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DOI:

[10.1016/j.langsci.2016.09.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2016.09.016)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Toolan, M 2016, 'Stylistic iconicity and Love's two orders of language', *Language Sciences*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2016.09.016>

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Checked 13/12/2016

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Stylistic iconicity and Love's two orders of language

Michael Toolan

My aim here is to put integrationism's anti-systematicity into close conjunction with stylistics' craving for linguistic explanation of literary effects, to see whether any kind of rapprochement, even of conceptual inclusion of the latter within the former, is remotely possible—or whether such an effort only highlights the mutual incompatibility of the two mind-sets. Love's idea of two orders of language activity helps to focus the difficulties. Applying these to the practice and principles of stylistics, they prompt several basic questions: Is stylistics doomed to the adoption of one 'second order' descriptive machine after another, in a futile effort to capture the essence, the life, of the literary texts it analyses? Are readers' actual engagements with poems, their 'first order' experiencing of poems, never to be satisfactorily or usefully explained by these abstracting, unit-manipulating, second-order systems? In moving towards answers to these questions I will suggest that stylisticians are not unaware of their difficulties (sometimes more aware than other linguistic analysts of texts), and that one concept that some have adopted as part of an effort to forge a strong connection from the second-order description back to the first-order experience, is that of iconicity. I discuss whether 'iconicity' is stylistics' attempt to bridge the second-order/first-order gulf.

1. Integrationism and Literature

Few integrationists have much to say about literature, perhaps regarding it as a specialist interest of the educationally privileged in modern societies—writers and readers-- whose outpourings have already received a disproportionate amount of linguists' attention. Certainly the *1066-and-all-that* history of linguistics describes European philologists devoting much energy to linguistic analysis of each language's literary canon studied diachronically, and minimal attention to contemporary speech and its synchronic systematicity. Then came Saussure and Boas, the revaluation of now mechanically-recordable speech, and a general turning away from regarding language-study and linguistics as having much centrally to do with literature, or *vice versa*. After all, everybody uses language every waking hour in all sorts of complex ways, and many do so without reading a word of literature, so the latter is clearly a linguistically peripheral cultural practice.

That, to my mind, is only part of the story. Another part would argue that Literature is modernity's religion of the book (it also often provides a good test for linguists' theories). For a significant proportion of literate people in western societies especially, and since the early 19th century mostly, spiritual guidance, self-understanding, explanation of what makes for a thoughtful, compassionate, ethical co-existence with all other creatures on the planet, has come as much, if not more, from their literary reading than from their reading of the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, or other holy scriptures. It is not clear to me that literature is still, in the 21st century, the primary spiritual guide for modernity's adherents—arguably songs to some extent and films especially, in various forms, have taken over the primary position. But by films here I mean *narrative* films--films that tell stories and almost invariably include language in the telling, most prominently in characters' speech. Narratives that use language (many do not) are arguably the master form, when people look for guidance and understanding. Notwithstanding the richness and subtlety of ideas that language-free film or music or visual art can prompt in recipients, literature retains its own

distinct position, by virtue of the complexity of the articulated situations it can convey through language.

From the era of structural linguistics onwards, most academic linguists in the West have had little or no interest in literature (with a few notable and not-entirely-mainstream exceptions, such as Jakobson, Kiparsky, Halliday, and Hymes), on the grounds that literature is remote from ‘ordinary language’, the canonical speech situation, and the mysteries of language acquisition by infants. The art in literary language, and literary culture as a whole, was implicitly judged by mainstream linguistics to be ‘artificial’, cultural rather than natural, of doubtful authenticity, often ‘contrived’, and absolutely the wrong place to look to observe the workings of ordinary language in its basic functions. If linguists analysed poems at all, there was a tendency to emphasize that each poem was *sui generis*, and related obliquely to the rules and units of ordinary language; for a while some generative linguists like Thorne proposed that each new poem had its own distinct language and grammar. But among those linguists who did explore poetics, such as Jakobson and Thorne, iconicity is often an at least implicit criterion of explanation.

