleasing tears", "pleasing pain" "loving hate", "I burn and breeze", etc. In the "Paradise Lost", Milton indicates the presence of God as

Dark with excessive bright

Thy skirts appear.

When the poet Kamala Das says, she would like to visit her grandmother's house to "pick up an armful of darkness" and allowed herself to sit beside her table "brooding there like a dog", she is not only making a collocational departure from the norm but also conceiving of a new mode of existence as it were. An "armful", as a noun phrase conveying a quantity, is not followed by "darkness", an abstract noun, in the normal course. But the semantic deviation has the effect of conveying the poet's anxiety to capture the entire past in a palpable way.

Similarly, when Dylan Thomas uses the collocation “a grief ago”, he not only violates the rule which here requires a noun phrase referring to a time-unit like “a week” or “a year” but also succeeds in making us construe “grief” as though it were a unit of time measurement. In consequence, the phrase “a grief ago” becomes a memorable expression.

Personification

By personifying the non-human objects, one can attract the reader’s attention. Milton describes Adam’s fatal mistake in the line:

... sky lowered.

... the muttering thunder,

The sad drops

Wept at committing the mortal crime.

Repetition

It is an item or feature used by all of us frequently to emphasize something. The repetition may be of sounds (onomatopoeia) or of words and phrases, or of sentences (syntactic repetition). Hamlet’s *hamartia*, that is, his incapacity to take proper decision on proper time could be noticed in the line:

If ’t were done, when it is done,

’T were well, when’t were done quickly.

The important point here to note is that the thematic effect of lexical repetition varies from poem to poem, and even more so in dramatic poetry. The repetition of the word ‘tomorrow’ in Macbeth’s speech:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.

may express the repetitive, laborious, meaningless progress of every day towards death and the fatigue and the frustration, accompanying it.

Epigram

One can attract the reader’s attention by using such figures of speech as epigram and transferred epithet. For example,

Child is the father of man.

Originally, the term epigram is used for a very short, pointed, witty poem. Towards the end of the 15th century, it comes to be applied to a neat and witty statement in prose as well as in verse that expresses antithetical ideas and surprise.

Transferred Epithet

The term transferred epithet denotes an adjective or adjectival phrase which is transferred from one object to another. For example,

The ploughman plods homewards his weary way.

He tossed from side to side on his sleepless bed.

In the former, the epithet ‘weary’ is transferred from ‘the ploughman’ to ‘way’. In the latter, ‘sleepless’ is transferred from ‘he’ to ‘bed’.

Ungrammatical Construction

Deviance is closely linked with the linguistic concepts of grammaticality and acceptability. Enkvist defines grammaticality as the extent to which a given sentence has been formed according to the rules of a given grammar. (Sastri22) He further says, "Acceptability is relative not on a given grammar but to the opinion of an informant or a group of informants.(22) The same sentence which is acceptable in one context may not be so in another. For example, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is tolerable in the context of Cummings's poem though it is ungrammatical according to the rules of English grammar.

The famous example of ungrammatical expression occurs in *Julius Caesar* in Antony's funeral speech, where he says, "This is the most unkindest cut of all." The Marathi poet P.S. Rege has used the word "*Pushkala*" as the title of his poem to indicate the multiple qualities that a woman possesses.

Parallelism

Parallelism is the matching of one construction with another, similar one. It is the occurrence of two structures which are identical in some respects but different in others. Poets employ this technique to achieve thematic significance.

However, in foregrounding, it should be remembered that the violation or deviation always has a purpose and when the purpose is not achieved, the deviation can be mere gimmickry. Therefore, it can be stated that all literary language is an aesthetically purposeful distortion of ordinary language.

The Stylistic Approach and the Teaching of Literature

The advantages of applying the stylistic approach to the teaching of literature are: (a) It gives the students something to do, to start with, some sense of activity. (b) It provides students something, some basis, to build their interpretation on. The stylistic approach to literature can help the students to appreciate the artistic use of language and enhance their communicative competence. Halliday looks upon style not as a mechanical addition to a text but as an organic part of it, e.g. "There is no text without style." Style, for him, is a message delivered by the linguistic code which is a sort of deviation from the norm as stated by Jan Mukarovsky. (Quote Deshpande 72)

The major problem in the teaching of English is to give the students a sense of style. And to give the student a feel for style, he should be not only provided with linguistic descriptions of the text but also taught to react to textual stimuli in the approved manner. Widdowson opines:

One can look upon stylistics as a pursuit that effectively mediates between linguistics on the one hand and literature on the other...The critic looks upon metaphor as an aesthetic phenomenon whereas it is the example of violation of "selectional restrictions" to the linguist. The stylistician tries to connect these two approaches and tries to account for reader's / student's reaction in terms of linguistic deviation. (Quote Sastri52-53)

To quote Widdowson, again, "It is important to remember that the effect of literary patterning is to create acts of communication which are self-contained units, independent of a social context and expressive of a reality other than that which is sanctioned by convention." (Quote Sastri52-53)

Thus, the stylistic devices are not just mechanical additions to or decorations of the text; they constitute the organic part of it. Style is considered to be the foundation upon which the students can form their interpretation of the literary work and not the dress of thought as stated by Alexander Pope. The application of this method in interpreting and appreciating a literary text brings a revolution in the teaching and learning process. The teacher's role here is just that of a guide. He/she is the passive tutor

monitoring the discussion and the students are the active participants. So, the teaching-learning process does not remain a monotonous activity. Instead, it becomes a lively, stimulatory and challenging task for them.

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