A STYLISTIC APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF POETRY WITH SPECIFIC
REFERENCE TO SEPAMLA'S POEM *The Blues is You in Me*
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1   Introduction

How do readers assign meaning to a text that does not completely
match their experience or that appears to them to be lacking in
coherence? According to Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle,
there is a tacit agreement between participants in communication
to 'work together to achieve a coherent and effective exchange'
(Wales 1989:95). Similarly, in literary discourse, the reader
'expects consistency of representation, just as the writer
assumes our "willing suspension of disbelief", for example, or
our willingness to tolerate linguistic deviation' (ibid.).
Schauber and Spolsky (1986:105) refer to the 'desire' of readers
or hearers to 'understand a text as satisfying or coherent'.
Hildyard and Olson speak of the 'Enabling' and 'Pragmatic
Inferences' (1982:20 & 21) a reader or listener draws in order
to make a discourse comprehensible. In these terms, it can be
assumed that a reader accepts that what he reads is inherently
meaningful and that he will cooperate with a text, striving to
make a meaning for it by seeking a functional motivation for the
presence of apparently unrelated or deviant features.

As a teacher of English to both first and second language
speakers, it has been my experience that initial readings of
Sepamla's poem *The Blues is You in Me* (Chapman 1986:175-177)
leave the average student reader with a sense of confusion. The
general response to this poem is that it seems to lack coherence,
that 'there seems to be no connection between the stanzas' or
between the 'blues' and the items 'listed' in the poem, that the
language 'is inconsistent' or that 'it does not make sense'. Most
readers observe two apparently unrelated styles of language
interwoven in the poem, namely that of blues lyrics and that of
a listing of items or circumstances. It is the way in which the
blues refrains are interspersed among the statements listing

these items that strikes most readers as being anomalous, or as deviating from what they regard as the linguistic norm in this poem. The poem seems to fuse two different styles of language, to operate on two dimensions which, in terms of the expectations of the average reader, initially appear to be incompatible.

In order to assign coherence to Sepamla's poem, readers will need to make inferences concerning the functional relevance and relation of the two seemingly disparate styles of language they observe. They will need to seek an underlying connection between them and to posit a motive for their use. In other words, they will need to establish the principles by which the text coheres or hangs together in order to make sense of it.

A discipline that offers procedures for exploring the language and the 'meaning potential' (Halliday 1971:337) of texts is Stylistics – the application of linguistic principles to the language of literary texts. The advantage that this approach has over previously applied methods of teaching literature is that it regards a literary text, not only as a complex linguistic structure, but also as a discourse with a pragmatic orientation. A poem such as *The Blues is You in Me* can therefore be approached through an analysis of its linguistic features, as well as through a consideration of its communicative context. It can be treated as a speech act, an utterance uttered by a speaker to a listener, each of whom holds a particular ideology or world view.

2 A stylistic analysis of *The Blues is You in Me*

2.1 The title

The title is often the point of entry from which a reader can contact a text and from which he can construct a set of expectations concerning its 'meaning potential' (Halliday 1971:337). In the case of Sepamla's poem *The Blues is You in Me*, how does the combination of the meanings of the lexical items in their syntactic arrangement in the title have meaning potential for the

reader? What expectations concerning the thematic meaning of the
poem does the title evoke in the reader?

2.1.1 The role structures of the title

The noun phrase The Blues is syntactically the subject of the
sentence that forms the title, and, as such, could be assumed to
be the focus or the Theme. However, the complement status of the
second noun phrase You in Me causes equal stress and focus,
according to Jackendoff's theory of thematic relations[1] (1972:237
and 1983), to be assigned to both noun phrases in this sentence.
The noun phrase The Blues 'maps' into what Jackendoff refers to
as a 'two place relation' (1983:69) between an Entity and a
Place/Location, in this case, between the You and the Me. The
noun phrase You in Me functions as the semantic Location of the
Theme, implying that The Blues is located in the relationship
between the participants in the utterance. The equal syntactic
and semantic prominence given to both these noun phrases, and the
integrated manner in which they relate to one another Themati-
cally, could be posited as reflecting the Thematic meaning of the
poem.