Integrational linguists may have neglected literary texts just as much as mainstream linguistics did, but for a different reason: how can there be any great ‘conveyed complexity’ in literary texts, worthy of analysis, if in line with the freedom of the sign-making individual that integrational semiology asserts, every different recipient is entitled to their own unique understanding of any given text, any purportedly artistic communicative act? But that theoretical principle applies to all texts and communicative events, and not exceptionally to poems. Nor should it be treated as licensing widespread communicational misunderstanding, but a more nuanced model of communicational accord, involving context-shaped coordination of words and acts. No-one writes a book like the *Language Myth*, urging a demythologized and redefined linguistics, with the expectation that every reader will make sense of it so differently from their fellow-readers that all mutual understanding is lost—least of all Roy Harris.

Integrational linguistics could have been among the last to accept the exiling of literature from the attention of linguists, since literature is arguably a best exemplar of its central claims. Where two or three gather together to read and discuss their reactions to a poem that is new to them, the experience will be palpably remote from what the language myth promises: no smooth mind-to-mind transfer of ideas, no rapid and uniform matching of forms to meanings, and no great certainty as to an agreed understanding at all.

Integrational semiology says all meaning, all sign-making and sign-interpreting is ‘now’ (not necessarily the same ‘now’ for all parties: I can leave some sticks on the beach in a particular configuration one evening, with a view to you seeing and ‘reading’ them the next morning). In a sense, with regard to meaning and communication, integrationists are always saying ‘you had to have been there’ (to ‘get’ what was signified by and for the parties involved).

On the other hand there is something we must set beside or against readers’ integrationism-warranted diversity of interpretations (sometimes an unmanageable diversity—but then, why value ‘manageability?’): it is the fact that poets and stylisticians are no less immune to seduction by the language myth of fixed-code telementation than anyone else. I suspect that we stylisticians, negotiating a kind of repression, intermittently simply *know* that linguistic communication—a poem, say—cannot possibly be based upon a fixed code of form-meaning pairs known or knowable by all. But craving the permanent and enduring, something that transcends the ephemeral moment and the never-to-be-recovered individual context, we contrive to explain what we see as the main enduring or promising-to-endure meanings and significance of specific linguistic communications (poems, and extracts from novels and plays), on the grounds that these are one kind of consolation—defiance

even—of the variability, indeterminacy, entropy, dissolving, and death, which we also know to be the case. And in that yearning for the permanent text, the promise made by the idea of iconicity in literature is seductive. It proposes that, for these particular language events, there is no specific ‘there’: as long as you are English-proficient, you can read a Shakespeare sonnet at any time, in any place, and *some* of the experience or meaning of the poem will (or should) be yours, whatever the contextual circumstances, because iconicity claims a natural fit between form and meaning. The inescapable test case, especially in the 400th anniversary of his death, is Shakespeare—for example, his sonnet #55:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

2. Love's two orders of language activity

Nigel Love's 1990 distinction between first order and second order language activity excited me when I was writing *Total Speech* (1996), and it is no less stimulating an idea to me now. He begins (1990: 96) with Bloomfield's "fundamental assumption of linguistics" (1935: 144), that for some speech community or other, some utterances are alike as to form and meaning, thus allowing the beginnings of a system of repeated signs to be *thinkable*. Without such recurrent 'sames', ordinary linguistics would not seem possible at all. But the assumption itself is magic wand-waving by the theoretician, Love suggests, and Bloomfield made no attempt to provide evidential support for it—instead by implication he treats orthographic writing as the *terra firma* justifying the assumption. If I write *Odense is rainy* and you write *Odense is rainy* these are said to be alike as to form and meaning, notwithstanding differences of handwriting, ink, surface, what have you. How do we know? Because they are written the same, and anyone who reads one aloud will make much the same sounds as when reading the other aloud. In short, the circularity or question-begging is (incompletely) masked by writing, or what writing seems to entail.

