Discourse Analysis (DA) versus Stylistics: the Main Distinctions

Nassera SENHADJI,
University of Bejaia, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Department of English, Algeria 06 000.

Abstract

This paper sets out to point out the main distinctions between two fields of study: Discourse analysis and Stylistics. As an illustration, an analysis of Shakespeare's Act 3, scene 3 from *Othello* will be studied according to a discourse- oriented perspective, and then the same scene will be focused on according to a stylistic analysis. Besides, we shall show how discourse analysis focuses on the relation between language and the contexts in which it is used whereas stylistics focuses on the relation between pattern and meaning in a context. Furthermore, while discourse analysis is concerned with all kinds of texts, stylistics is mostly devoted to the study of literary texts. Discourse analysis's main concern is the pattern of discourse for the overall text, and this is exactly what we are going to show in Scene 3 from *Othello* where the pattern is a series of unanswered questions Iago avoids in order to sow the seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind. Stylistics will not concentrate on the general patterning, but will put emphasis on how repeated linguistic items (here the shift from the third-person to the first-person and vice-versa and also the shift from generalizations to personal implications) are a key to unlocking Iago's manipulation of Othello.

Teaching Discourse Analysis, abbreviated DA, and at the same time doing an academic research in Stylistics have led to the writing of this article about the two fields. Our research has implicitly made us aware of the content of each field, and the differences that make each one of them a separate field of study. Consequently, our investigation in this article will be to underscore the main points of difference so as to give the reader a better understanding of each field's points of focus. Both take the context as primordial in   inferring the meaning of the utterance, but the points of focus of each are quite distinct. As a consequence, we shall draw the main characteristics of each while giving their differences in the form of a table, summarizing their main areas of concern. Then, an illustration of the difference between the two will be made through the study of scene 3, Act 3 of *Othello*, one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. The first part of scene 3, Act 3 will be analysed through a discourse-oriented perspective while all the rest will be looked at from the point of view of stylistics. Although the main differences between the two fields are clearly listed, there is no better grasp of each than when it is applied to the analysis of a literary work. This is what the present paper attempts to do.

Discourse Analysis	Stylistics
-Relation between language & the	-Relation between pattern and meaning

contexts in which it is used	in a context
-Heterogenous and wideranging discipline including Linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and sociology	- Area of mediation between literary criticism and linguistics or between language and literature/areas it is linked to: linguistics, civilization, history, Psychology.
-/1960's-1970's/	-The 1960's with Roman Jakobson 's Russian Formalism
-DA (Discourse Analysis) is concerned with texts of all kinds and spoken data from conversation to highly institutionalized forms of talk	-Material studied is mainly literary.
-Interested in language above the sentence and searches for patterns of discourse for the overall text such as, for example, the problem-solution pattern	-Interested in a pattern in a sentence, which is purposefully repeated in the next sentences, that might signal a **foregrounding,** namely, linguistic features are highlighted, made prominent for specific effects and contribute to the text's total meaning. Repetitive patterns of sound or syntax, for example, strike the reader's conscious attention as unusual.

Table n° 1: The Main Distinctions between Discourse Analysis and Stylistics.

The comparisons and distinctions made in the table above represent a synthesis of our readings in discourse analysis and stylistics. Discourse analysis focuses on the relation between language and the contexts in which it is used. Stylistics is mainly based on the relation between pattern and meaning, namely, that structure and meaning form one. The pattern can be located in the clause, the paragraph, and the text at large. Besides, discourse analysis is a heterogeneous and wide-ranging discipline including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and sociology whereas stylistics is an area of mediation between literary criticism and linguistics or between language and literature. The areas it is linked to are linguistics, civilization, history, and psychology. It has emerged in the 1960's with Roman Jacobson's Russian Formalism. On the one hand, Discourse-analysis is concerned with texts of all kinds and spoken data from conversation to highly institutionalized forms of talk; on the other hand, stylistics mainly studies literary texts. Moreover, Discourse Analysis is interested in language above the sentence and searches for patterns of discourse for the overall text such as, for example, the problem-solution pattern. It is also concerned with written discourse and studies the cohesion of texts revealed through

pronominalisation, ellipsis and conjunctions which contribute to the coherence of a text. It also concentrates on the text and its interpretation, how cohesive markers make links across sentences and pair items together that are related by referring to the same entity and how, we, as readers, we interpret the text by making the ties between the sentences. This is an act of interpretation that depends as much on what we bring to the text as what the writer puts into it and this aspect of discourse analysis comes closer to stylistics and is a point we should reinforce with our students: how clauses are linked together in a coordination or subordination and what those cohesive markers express as in the overall sentence. Both discourse analysis and stylistics entail a cognitive activity which involves an interaction between a reader, a text, and the author of the text in literary pieces of writing for stylistics as well as spoken and written texts in discourse analysis, yet for the latter what is at stake is the analysis of written language over and above concerns such as the structure of the clause or sentence. Furthermore, Discourse Analysis looks at ways of analyzing speech and writing with some specific models. As to stylistics, it is interested in a pattern in a clause, which is purposefully repeated in the next sentences that might signal a foregrounding, namely linguistic features which are highlighted, made prominent for specific effects, and contribute to the text's total meaning. Repetitive patterns of sound or syntax, for example, strike the reader's conscious attention as unusual.