2.1.2 The deictics of the title

The noun phrase You in Me consists of three deictic words, namely
two personal pronouns and a preposition. Deictic words are those
that convey semantic information concerning the 'personal,
temporal or locational character of the situation within which
an utterance takes place' (Crystal 1985: 86). It is through the
deictics that readers are guided in their construction of the
speaker's orientation towards both his topic of discourse and his
listener. The use of the first and second person pronouns in this
title implies a close relationship or form of interaction between
the participants - one that results in the blues. Would it be
appropriate to infer that these pronouns refer to the speaker and
the listener respectively? Would it be reasonable, in view of the
semantic connotation of the blues, to infer that the nature of
their relationship is discordant and lacking in harmony? Readers,
in their desire to assign coherence to this utterance, will need

to make such inferences, not only concerning the identity of <u>you</u> and <u>me</u>, but also concerning the social context in which this utterance occurs.

The lexical item the <u>blues</u>, is also a deictic word, as it orients the readers towards a set of expectations. It signals the genre of the utterance, namely that of the blues lyrics.

2.2 Genre

Todorov (in Schrauber and Spolsky 1986:70) maintains that the choice of a genre is pragmatically motivated, and that the genre of an utterance is 'identifiable with the speech act at its base'. A genre is characterized by a set of features, conditions or constraints. Readers therefore need to determine whether the description they give of the nature of the speech act (as well as of the role and communicative purpose of the speaker) matches the characteristic features or the appropriateness conditions of the genre in question. Schauber and Spolsky (1986: 76) claim that 'the readers' failure to understand all the implications of an unfamiliar functional genre will not affect their feelings of satisfaction with the recognizable unity'. Individual readers each have their own set of knowledge structures that make up their respective interpretive systems, which is perhaps why, according to Hildyard & Olson (1982:21), a text often means 'both more and less' than it says to different readers. Each reader, within the constraints of his or her literary and pragmatic competence, will attempt to assign coherence to an utterance and to construct an interpretation for it.

Readers are able to mobilize the many kinds of perceptions and ideas they already have in their repertoire to make pragmatic inferences concerning the relevance of that which is unfamiliar or anomalous in a text. They will therefore not need to have an in-depth knowledge of the characteristic features of blues lyrics to attempt to construct an interpretation for this utterance. Even a superficial knowledge of the genre will provide readers with an adequate context within which they can each proceed to

make an interpretation, whether strong or weak, according to
Schauber and Spolsky's (1986) Preference Model of Interpreta-
tion[2].

On the most elementary level, the main characteristic of the
genre of blues lyrics is that it is an expression of sadness, or
of protest in response to a set of circumstances in which the
speaker finds him or herself. The socio-cultural context in which
blues lyrics developed is that of the Afro-American oral tradi-
tion. It is the lyrical medium through which Afro-American slaves
protested against their suffering (Jarrett 1984). Blues music and
blues lyrics, in later times, became the medium through which
Afro-American jazz singers and musicians articulated their
protest against the social and political injustices they endured.
The blues is therefore a genre associated with Black experience.
It is a genre expressing Black ideology. Whereas blues music 'has
entered the mainstream of consciousness through its adaptation
to popular, commercial music' (Jarrett 1984:156), the same is not
true of blues lyrics which can strike the listener as being both
'compelling and confusing' (ibid.). A characteristic feature of
the genre is that the refrains are frequently strung together in
'apparently random order' (ibid.) and do not follow the sequence
that listeners to the lyrics of more conventional songs would
expect, eg

> *yeah I've been howling*
> *clouds have been muffling*
> *and the rain has come*
> *and washed away*
> *these blues of mine*
>
> *the blues is you in me*
>
> *I want to say it louder now*
> *I want to holler my thoughts now*
> *for I never knew the blues until I met you*
>
> *the blues is you in me*
> *...*

Having explored the semantics and the deictics of the title,
readers will have made certain inferences concerning the theme
of the utterance and the nature of the relationship between the
participants, the speaker and his listener. There is enough

evidence in the first stanza to support the inference that this is a discordant relationship. It induces a heart beat that is *a rhythm/ off-beat with God's own scintillating pace*. It leaves the speaker with *thoughts/ that mar the goodness of living* with his listener and that result in his having *the blues for howling*.

On an initial reading of the poem, readers ascribe the seeming lack of coherence to the interaction of two apparently disparate styles of language. One of these is the language of the blues lyrics; the other relates to a world that is familiar to, or even experienced by, South African readers, namely that depicted by the list of grievances, such as *the censor's pen, the Immorality Act, the Group Areas Act and the Bantu Education Act*. These are the laws that pervade the speaker's life and that constrain him and his people. This language obviously belongs to a different genre from that of the blues lyrics. The question could be raised whether this familiarized style of language represents a second genre in the poem. Could the apparent lack of coherence then be ascribed to a mixing of two genres?