Love further suggests that the making of a distinction between types and tokens is a necessary condition of 'generalizing discourse' about anything, and that "this capacity of language to facilitate generalizing talk about the world is unremarkable" (97). What he intends here—I believe—is not any claim about the 'necessity' of a philosophical explanation in terms of tokens and types, but about the interdependence, without priority, of several ideas: perceptions of sameness; performing a sameness (e.g. saying or writing what you regard as the same thing again); abstraction; and generalization. Any one of these entails the others. But we have no grounds for assuming that our abstraction, our sorting of instances into types, is itself identical to that of others. We use this capacity to treat utterances as if they were

recurrent variant instances of underlying invariants all the time in linguistic communication. The mistake, Love suggests, is to assume uniformity among all speakers in a speech community, as to what count as instances and underlying invariants. At several points Love argues that the problem is not with the idea of abstraction itself, of individual communicators devising a cognitive categorization of the utterances they encounter or produce. The problem is with any assumption that this abstracting operates on a unified, determinate, homogeneous substrate: “The problem is not the idea of abstractions underlying speech, but the idea of *determinate systems* of abstraction underlying speech” (Love 1990: 108) The world is not the same for everyone, not has ever been.

First-order linguistic communication is the use of language to communicate (informing that use with your past linguistic, indeed interactional, experience or history, mostly spontaneously and unreflectingly). It is a ‘doing’; it can be minimally self-conscious, and is often so in the very young, those suffering from dementia, the rest of us in moments of emotional extremity, and perhaps, sometimes, in self-communication. Second-order linguistic communication comprises every kind of articulated reflection upon first-order linguistic communication, and particularly the verbal parts of it. It assumes and exploits self-consciousness, reflexivity, our powers of memory and our ability to treat temporally discontinuous material as repetitions and parts of a pattern. It also assumes our powers of imaginative projection: we can, vividly enough, imagine ourselves stepping out of the on-flowing river of life to appear to stop living *now*, while we ponder and report on what we or someone else said *then*. So second-order linguistic communication is metalinguistic activity of all kinds. But is this metalinguistic activity exclusively second-order? No. I cannot deny that even in maximally ‘engaged’, minimally reflexive first-order language-using activity, we still find speakers using kinds of metalanguage, albeit more evaluatively than analytically (e.g. when they say someone is a smooth talker or uses filthy language or sounds angry all the time).

I therefore do not find the ‘two orders’ distinction unproblematic. In particular it is quite hard to recognize a ‘first-order’ use of language that is utterly devoid of the proposed defining features of second-order language communication (and, perhaps, *vice versa* too). Thus in a recent commentary on the distinction sent to all participants prior to the Odense Symposium, Love says that in first-order communication the speaker has to creatively deploy parts of their past experience to maximise likelihood of communicative success, and the hearer is supposed to ‘do their best’ to understand the speaker. But for a hearer to ‘do their best’ seems to imply some comparative self-assessment on their part, a comparing of their current effort with alternative qualities of effort, which looks very much like a second-order activity. Likewise the speaker’s task of selecting clues from past experience also suggests a kind of second-order detached reflection upon both present and past communicational activity.

While sometimes (or even always) difficult to maintain, the ‘two orders’ distinction is also useful—a usefully extreme encapsulation of two quite different ways of thinking about and using language, which might be summarized, again *in extremis*, as the ordinary person’s approach to language (full integration) and the academic linguist’s approach to it (at least partial segregation). At the very least, Love is arguing that we need to be attentive to the differences between the two orders, and to beware of presuming that a commentary couched in the terms of the second-order will necessarily yield insights into the workings of linguistic communication in the first-order. I am assuming also that a redefined linguistics of an integrationist or related kind would hope to clarify the relations between the second and first orders, and make second-order academic linguists more responsive to, more engaged with, first-order activity. Whether that is a matter of building bridges between the two, or contriving a merger (an absolute separation would be a policy of despair, presumably) is less

clear to me.

