

Review

Ninke Stukker and Arie Verhagen:

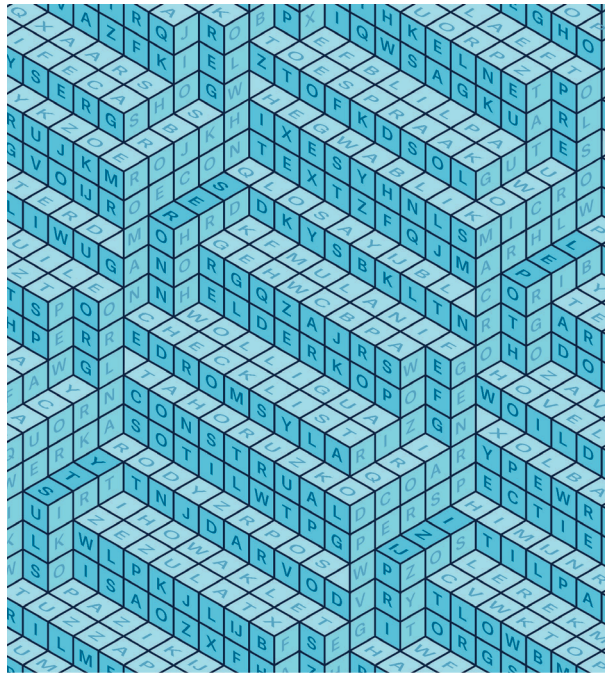
Stijl, taal en tekst: Stilistiek op taalkundige basis

Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019. 281 p.

ISBN 978 90 8728 321 6 / e-ISBN 978 94 0060 340 0 (e-PDF) /

e-ISBN 978 94 0060 341 7 (e-PUB)

Reviewed by Tanja Collet



Stijl, taal en tekst

STILISTIEK OP TAALKUNDIGE BASIS



Ninke Stukker en Arie Verhagen

Stylistics, generally defined within the Anglo-Saxon tradition as “the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use” (Mukherjee 2005, 1043), has found itself relegated to a marginal position in Dutch studies since at least the second half of the 20th century. At least two developments, one specific to the area of Dutch studies and the other more general in the field of linguistics, gradually led to the marginalization of the study of style. In the Dutch language area, the gradual abandonment of classical philology following both World Wars contributed to the establishment of the study of language and the study of literature as two separate fields of inquiry,¹ within which there was little room left for the study of style, though it intersects with both disciplines. In linguistics, more generally and almost simultaneously, the wide attention gained by structuralism in the 1950s followed by the Chomskyan revolution of the 1960s and 1970s shifted the attention of researchers away from actual language use and refocused it nearly exclusively on the system of language or on the concept of *grammar*, whether particular to a language or universal, transcending all languages. Later developments, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, which led to a renewed interest in style analysis, such as the growing proliferation of research in cognitive linguistics in the 1990s, were largely ignored by researchers working in the Dutch language area. Now, in *Stijl, taal en tekst: Stilistiek op een taalkundige basis* (‘Style, language, and text: Style analysis grounded in linguistic theory’), authors Ninke Stukker and Arie Verhagen set out to reclaim stylistics’ rightful position as a multidisciplinary endeavour at the centre of Dutch studies, situated at the intersection of disciplines such as linguistics and literary analysis. To achieve this goal, the authors adopt an approach that is two-pronged. They first propose a theory of style solidly grounded in cognitive linguistics, particularly in cognitive semantics, and then present a style analysis method that style analysts can apply to a broad range of texts, be they literary or non-literary. We will attempt to summarize both to the best of our abilities.

Style, as Stukker and Verhagen contend, concerns a relationship that has received much attention in linguistics: the relationship between form and meaning in language and, especially, in texts. Indeed, style is generally regarded as a consequence of the choices offered by the language system, which allows for any given content to be encoded in more than one linguistic form. A question that remains the subject of much debate, however, concerns the nature of the form-meaning relationship at the basis of style in texts. There are at least two opposing views: monism and dualism. The monistic view holds that form and meaning are

¹ Classical philology was heavily dominated by German scholars, from Friedrich Schlegel and Franz Bopp to Friedrich Nietzsche. Anti-German feelings and increased influence from Anglo-Saxon scholars may have played a role in the weakening of its position within academe from the 1950s onwards.