The cumulative list of grievances is based on the genre of the praise poem (Beier 1967, Chapman 1982:19, Ong 1982:33) which has its socio-cultural origins in the African oral tradition. (Walter Ong 1982:111 states that much of the poetry in oral traditions is 'concerned basically with praise or blame'). In praise poems, lists of praiseworthy characteristics of people, aspects or items are recited. In Sepamla's poem, however, this technique is inverted; the speaker names/lists/itemizes those aspects of his life that are to be condemned. This inversion of the genre of praising by naming could be posited as having the effect of ironizing (or making ironic) the utterance.

It is, however, the language of the blues lyrics, the inter-spersion of the blues refrains among the sequence of constraints, that is foregrounded, that intrudes itself upon the readers' awareness as being different and in need of explanation. It is the Americanized diction such as *yeah I've been howling* and *I*

want to holler my thoughts now that is a departure from the familiar style and that leads the readers to question its stylistic relevance[3] and function in the utterance.

2.3 Foregrounding
Roger Fowler (1987:98) defines foregrounding as 'a useful, even crucial concept in stylistics, providing a bridge between the relative objectivity of linguistic description to the relative subjectivity of literary judgement'. It is the defamiliarization or foregrounding of linguistic features that 'awakens the reader by freeing him from the grooves of cliché expression to a new perceptivity' (ibid.).

In order to make sense of the utterance, readers need to establish a functional motive for this blending of two genres and their respective styles of language. Why is the defamiliarized or foregrounded language of the blues lyrics being played off against the familiarized or backgrounded language in which the speaker enumerates his miseries? Can the style of the blues lyrics be related functionally to the other style of language in the utterance, namely that of the inversion of the tradition of praising by naming? How do the blues lyrics contribute to the meaning potential of the utterance as a whole? Does this interaction of the two differing styles of language and genres serve a functional purpose, such as to highlight the thematic meaning of the utterance? Does it cast any light on the nature of the speaker, his relationship with his listener or the situational context of the utterance?

An obvious functional motivation that could be posited for the interaction of these two different styles and genres is that they are each, in their own way, an expression of protest. The participants in the utterance, the you and the me appear to be representatives of two mutually exclusive groups. In view of the nature of the genre of the blues lyrics, it might also be appropriate to infer that the speaker is a 'bluesman' (Jarrett

1984), uttering his protest on behalf of a specific group. In the light of the South African context, the speaker could be lamenting the rigours of Black experience in a racially segregated society and the listener could be regarded as representing White readership. The speaker could be assumed to be saddened or made 'blue' by the social gulf that separates his world from that of his listener.

Foregrounding occurs at various levels in the utterance. For instance, on one level, there is the defamiliarized style of the blues lyrics already mentioned; on another level, there are instances of lexical foregrounding, such as *the shadow of a cop/ dancing the Immorality Act jitterbug, ... the Group Areas Act and all its jive ...* . Lexical items associated with the world of jazz and blues rhythms are combined with those associated with legal constraints. The readers' internalized knowledge of the world informs them that the qualities or attributes associated with dance forms cannot literally be projected onto abstract entities such as laws. Such semantic anomaly or incompatibility is a type of lexical foregrounding consisting in the violation of selectional restrictions, namely those constraints on what lexical items can be combined with what others (Traugott and Pratt 1980:204). The violation of selectional restrictions is the basis of metaphoric language. It is a widely used foregrounding device in the language of literature, resulting in a heightened sense of awareness on the part of the reader and inviting interpretation.

Readers need to seek a functional relationship between the different instances of foregrounding they observe in a text; in this case, the interaction of two differing styles of language and genre, and the violation of selectional restrictions. They need to establish a 'cohesion of foregrounding' (Short and van Peer 1988:65) by relating the separate instances of foregrounding to one another and to the total meaning of the utterance. They could, for instance, posit that it is the integration of the two different styles of language and genres that gives rise to the

violation of selectional restrictions. The two styles are not merely juxtaposed, they are fused, which results in the semantic anomalies of the *shadow of a cop/ dancing the Immorality Act jitterbug* and the *Group Areas Act and all its jive*. It could be asserted that the verbal irony that results from the projection of the properties of dance rhythms onto constricting laws contributes to the irony already achieved by the inversion of the genre of praising by naming, and that this results in the overall sardonic tone of the utterance.