Some of the thinking that developed into the idea of two orders of language activity are detectable, I believe, in an earlier paper critiquing the fixed-code theory (Love 1985). There, Love uses the variant pronunciations of *postmen*, the philosophers' complicated attempts to explain the allegedly paradoxical nature of negative existential sentences, and variable informant responses about the propositional entailments of sentences like *my son threw a brick at the window*, to make the point that these are linguists' language-games where various moves (objections, reformulations) are allowed but where there is a limit, a point where you are deemed no longer to be playing the game. At that point you are 'cheating' (Palmer), beyond the pale, not doing linguistics. Such 'cheating' might prompt the rhetorical question *Is nothing sacred?* (with its own negative existential)—because in the language games of orthodox linguistics something certainly is sacred, and that is the commitment to the idea of unambiguous form-meaning pairings as the foundation of a language system. Holding that principle sacrosanct, the linguist game-player will have no time for Love's observations with regard to the variability of propositional entailments depending on the communicational needs on a particular occasion of use. Implicit in orthodox linguistics' disallowing of 'beyond-the-pale examples', I believe, is a sharply circumscribed conception of first-order language activity, upon which (and only upon which), linguists' sophisticated second-order analytical machinery can reliably work. The segregational linguist will dismiss, as 'cheating', the idea that "the relation between propositions and the forms of words that express them is not such that the former can be read off directly, in the absence of any context of utterance, from the latter" (1985: 3). Because the orthodox linguist is so firmly committed to the describing of a fixed code pairing of abstraction conceived of as forms and meanings (for thought-communication) "our inability to say precisely what might be communicated by *my son threw a brick at the window* is taken as no hindrance to the enterprise of determining, in the abstract, the meaning of that expression" (1985: 5-6). Actual communicational practices using language are held at some distance from this idealising and arguably misrepresenting endeavour.

One of the important things that Love's first order/second order naming achieves is to make clear that the systematisation of verbal communication into something conceived of as a language with a set of items and rules for their combination (what I've called the codification impulse) comes after, or second. Orthodox linguistics has managed to induce many to believe that the order is exactly the reverse, and the terminology of system and instantiation aids in that misrepresentation, as do the many game and dance analogies. First you have chess with all its rules, and then you have a rich 'creative' variety of possible legal moves that follow those rules (and if you devise a board game with 36 squares and no knights then you're not playing chess at all, so, again, beyond the pale).

Love suggests that perhaps the most primitive manifestation of our decontextualising ability, our ability to move to the second order of language activity, is displayed by our capacity to respond to the metalinguistic question "What did you say?"—or, I would add, "What did they say?". Any non-literate person who asks either of these questions has a concept of 'sayings', of sequences of oral sounds understood to play an important role in the expression of currently relevant meanings, sequences sufficiently object-like that speaker and addressee can try to orient to them and inspect them. Love pinpoints the metalinguistic question as evidence of the language-user's grasp of the possibility of contextually-relevant repetition. For me, it is equally important as evidence of a kind of intersubjective faith: a trust that it is possible, to all important intents and purposes, for someone to replay now and here what someone said far away and long ago. In this replaying, this reported speech, there is no identifying of a linguistic unit, let alone an identical linguistic unit. In reported speech something "relevantly similar", to use Love's formulation, is surely all that interactants who

trust in the possibility of it expect. Elsewhere (1990: 98), Love suggests that when A asks for an *exact* repetition from B, the judgement that B's second effort is an exact repeat is grounded in no transcending abstract scheme, no autonomous system, nothing beyond situation-internal conformity with the *idea* that it is, in all the interactional circumstances, a valid repeat. Even to me, carrying the integrationist virus (Owen nnnn), this kind of non-explanation feels like the sort of hand-waving that most linguists find exasperating; but laying claim to any more determinate basis for sorting the repetitions from the variations is arguably to descend into scientism. Besides, it is surely no accident that only in legal and other quarrelsome situations that ideas of *verbatim* reporting, of X saying 'exactly' what Y said, come to the fore; and even these never really cease being a kind of loose talk (to use relevance theory's useful concept), a context-specific acceptance that such and such will count as 'an exact repetition' of some previous formulation. The looseness begins with the indeterminacy as to what *verbatim* or *faithful* themselves mean.

"What did you just say?" and "What did they say?", and the possibility of giving answers to such questions, encapsulate metalinguistics, or second-order language activity and thinking, in the most compelling way. They invite us to imagine a language-using world where such questions are missing. (They are absent from Wittgenstein's four-term builder's language, of *Block!*, *Slab!* etc.,--but that is an implausibly reduced language.) I cannot imagine that such a world would not also lack questions like "What happened?" and "What did you just do?", so "What did you say?" is an integral aspect of our capacity for partially removing ourselves from the present flow of experience to the point that we temporarily focus upon spatiotemporally removed activity, and put current activity in the background. It is what deixis is all about (deixis suitably broadly conceived being, in my opinion, what the final chapter of *The Language Myth* is also all about). We cannot, however, escape that embeddedness in the spatiotemporal present, as Harris's concept of cotemporality emphasises.