Let us now take William Shakespeare's *Othello* and see how we can analyze it from a discourse-oriented perspective. The general pattern of the first part of scene three is in the form of questions and answers and this general pattern constitutes an allusion to Cassio's misbehavior: why should he leave so suddenly when he sees Othello? This is Iago's question to Othello to put suspicion in the latter's mind. This pattern of questions and answers makes us understand the kind of interaction between the two characters Othello and Iago. One main aspect of the play of *Othello* is how in Scene 3, Act 3, he is deceivingly convinced by Iago of his wife's adultery, how at the beginning of the scene, he is happy in his marriage and at the end of the scene, he wants to murder both Cassio and his wife. This shows how Iago has well done his job of insidiously half-concealing, half- revealing that his wife is being disloyal to him and that Cassio is his wife's lover. The main technique or discourse pattern is that of question-answer or question-question that eschews giving a direct answer to Othello and putting him on edge. After Cassio's departure from Othello's wife Desdemonia, Iago affirms loudly to Othello that he does like that, and so Othello asks for clarification. Why does he not like it? And Iago refuses to answer. Again, Othello asks another question about whether it was Cassio who was leaving his wife. To this, Iago answers with surprise and says it is strange he would sneak away guilty-like thus arousing suspicion in Othello. Iago answers with a question to put even more suspicion of guilt on Cassio and it is finally Desdemonia who answers Othello that it actually was Cassio. Iago is seen as reluctant to answer his questions so that he avoids answering six questions to eschew giving his opinion about the honesty of Cassio. Often, he answers with the same question: "Honest, my lord?" He leaves him suspended by not answering his questions therefore torturing him.

Othello   *Is he not honest?*

Iago   *Honest my lord?*

Othello   *Honest? Ay, honest*

Iago   *My lord, for aught I know. What dot thou think?*

Othello   *Think, my lord?*

Othello   *Think, my lord! By heaven, he echoes me,*

             As if there were some monsters in his thought.

             Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something

             I heard thee say even now, thou lik'st not that,

             *When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like? (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 108)

This dialogue is fraught with questions and answers with certain answers being the repetition of the questions (as mentioned in the last chapter of Coulthart.M. *Discourse Analysi*s), and this is intended to arouse suspicion in Othello about his wife's disloyalty to him. These series of unanswered questions force Othello to look for a reason. Iago carries on enquiring about whether Cassio knew that Othello was courting Desdemona, and then these unanswered questions aim at arousing Othello's suspicion of Cassio especially as Iago started by exclaiming that he did not like the way Cassio parted guilty-like from Desdemona when he saw Othello coming. Iago is skillfully eschewing answering Othello by sidestepping his request for clarification: show me thy thought(108), to which he simply replies: My lord, you know I love you (108). Nevertheless, Othello is sure that Iago is hiding something from him:

Othello   *As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts*

             *The worst of words. (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 109)

It is then that Iago will begin making general statements to avoid answering Othello's questions directly, and that Othello will speak of himself in the 3rd-person, but now we are going to leave the discourse pattern of questions and answers which represented a starting board to give way to a shifting of third-person to first-person reference and vice-versa, which is the domain of a stylistic analysis. Our study will no longer focus on the form of the discourse but on the content. The pattern of questions and answers represents for us the beginning or the first phase of Iago's tactic; the second part will be a development of his manoeuvre leaving him confused and perplexed. In this scene, Othello will use an impersonal and indirect speech in an attempt to draw information Iago seems to hide from him. This third person reference can, of course, be understood as having first-person implication. It is as if Othello was

raising a secret issue difficult to talk about openly and it is as if Othello's very puzzlement and perplexity make him waver between the third person pronoun and the first-person reference, and it is this characteristic in Othello that Iago exploits to his own end: his progressive but destroying revelation that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. As H.G Widdowson has put it:

> This perplexity is inherent in Othello's character and that Iago's achievement is to project it into the world of actual events so that it becomes a force of self-destruction.[1]

> Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago
> If thou but think'st him wronged, and mak'st his ear
> A stranger to thy thought (Muir, k .ed, 1980, *109).*