one, and consequently that changes to the linguistic form necessarily entail a change of meaning, however subtle. The dualistic view, often attributed to Aristotle, on the contrary, separates form and meaning, arguing that a same or similar meaning can be expressed by different linguistic forms. For the dualist, for instance, the active and passive forms of a sentence are synonymous, whereas for the monist, they are not, since the focus has shifted. Stukker and Verhagen end up rejecting both views. They propose instead a compromise informed by recent developments in cognitive semantics. Following Langacker (1990), they argue that in actual language use “objects” (the thing, situation or idea that is the topic of the actual language use) are not simply evoked or referred to by linguistic forms in sentences or texts but conceptualized. “Objects of conceptualization” can indeed be construed or mentally structured in different ways, depending, for instance, on the viewpoint adopted by the speaker. Consequently, linguistic expressions that refer to the same “object” and evoke the same conceptual content can nonetheless be semantically distinct because they construe that “object” in alternate ways. It follows, then, that for Stukker and Verhagen the active and passive forms of a sentence are not fully synonymous but represent different linguistic construals of a same “object of conceptualization.” It is this variation in the linguistic construal of a given “object of conceptualization,” a phenomenon that is an inherent characteristic of human communication and language use, that underlies style in texts, according to the authors.

The direct link between style and construal, posited by Stukker and Verhagen, limits what can be probed by the stylistic analysis of a text. Only linguistic signs (in the Saussurean sense of a linguistic form associated with a particular meaning through social convention) and combinations thereof are acceptable material for a style analysis. Literary devices traditionally included in stylistics, particularly in literary stylistics, such as rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, are excluded by the authors. Though such devices contribute to the overall aesthetics of a text, they play little or no role in the semantic construal of the “object of conceptualization,” the phenomenon underpinning style in text according to the authors’ linguistically grounded interpretation of stylistics, since they do not constitute linguistic signs. As for classical rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, hyperbole, oxymoron, and so on, which do play a role in construal, they are not independently needed as categories. Within Stukker’s and Verhagen’s approach to stylistics, they are simply understood as combinations of linguistic signs that construe “objects of conceptualization,” which is precisely the material that a style analysis rooted in cognitive semantics is concerned with.

By now it should be clear that style and meaning, and hence text interpretation, are closely related. Indeed, for Stukker and Verhagen, style analysis looks to establish correlates between the linguistic components of a text (its

lexical and syntactic characteristics, for instance) and the content that is so encoded or construed, and ultimately decoded by the reader. Style analysis operates, hence, at two distinct but interrelated textual levels: at the micro-level of the linguistic elements of the text, such as types of pronouns, verbs and their tenses, types of sentences, and so on, that linguistically construe an “object of conceptualization,” and at the macro-level of the overall interpretation of the text as it derives from the text’s micro-level features. The authors are quick to add, however, that text interpretation is not simply a question of adding all of the linguistic construals executed at the micro-level of the text; other factors, such as the reader’s background knowledge about the topic of the text, its author, and genre, for instance, also play a role. In other words, when interpreting a text, readers do not only rely on the information gleaned from the linguistic micro-level features of the text; they also use extra-linguistic background knowledge. Be that as it may, stylistics is mainly concerned with the linguistic choices operated at the micro-level of the text, and the consequences of these choices at the text’s macro-level.

Finally, before moving on to Stukker’s and Verhagen’s method of style analysis, it is important to point out that the concept of style is inherently comparative: it refers to what is unique to a text, thus to what sets a text apart. But apart from what, one may wonder. Ordinary, neutral language use, some would argue. The authors opine, however, that actual language use is never truly neutral (nor ordinary or normal), as all instances of language use, at least according to the tenets of cognitive linguistics, construe “objects of conceptualization” from a wide spectrum of perspectives. In other words, the idea of “construal” is incompatible with that of neutral language use. The authors resolve this issue by favouring a comparative approach to style analysis that makes use of a textual reference: a comparable text (also written in Dutch) with a similar topic or “object of conceptualization” belonging to the same genre, era, and so on, but which construes that “object” differently. The comparison of both texts should highlight micro-level differences of a lexical or syntactic nature that lead to differences in construal and hence in text interpretation at the macro-level.

To identify these micro-level and macro-level linkages, Stukker and Verhagen propose a well-thought-out three-step method that can be applied to all manner of texts, literary but also non-literary. The first step of the three-step method consists of a detailed analysis at the micro-level of the text, geared towards the identification of micro-level features deemed relevant for the text’s style, such as particular language patterns and their localized construals. To assist the analyst in this crucial first step, the authors have compiled a stylistics checklist roughly based on the *Checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories* first introduced by Leech and Short ([1981] 2007) for the English language. The checklist,

presented on pages 72 to 75 of *Stijl, taal en tekst*, is comprised of various linguistic means (for instance, lexical and syntactic patterns, text structure patterns, and so on) available to the writer in the Dutch language and which, when selected, contribute to create a text's unique style. It is important to note here that Stukker's and Verhagen's checklist constitutes a major empirical contribution to the area of Dutch stylistics. Indeed, the checklist is much more than simply a practical tool for the style analyst; it also greatly reduces the subjective nature of style analysis by making it possible for the analyst to approach the text in a systematic and hence more scientific manner. The following step in the three-step method, a second style analysis but at the text's macro-level, seeks to uncover correlates between the micro-level features identified in step 1 and various elements of the text's overall meaning. As for the third and final step, it uses a contrastive analysis by means of a comparable text or reference to verify the results obtained in step 1 and 2.