Just as 'what did you say'? is the canonical metalinguistic question, the very idea of reported speech lies at the heart of linguistics; furthermore, in one form or another, it is a generator of endless papers and theorising in narratology and cognitive poetics—e.g. Text World Theory (see, e.g., Werth 1999, Gavins 2007), just one of several attempts to develop a deictic or perspectival model of the way stories can be embedded within stories recursively, giving rise to complex interpretive tasks for the reader, assessing the varying reliability of narrators at different levels of embeddedness. In short and in essence, the problem of hearsay evidence. You *heard* that X said Y but you didn't yourself hear X say Y, did you? More complex yet than the literary representation of bog standard direct speech and indirect speech is that *written* discourse which has many of the formal characteristics of indirect speech (e.g. past tense, 3rd person pronouns) but when read aloud nevertheless 'sounds' like a direct voicing of a character's words or thoughts: a discourse presentational format that 'cheats', going beyond the pale of grammatical direct and indirect discourse. No topic is dearer to the hearts of narratologists and novel criticism than such Free Indirect Style (to give one of its myriad names), a sophisticated literacy mutation of the reported speech genus, raising difficult questions for the reader about quite whose judgements (the narrator's or a character's?) are being presented, as from what time, and in what place.

In the stylistic analysis of literature, there is a powerful *wish* to describe or identify, if possible, the abstract linguistic systems that underlie the poem or style under scrutiny and to try to persuade others that they too, if they do enough second-order reflection upon their first order experience of the poem, must agree that just these systems, these units, these forms, have very much the meanings that the specific stylistician proposes. Or, making concessions to different readers' racial, sexual, etc identities, stylisticians will allow some divergences in interpretation, but will tacitly cling to the idea of convergence, of a large and central area of

‘shared experience’ by virtue of stable forms triggering or containing stable meanings. The alternative is too distasteful—it is the suggestion that what I take to be the forms and meanings of Shakespeare’s sonnet 55 might be incalculably different from what the next person takes that poem’s forms and meanings to be, that in fifty, ten, or five years’ time the view might emerge that this sonnet is as inconsequential as yesterday’s free newspaper. To stylisticians it makes no sense to imagine that in a hundred years time people might agree that sonnet 55 is rubbish.

3. Taylor and the politics of language

In the same long ago *Redefining Linguistics* volume that carried Nigel Love’s paper appeared also Talbot Taylor’s plea that a redefined linguistics pay proper attention to the kinds of normativity in language that, from the perspective of the language-user, are so important. Normativity, socio-political pressures to conform or converge in our usage, our form-meaning pairings and our form- and meaning-selections, are a prominent part of the ordinary socialised language-user’s understanding of what language is, and affects their own uses of language and their evaluations of others’ uses. An integrationally redefined linguistics should attend to this. A linguistics which claims to espouse pure descriptivism is failing to engage with “the important issues of the politics of language”, Taylor says, adding:

From the perspective of the language-user, concepts such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, and ‘correct’ (no less than ‘word’, ‘meaning’, and ‘sentence’) are necessary to an understanding of what a language is. (1990: 142, italics in original)

I would agree, but the evaluative judgements that are so important a part of understanding of a language for a language-user do not stop there, with ideas about good, bad, correct and incorrect. What about language that gets talked about because someone deems it beautiful, or ugly, or forceful, or mysterious, or vivid, dynamic, transcendent, agitated first but calm later, dreary, clotted, stodgy, paradoxical... in fact the whole panoply of forms of judgement that readers normatively orient to when they feel impelled to talk about samples of language at all?