It is also a means of getting information from him. On the contrary, for Iago, expressing himself in generalisations enables him to make an indirect insinuation and attack, namely, he does not want to strike straightforwardly. It is as if Iago has also understood that Othello with his discreet reserve cannot talk of such a personal matter in the first-person and consequently, he will adopt the third-person, but for Iago, this third person always has second-person reference. In the following extract, he is going to resort to generalizations to comfort his interlocutor that he is not the sole human being in this plight:

> As where's that palace, wherein foul things
> Sometimes intrude not? who has a breast so pure
> But some uncleanly apprehensions
> Keep leets and low-days, and in session sit
> With meditations lawful? (Muir, k .ed, 1980, 109)

This generalisation and indirect speech hint at the fact no one is pure, beautifully expressed in the metaphor of a palace defiled by foul things. Iago also refers to jealousy in general terms as the *green-eyed monster* which Othello applies to himself asking confirmation from Iago: *Think'st thou I'd make a life of*

---

[1] **Widdowson, H.G.** "Othello in Person in *Language and Literature*, edited by R.Carter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 51.

jealousy(110). By going back and forth from general statements to personal implications, Iago not only arouses his jealousy but completely unsettles him. The best achieved convergence between third-person description and his first person condition is when he exclaims: *O misery (110)* as if he was suddenly realizing that Iago's general reference to jealousy as *the green-eyed monster (110)* in fact applies to him. After this metaphorical generalization where foul things may intrude, Iago in a detached fashion expresses that no one is pure, and Othello keeping this position of detachment will carry on referring to himself in the third-person:

> *Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago*
> *If thou but think'st him wronged, and mak'st his ear*
> *A stranger to thy thought (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 109).

In fact, Othello meant: 'thou dost conspire against me, honest Iago. His third-person reference has a first person reference. He frankly though indirectly expresses that you (Iago) are hiding things from me and to comfort this idea, Iago adds that Othello *should spy into abuses* making him search for a culpability in his wife, but then again he retreats into a more general statement that othello should not take notice of what he has just said. This has the effect of destabilizing Othello completely, as a mere puppet in the hands of a manipulating agent. Having said that Othello should take no notice, he carries on that it is because of your good disposition and because of your respect and honesty, that he does not want to reveal his thoughts. It is as if Iago injects his poison slowly, but surely, and back again he once more retreats into generalization which will combine a generalization with a personal reference in the same utterance:

> *Good name in man, dear my lord,*
> *Is the immediate jewel of their souls;*
> *Who steals my purse, steals trash, 'tis something, nothing,*
> *'Twas mine,'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:*
> *Robs me of that which not enriches him,*
> *But makes me poor indeed. (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 110)

Contrary to the previous utterances where third-person reference has a first-person implication, here, it is the reverse: the

first person reference acquires *a generalized third-person sense*[2] according to H.G Widdowson and results in *a blurring of the distinction between the experience of self and the observation of others, between first- and third-person reality.*[3]

And again, in a moment of impatience, Othello uses the second-person addressing himself to Iago to ask for immediate clarification:

*By Heaven, I'll know thy thoughts (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 110).

But Iago categorically refuses to comply and answer his request, which is a proof that he is hiding something concerning Othello, and he will again in general terms refer to jealousy in general terms so if we make the connection between something unstated by Iago and his reference to jealousy, one can easily infer that it concerns Othello because why should he address Othello in general terms if it doesn't in fact apply to him that is why Othello's reply is an awareness that it applies to him in his famous *O misery(110)* from this same scene three. This simple exclamation is a revelation of personal involvement. There are in Iago's general reference to jealousy starting with the warning *'beware'* and in Othello's reply 'O misery' a blurring of a general statement with a personal involvement. This shifting of third-person reality to first-person involvement is an ordeal being imposed on Othello, and is in fact the tactic Iago uses to put Othello on edge. But the latter is not going to be beguiled because Desdemona chose him:

No, Iago
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt prove;
And on the proof, there is more but this;
*Away at once with love or jealousy (*Muir, k .ed, 1980, 111).

Othello is trying to shake off his spirit from doubt, and tries to re-gain confidence and reason. To be convinced, he has to have a proof. Following his general's reasoning, Iago invites him to open his eye and insinuates in a general

---

[2] **Widdowson, H.G.** "Othello in Person." In *Language and Literature*, edited by R. Carter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 45.