The three-step method just described is carried out over at least three rounds of data collection and analysis, with each round involving all three steps: a data exploration round; a data systematization round; and a final round of data verification. During the data exploration round, the analyst lays the groundwork for the detailed style analysis that will be carried out in round 2. The analyst surveys the text and notes several micro-level and macro-level style characteristics based on a subjective and rather intuitive reading of the text. A literature review is then undertaken, among other things to confront these initial findings with those of other researchers, if available. It is also during this first round that the researcher looks for an adequate reference text for step three's contrastive analysis. During the next round, the data systematization round, the analyst applies the stylistics checklist to uncover relevant linguistic patterns at the text's micro-level, looks for likely macro-level correlates, and contrasts these results with the style characteristics of the reference text. Given that both texts focus on similar "objects of conceptualization," which they construe differently, however, the comparison should yield differing micro-level linguistic patterns with corresponding macro-level differences. Then, during the third and final round, the analyst checks the results of the style analysis one last time for consistency and coherence before concluding the style analysis.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of *Stijl, taal en tekst* are dedicated to the theoretical framework and the checklist method summarized above. The three remaining chapters before the book's conclusion present a series of case studies, some of which have also been published elsewhere. The case study comparing the parliamentary speeches of Dutch politicians Geert Wilders and Ella Vogelaar is a case in point. Interested readers less familiar with the Dutch language will be happy to find an English-language version of Maarten van Leeuwen's study

included in *From text to political positions: Text analysis across disciplines*, published in 2014 by John Benjamins. The study uses the checklist method to identify a series of micro-level linguistic means (such as the use of abstract nouns, sentence length and complexity, and complementation) that contribute to the differing macro-level characteristics of Wilders' and Vogelaar's speeches. It should be said here that speakers of Dutch intuitively judge Wilder's style as clear and unambivalent, while Vogelaar's speeches tend to be qualified as *woolly*, as unclear, fuzzy, and full of complexities. The uncovered micro-linguistic means are shown to play a role in these macro-level intuitions, that combine furthermore to create the impression that the controversial and populist Wilders is more in tune with the Dutch voter (some might even say folksy), than the seemingly cerebral and "academic" Vogelaar. The case studies in the other two chapters concern writings by some of the Dutch literary giants, such as Maarten Biesheuvel, Jan Arends, Harry Mulisch, and Gerard Reve. Together the style analyses in these three chapters of a wide range of texts underscore the book's claim that style is a universal communicative phenomenon not limited to the literary realm. The analyses demonstrate, moreover, that Stukker's and Verhagen's theoretical framework and checklist method capture the universal nature of style rather well. For the reviewer, incidentally, it is this aspect of the authors' approach to style in texts that is particularly appealing: its applicability to all sorts of texts, including so-called specialized texts, whether academic, political, or journalistic.

To conclude this review, *Stijl, taal en tekst* is a well-researched but also somewhat densely written book that should appeal to a wide range of Dutch language specialists interested in actual language use, from semanticists to discourse analysts and literary specialists. As such, it succeeds in placing the study of style once again in a more prominent position in the multidisciplinary field of Dutch studies.

References

- Langacker, Ronald W. 1990. *Concept, image, and symbol: The cognitive basis of grammar*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Leech, Geoffroy and Mick Short. (1981) 2007. *Style in fiction. A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*, 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Longman.
- Mukherjee, Joybrato. 2005. Stylistics. In *Encyclopedia of linguistics*, edited by Philipp Strazny, 1043-1045. New York: Taylor & Francis.

About the reviewer

Tanja Collet is an associate professor of linguistics in the French Studies program at the University of Windsor (Windsor, Ontario, Canada), where she lectures in

Applied Linguistics, Translation and Lexicology / Terminology. Her research interests concern the intersection between terminology, text linguistics and LSP (languages for special purposes), with a main focus on term-text dynamics in specialized discourse, whether academic or political. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse and Interaction*, *JosTrans: The Journal of Specialised Translation*, *Meta: Translators' Journal*, *Terminology: International Journal of Theoretical and Applied Issues in Specialized Communication*, and *TTR (Études sur le texte et ses transformations)*. Originally from Belgium and a native speaker of Dutch, she is also the current president of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies (CAANS).