It is possible that readers may not feel impelled to talk about any of the language that they themselves produce or that they encounter coming from others, and likewise perhaps we could go through life drinking various kinds of wine—the way bees suck nectar—and never pass any kind of reflective judgement on them. But as Love has argued, it is hard to imagine anything approximating a spoken language getting under way without a concomitant reflexive (and often normative) set of practices of second order commentary *also* developing in parallel. With writing it all gets much more developed and sophisticated (on this topic, Teubert 2010 is an important recent contribution). With literature, commentaries on literature, and those reversions to form- and meaning-analyses that claim to illuminate those commentaries (aka stylistics), reflexive commentary is thoroughly entrenched. We could say it is unnecessary to do these things—just drink the wine, just listen to the poem—but is there any such thing as ‘just drinking the wine’ (would it be anything like our conception of wine if it was something we just drank, without speaking about it in any way?), or ‘just listening to a poem’, analogous to the way that we most of the time completely unawares keep breathing the air around us and keep hearing the ambient hum and rumble of machines and traffic around us? And without reflexive and normative commentary on the quality of the wine, or of the air, would we be able efficiently to protect ourselves from poor or even vile wine, and polluted or toxic air?

I by no means assume that there is uniformity of judgement, among readers or among stylisticians, as to what constitute ‘agitated sentences’ or ‘calm sentences’, any more than

there is uniformity of view among language-users as to what is correct or faulty grammar or pronunciation. On the contrary there is divergence, claim and counter-claim, and an ongoing conversation: this is part of what makes these questions sites both of normativity and cultural interest. In stylistics I have always argued that the practitioner is aiming, by the rhetoric of their deployment of linguistically-formulated evidence, to persuade others that this matrix of formal features, in this assessment of the entextualised situation, is likely to have created in the reader and likely to create in future readers such and such effects (meaning, interpretation, signification) *on the balance of probabilities*. Any higher standard, such as certainty beyond a reasonable doubt, is incongruent with the theoretical assumptions made so far. The stylistician is always making a (civil) case, not delivering a proof; they are always making a normative claim, if you like, and norms change thank God, so stylistic analyses of Shakespeare will never conclude, final solutions as to his sonnets' meanings will never be reached (this clearly creates a tension with iconicity's claims of natural and enduring form-meaning 'fit'). They are also always functioning as a first-person reporter on their own linguistic experience of the poem--who else's could they truly reliably report?—or of others' reported experiences of the poem.

By the same token, if I accept that a redefined linguistics must recognize that how language-users make language significant (sc., how they attribute or impose *form* upon its substance) is contingent upon the individuality of person and situation (in Taylor's words: 1990: 143), nevertheless the wish of the stylistician is to believe that for this poem or that play, the individualities of person and situation on the production or the reception side are attenuated or transcended. Thus the stylistician's wish is that the form of literary works and the addressee experiences they provide were comparatively permanent or stable, albeit within a world where all linguistic form is situation-dependent and variable. Nor, another qualification, is the stylistician entitled to assume that the literary critical assessments (*menacing, agitated, calm, dynamic*), invoked as the reader responses for which the linguistic commentaries purport to be a causal explanation, are themselves stable, transparent, and determinate in meaning. On the contrary, they too are inevitably contingent and impermanent, and some will wax others wane with change of time and place, in terms of prominence in the literary stylistic conversation: consider the changing fortunes of critical terms such as *racist, gendered, sentimental, muscular, tone-deaf*.

One of the things integrationism dislikes about the practices of stylisticians are those points in their books and articles where they claim to *explain* the meaning of some form, as if the identification of the form and of the meaning and indeed the explanation were not just good for the writer themselves but for readers in general, and for all time. Of course stylisticians' explanations, given integrationism's situationism, cannot be of such an absolute kind. But it is worth noting how different are the terms of engagement when someone attempts a stylistic analysis of a Shakespeare sonnet, by comparison with the canonical situation of linguistic communication within which most integrationist examples are discussed, highlighting the situation-embedded coordination of meanings which might be called the normal practice. In two important ways, the sonnet-analysis is different. First, while the substance to be interpreted is writing, it is mostly writing that we understand is a script for what actually needs to be spoken, performed (all the attention to rhyme, assonance and intonation would make no sense otherwise): it is hard to think of another culturally-entrenched linguistic activity which hovers quite so ambivalently between the categories of speech and writing. Second, it is understood to be composed by one but intended to be read by many; and the 'one' here is not any old one, but the greatest of verbal artists.