[3] **Widdowson, H.G.** "Othello in Person." In *Language and Literature*, edited by R. Carter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 45.

statement that often women in Venice hide things from their husbands, and so Desdemona is identified with the adulterous women of Venice. She even dared deceive her father, and so can she deceive her husband as well! Iago then leaves Othello, but he knows he has succeeded in planting the seed of suspicion in Othello since Othello starts regretting his marriage, and is persuaded that *Iago knows more, much more than he Unfolds* (113) since he recommends him to observe her well with Cassio (111). It is true that this rocking back and forth between general statement to private involvement or from the third-person to the first-person and vice-versa can be accounted for three main reasons: first, Othello is the general of the army, and he is discussing a private matter with his underling; second, he is not certain about his wife's infidelity as their marriage was founded on love; and finally, he has to keep his self-respect as a high-ranked general. Othello also wants to sort out the truth from the falsity of the allusion, the semblance from the reality. But Iago as the embodiment of Satan plays with his feelings of doubt and anxiety by using the same attitude of going back and forth from general statements to personal involvements to achieve his goal: Othello's insidious destruction. This repetitive shift of pronouns coupled with a going back and forth from general statements to personal implications is what we call a foregrounding. What is a foregrounding? It is a key concept in Stylistics. Mick Short in *Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose* illustrates this stylistic feature by referring to a painting since ,as he writes, *the term is borrowed from art criticism*[4] The foreground is that part which is in the centre and the items in the foreground will appear more important than the rest.

M.A.K Halliday (as cited in Text and Discourse, 2002) defines foregrounding as *patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out or maybe brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this way towards a new insight, through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer's total meaning.* [5]

Katie Wales (as cited in her *Dictionary of Stylistics, 2001*) explains that foregrounding is thus *the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. But within the literary text itself, linguistic features can themselves be foregrounded or ' highlighted ', made prominent 'for specific effect against the background of the rest of the text. It is on this internal foregrounding that critical attention is largely focused.*[6]

To come back to Mick Short's notion of foreground and background in a painting, the foreground is that part of a painting which is in the centre and towards the bottom of

---

[4] **Short**, **Milk.** *Exploring the language of poems*, plays *and prose (*England: Longman, 1996), 11.

[5] **Halliday, M.A.K**. *Text and Discourse, edited by* Jonathan Webster (London: continuum, 2002), 98.

[6] **Wales, Katie**. *A Dictionary of Stylistics (*England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 157.

the canvas and will appear large as opposed to the rest of the painting and will represent the subject matter of the painting. Mick Short highlights that *in language, the background is what is linguistically normal- the rules, norms and expectations which we associate with a particular kind of speaking or writing; the foreground is in large part, the portions of text which do not conform to these expectations. . Foregrounding is thus produced as a result of deviation from linguistic (and non linguistic) norms of various kinds.* [7] Foregrounded elements include **deviations** but also **repetitions** and **parallelisms** which authors will use for specific effect and communicative purposes.

In conclusion, whereas Discourse Analysis is mainly concerned with the overall pattern(s) of the discourse, stylistics is going to relate the aesthetic effects of language with their meaning in looking at the presence of foregrounding, a term explicitly clarified earlier by Mick Short, M.A.K Halliday, and Katie Wales, is therefore a key concept and a cornerstone of stylistic analysis. Besides, scene 3, act 3 has represented the ideal scene to illustrate both a discursive analysis for it starts with the pattern of questions-answers or questions- questions and a stylistic analysis where this constant shift of 3rd-person to 1st-person and from generalizations to private commitments was something so conspicuous in the scene that it has indeed signaled a foregrounding, namely, that these repeated linguistic items had a communicative intent which was different according to Iago or Othello. For the former, it was a way of indirectly revealing to Othello that he was betrayed by his wife, and for the latter, being personally involved, it was a shame of raising such a personal and perplexing matter to his inferior officer since Othello is, in fact, the General of the Army. To put it in a nutshell, we saw how there was a blurring of general statements with personal references and of first-person involvement with third-person reality which was, of course, Iago's tactic to completely unsettle the moor and to transform him into a revengeful monster. One can conclude that both fields are indeed needed to have a better understanding of William Shakespeare's major scene in this play.

<u>Works Cited</u>

1) Coulthard, Malcom. (1985). An *Introduction to Discourse Analysis.* Malaysia: Pearson Education Limited.

2) Halliday, M.A.K. (2002*). Text and Discourse*, in Jonathan Webster (ed) London: continuum.

3) Shakespeare, William. *Othello* edited by Kenneth Muir. (1980). Great Britain: Penguin.

4) Shakespeare, W. *Othello*. (1968). England: Penguin Books.

5) Shakespeare, W. *Othello* edited by Richard Clay (1994) England: Penguin.

---

[7] **Short**, **Milk.** *Exploring the Language of Poems*, Plays *and Prose (*England: Longman, 1996), 12.

6) Short, Milk. (1996) *Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. England: Longman.

7) Wales, Katie. (2001). *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. England: Pearson Education Limited.

8) Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. London: Longman.

9) Widdowson, H.G. (1982) "*Othello in Person*" in Language and Literature, edited by R.Carter. London: George Allen and Unwin.