

Stylistics

A practical coursebook

Laura Wright and Jonathan Hope



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**Also available as a printed book
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- Laura Wright
- Jonathan Hope



LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1996
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

Simultaneously published in the USA and
Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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Text design: Barker/Hilsdon

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in
Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book has been
requested

ISBN 0-203-14757-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-21803-5 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-11381-4 (Print Edition)

*In memory of J.P.Thorne (1933–1988)
whose teaching influence continues
in these pages*

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(date of first publication [date of edition used])

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—— *The Salt Eaters*, The Women's Press (1980) (2.9).
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- Carey, Peter, *The Tax Inspector*, Faber & Faber (1991) (4.1).
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How to use this book

Using a wide range of twentieth-century literary prose, this book is an introduction to the techniques of stylistic analysis. The book also serves as a practical introduction to basic descriptive grammar from clause to text structure.

The book is divided into five chapters, which are subdivided into sections. Each chapter corresponds to a major area of grammar, while each section focuses on a particular feature of the area. Sections are self-contained, with a definition of the feature, a text for analysis in which use of the feature is significant, a solution, and a verdict.

Within each chapter, the higher numbered sections are more complex. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 are also in increasing order of complexity. However, we have placed Chapter 5 at the end, even though vocabulary is arguably the most easily grasped topic, because it is the most limited area linguistically and therefore least rewarding.

Although the chapters and sections get increasingly complex, there is no need for teachers to follow our ordering within or between blocks. One method which we have both used with success is to group three or four texts on a similar point (for example, pronouns), give them all to a class, assign one text to a group of students within the class for detailed analysis, and end the class with the groups discussing each text in turn. The teacher can begin with an introduction to the area being studied if appropriate, but we have found that it often pays to assume knowledge on the part of students: they quickly come to understand what is being looked at from the definitions, and the texts.

What the book does not do

This book does not seek to give an account or defence of stylistics as a discipline (see Michael Toolan, *The Stylistics of Fiction* (Routledge, 1990) and the journal *Language and Literature* (Longman) for this).

The book deliberately confines itself to twentieth-century fictional prose, with some non-fiction for contrast. We took this decision because we wanted to address a literary-linguistic audience, and because most of the stylistics published in this area is on poetry.

Although the book confines itself to twentieth-century fictional prose, it teaches techniques of analysis which are readily transferable to other genres of texts. Students might be encouraged to find similar features in a range of non-literary texts (or comment on their absence) as a result of working with this book.

The book does not provide whole readings of literary works. Students and teachers from a literary background may find this reductive or frustrating. We would encourage teachers to follow up the partial readings provided here with more detailed work. We have deliberately selected authors whose work deserves, and would repay, more detailed analysis using the techniques introduced here.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank: Ailsa Camm; Ruth Williams; University of Hertfordshire, Department of Linguistics; University of Leeds, School of English; Julia Hall; University of London, Royal Holloway College, Department of English and Library; Loreto Todd; students of the Leeds MA course in English Language who commented on draft sections; and Norman MacLeod.

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Abbreviations

AdjP	adjective phrase
aux	auxiliary
Av	adverbial
C	complement
NP	noun phrase
O	object
P	preposition
PP	prepositional phrase
S	subject
V	verb
VP	verb phrase
*	ungrammatical form

Chapter 1

The Noun Phrase

1.1	Introduction: the structure of the noun phrase	1
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1.1

Introduction: the structure of the noun phrase

The simplest kinds of clause usually consist of nouns (sometimes called naming words) and verbs (doing words), for example:

Helen	saw	Bill
(noun)	(verb)	(noun)

However, in spoken language these positions before and after the verb are rarely occupied by just a single noun. More usually, they are filled by groups of two or more words. These groups of words are called **noun phrases** (NP) because, although they can consist of more than one word, they function in exactly the same way as a single noun:

NP(My friend)	saw	NP(Bill who comes from Leeds)
---------------	-----	-------------------------------

You can check that the groups of words bracketed here as noun phrases really do function as nouns by substituting *Bill* or a **pronoun** like *she*, *he* or *him*:

NP(She)	saw	NP(him)
---------	-----	---------

Noun phrases consist of one **head noun**, which must always be present, and a number of further elements, all of which are optional. Noun phrases can therefore consist of only one, or very many, words. If only one word is present, it will usually be either a proper noun (a name) or a pronoun, for example:

NP(Helen)	saw	NP(him)
NP(She)	saw	NP(Bill)

The majority of noun phrases consist of a head noun plus one or two of the optional elements. These optional elements fit into four predetermined slots in the noun phrase:

NP = ()
 1 2 3 4

- 1 = **determiner** and/or **enumerator** (e.g. *the, a, first, his*)
- 2 = **pre-head modification** (e.g. *red, washed, painting, steel*)
- 3 = **head noun**
- 4 = **post-head modification** (e.g. *in Leeds, which I showed you*)

for example:

NP(a Judas Priest T-shirt with vents cut out)
 1 2 3 4

NP(His size ten Doc Marten combat boots)
 1 2 3 4

NP(My friend) ...
 1 2 3 4

NP(Bill who lives in Leeds) ...
 1 2 3 4

NP(Benny) ...
 1 2 3 4

NP(He) ...
 1 2 3 4

The optional nature of elements 1, 2 and 4 means that noun phrases have a highly variable appearance—from single words to very long passages of text, for example:

NP(she)
1 2 3 4

NP(the old stone cottage at the top of the hill which had been
1 2 3 4
condemned but was now up for renovation and which I had always
dreamed of owning) was too expensive

compare:

NP(it) was too expensive

Slots 2 and 4 in particular can be almost infinitely expanded—but note that slot 2 is usually occupied by single words (either adjectives, or nouns with an adjectival function), while slot 4 usually contains phrases or clauses. In all cases, the word in slot 3 is the most important one—it can be replaced by a pronoun, but never deleted. This is the head noun.

Stylistically, slot 4 is the most usual place to find modification of the head noun in English. This may seem strange—after all, modification in slot 2 is simpler in that it consists of single words—but it makes sense in that this allows the hearer or reader to know what the head noun is before receiving any extra information about it. Some types of text (adverts, newspaper headlines) do have modification in slot 2 more frequently as it saves space, for example:

(Media tycoon) wins (Italian landmark poll)

but having more than two elements in this slot quickly sounds unnatural.

Pronouns

Pronouns are a special type of noun phrase which we will be looking at in some detail. Pronouns refer to people or things, and are used to replace full nouns (hence their name).

Typically pronouns occur on their own in the noun phrase—without determiners or modification:

(he) (she) (I) (it) (they)

although **possessive pronouns** can themselves function as determiners:

(his face)

1

(her second novel)

1 2 3

Pronouns are structured in terms of their reference to person and number:

Person	Number	
	Singular	Plural
1st	I	we
2nd	you	you
3rd	he/she/it	they

and most change their form according to role within the clause:

subject	I	you	he/she/it	we	you	they
object	me	you	him/her/it	us	you	them

hence:

(I)	saw	(you)	(you)	saw	(me)
-----	-----	-------	-------	-----	------

Writers can, however, achieve stylistic effects by broadening these limits of reference.

1.2
Premodification

Definition

Words which can occur in slots 1 and 2 to the left of the head are typically:

slot 1	determiners, numbers, pronouns
slot 2	adjectives, nouns

The head of the noun phrase (slot 3) is a word which is modified by modifiers to the right (slot 4) or left (slots 1 and 2) but which cannot be deleted.