4. The importance of literature, iconicity, and creative 'fit'

I want to return to the ‘Is nothing sacred?’ rhetorical question, which I mentioned earlier in relation to Nigel Love’s 1985 commentary on those language games that are permitted, and those that are not, within the fixed-code paradigm. It is a question of enormous resonance. It was invoked, with obvious irony, by Salman Rushdie also in the 1980s, when some of the wordings in his *Satanic Verses* were deemed by some to be so wicked that a death-sentence was passed on him. But in the predominantly secular Britain of the late 20th century, the years of Derrida and Dawkin but really a zeitgeist that reached back to Darwin and the 19th century rise of scientific explanation, the prospect arose, and is embraced by integrationism, that nothing linguistic is sacred. More specifically, nothing verbal or linguistic is, by virtue of its specific wording in such and such a context of situation, guaranteed to signify in some particular predetermined way. No meaning, whether deemed banal and everyday or transcendent and transformative, can be *predeterminately* assigned to some specifiable extent of linguistic form, and guaranteed as good over time and across a whole speech community: determinations as to form and meaning are ratified by language-using language-making participants in the course of the communicational event in which they are engaged. There are ways in which the briefest reflections on our own changing lives, and on the changes we see in language through time and space, remind us that we know this. We know that forms and meanings are constantly in process of revision, renewal, ratification or sanction, promotion or demotion. But we also yearn for occasions of form-meaning permanence and exceptional power, transcendent language, celebrated communally as if available to all—usually written occasions or at least scripted-and-performed occasions. Many once looked for these occasions in religious texts, tellingly called ‘scripture’ in the Christian tradition, and plenty still do. Some look instead or as well to other form-meaning communicational pairings, in music, dance, film, and the pictorial and plastic arts. Some look to literature. And iconicity discourse reflects that desire.

The discourse of iconicity has a crucial place in the story modern stylistics tells about itself, alongside such ideas as foregrounding, deviation/markedness, and parallelism or repetition. It is strikingly difficult to find an entirely satisfactory single definition of what iconicity amounts to, for stylistic purposes (the work of Fischer, Nänny and others is frequently cited, however). In one set of terms or another it re-asserts a natural or logical connection between the form and meaning of signs, whereas modern linguistics has declared the connection to be purely arbitrary and conventional. So terms like analogy, similarity, or resemblance are invoked: the linguistic form is said to reflect, match, enact, be mimetic of or proportional with, the meaning. Sometimes the match is claimed to be between the form and the (real) world. And for some (e.g., Jeffries 2010) the iconic text must have an ‘experiential’ effect: you don’t just read or process the iconic language in poems, you experience it, the experience being said to ‘fit’ the meaning, the effect that communities of readers agree a poem has on them. Stylisticians say there is iconicity, or that the language is iconic, where they can see and demonstrate a degree of calculated ‘fit’ between the sounds or written shapes used, or the sequences of words used, or the grammar of a whole line or sentence—in short, the form--and the meaning we believe the poet or writer wanted at that point to convey, i.e., wanted the reader to experience. Like other discourse analysts, stylisticians here lean heavily on paraphrase: having sought acceptance of their paraphrase of the text’s meaning, they argue that the poet’s chosen forms achieve that meaning/experience entirely more fitly than the paraphrase.

A famous poem involving ears of wheat may serve as an example: Seamus Heaney’s ‘The Harvest Bow’, often read as an homage to his father. Here is its first stanza:

As you plaited the harvest bow
You implicated the mellowed silence in you

In wheat that does not rust
But brightens as it tightens twist by twist
Into a knowable corona,
A throwaway love-knot of straw.

The stylistician's iconicity question is roughly as follows: As we read Heaney's poem about the harvest bow, the delicate decorative 'knot' that is tied out of a ripe bunch of wheat ears, is there anything curved, wound, or knotted back on itself, in the language or form (including the sounds), or in the grammar, that seems uncannily to fit the topic especially well? Is the poem itself, as an expression of what it is about, amount to what Philip Larkin in another context called a 'frail travelling coincidence' (overtly describing a train journey, but covertly encapsulating his poem about the train journey: second-order morphing to become first-order)? Some stylisticians, some of the time, would try to persuade readers that there are iconicities of form, and will care a great deal more about it than about *you was* and *I were*, *judgement* and *judgment*, *connexion* and *connection*, and other kinds of more routine conformity and nonconformity.

In a recent article (Toolan 2015) I tried to define 'stylistic iconicity':

By 'stylistic iconicity', I refer to that impression of exceptional 'embodiment' of a sign's meaning in its materiality, such that the communication seems to be a more direct and natural enactment of the meaning than the arbitrary and symbolic signification which we ordinarily look for in language (Fischer, 2014; Leech, 2008: 114–15, 149–50). To claim that language is being used iconically is to claim that, to some degree, the form embodies the meaning; linguistic iconicity is at work when the form evokes the meaning because it resembles (visually or aurally) the thing meant. As such, in (rare) cases of what we might call 'absolute iconicity', an addressee should be able to grasp the meaning *without prior knowledge of the language in which it is carried*.

There are plenty of things in the above formulation that need adjusting, to suit integrationist ears, but I think there is sufficient modalizing in the account to protect it: the references to *impression*, *claims*, and what *seems* to occur. There is an implication too that iconicity is a natural form-effect fit, rather than something sometimes arising from conventions and training; I think the implication broadly correct, but it also true that literary education may encourage our attending to iconic effects (stylisticians are not the only people to have noticed them). In any event even stylisticians know that iconicity in poetry is rarely if ever an embodiment, in the linguistic form, of the meaning (the 'embodiment' metaphor reflects the same yearning for 'real' and certain intersubjective material contact, the thing itself and not just a sign or trace of the thing). More typically iconicity is postulated where something in the form seems consciously chosen (by the poet using her superfine metalinguistic awareness) for the way it supports or enables meanings that are mostly assessed by other integrational means. And Leech and Short's (2007: 195) warning against using iconicity claims to foist 'private and whimsical responses' on literary texts certainly needs to be attended to; still, it is the same Leech (1969, 2008) who, over many years, has recognised the importance of iconicity to poetics and stylistics. "How language works ultimately cannot be separated from [among other things] how its users think it works", Love wrote in 1989 (817); and one of the things poetry-lovers and stylisticians believe (yes, it is a conviction) is that they may be justified in claiming that a poem's sound echoes the sense, or that the appearance on the page, the rhythm, the lineation, or the grammar are iconically matched to the sense, the effect as experienced by the reader.

I have argued (Toolan 2015) that literary creativity (e.g., in a poem), while not demonstrably different in kind from language creativity in non-literary situations, is nevertheless distinctive because it is constituted by the text's exceptional fitness in

addressing some important purpose or situation of which the reader was not aware until they encountered it in the poem itself. Of course the particulars of a purpose or situation described in a poem will be unfamiliar and ‘new’; here I am referring to the general contours of the poem’s purpose, as themselves new to the reader. A new situation is matched with a new ‘solution’, and the fitness of the latter to the former feels inspired: those, for me, are the components of literary creativity.

So in answer to my own earlier question—

Is stylistics doomed to one ‘second order’ descriptive system after another, in a futile effort to capture the essence, the life, of the literary text(s) it analyses?

--my answer is that Yes, Stylistics is bound to fail if, ignoring the time-bound fluidity of signification, it imagines that a permanent essence of a text and a timelessly stable descriptive system to apply to it are coherent goals. On the other hand, if it is accepted that in the face of complex and polysemous literature, discursive commentary remains useful which draws on linguistic terms and principles and aims to further an understanding of how and why a text is composed in one way rather than another, then all talk need not cease. A non-transcendental stylistics, deploying various second-order linguistic descriptions while remaining alert to integrational semiological axioms and the Circean attractions of the language myth, continues to offer valid and useful commentary on how readers read and how writers write. In its very provisionality it is arguably a more sophisticated sub-discipline of linguistics than some other more prestigious ones.

Acknowledgement: I am most grateful to Rowan Mackay, Bettina Perregaard, and Talbot Taylor for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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