Another functional motive that could be asserted for the foregrounded blending of disparate styles of language, is that it highlights the ambivalence with which the speaker views his troubled relationship with his listener. Whereas initially the speaker focuses mainly on the discordant nature of his relationship with his listener, he shifts his perspective in the penultimate stanza. The deictics, you and me give way to the pronoun we, which signifies a change in their relationship. They now move closer together. The speaker includes the listener as a part of his world - he draws him into his experiences and speaks of him as a participant in his suffering:

> *because we are the blues people all*
> *the whiteman bemoaning his burden*
> *the blackman offloading his yoke*
> ...

The listener becomes more than just a listening ear. He is no longer a passive recipient of the speaker's message. The blues now affects the listener and the group he represents as much as it does the speaker and those on whose behalf he speaks. Both the you and the me are caught up and united in the blues as a result of the inexorable laws that separate them.

By seeking a functional motivation for observed instances of foregrounding, readers will be able to assign an interpretation to the utterance, the configuration of which initially appears to lack coherence. They will be gaining insight into how the two seemingly disparate styles and genres have been blended creatively in a dialogic construction (Halliday 1987:135).

2.4 Pragmatic orientation

A Stylistic approach recognizes the communicative function and the ideological setting of texts and provides procedures and strategies for studying these aspects. Sepamla's poem could be posited as being an utterance with a specific communicative and ideological purpose. It denounces a particular set of circumstances that *mars the goodness* of the relationship between two groups. The utterance could, by virtue of its blending of the genre of Afro-American blues lyrics with that of an inversion of an African praise poem, be regarded as being a rejection in itself of a Eurocentric form of expression. The blending of stylistic features from these two genres could also be posited as having a conscientizing effect, firstly on the group represented by the speaker, by relating their experiences to those endured by the Afro-Americans, and secondly on the group represented by the listener, by involving them as participants in this world of constraints.

3 Conclusion

A Stylistic approach provides teachers of literature with recourse to the theories, models and descriptive methods derived from the discipline of Linguistics. As such, it can assist teachers in gaining insight into the way in which their students' ability to construct interpretations depends, not only on their linguistic competence, but also on how well they can contextualize the text. Such an approach differs from previous methods such as the New Criticism which insisted on the autonomous, decontextualized nature of the written text, treating it as a 'verbal icon' (Ong: 1982:160). By integrating a close scrutiny of the linguistic structure of a text with a consideration of the contextual determinants that operate in the act of constructing an interpretation for that text, Stylistics makes a valuable contribution to the teaching of both language and literature.

<u>The Blues is You in Me</u>

When my heart pulsates a rhythm
off-beat with God's own scintillating pace
and I can trace only those thoughts
that mar the goodness of living with you
then I know I've got the blues for howling

    yeah I've been howling
    clouds have been muffling
    and the rain has come
    and washed away
    these blues of mine

    the blues is you in me

I want to say it louder now
I want to holler my thoughts now
for I never knew the blues until I met you

    the blues is you in me

the blues is the clicks of my tongue
agitated by the death I live

the blues is my father's squeals
every Friday in a week

    the blues is you in me
    I never knew the blues until I met you

the blues is the screech of the censor's pen
as he scribbles lamentations on my sensitized pad

the blues is the shadow of a cop
dancing the Immorality Act jitterbug

the blues is the Group Areas Act and all its jive

the blues is the Bantu Education Act and its
improvisations

    the blues is you in me
    I never knew the blues until I met you

the blues is the people huddled on a bench
eating of their own thoughts

the blues is those many words said to repair
yesterdays felled again and again by today's
promises

the blues is the long shadow I count
measured by moments dragging the sun

    the blues is the ratting of my brother

for opportunities he gets which he ought to have
had

    the blues is you in me
    I never knew the blues until I met you

I want to holler the how-long blues
because we are the blues people all
the whiteman bemoaning his burden
the blackman offloading the yoke

    the blues is you in me
    I never knew the blues until I met you

(Sipho Sepamla)

FOOTNOTES

1   Thematic relations, or role structures, are theoretically postulated entities which aim to explain the manner in which the propositional content of a sentence relates to entities, actions and situations in the world. Theories of thematic relations posit an account of the systematic correlation between syntactic form and semantic function. Jackendoff's (1972) theory of thematic relations posits that every sentence has a semantically discernible Theme which is the focus of the construction both syntactically and semantically. It is the semantic nature of the verb that determines the thematic relations of the noun phrases in a sentence.

2   Schauber & Spolsky (1986) have developed a Preference Model of Interpretation according to which they posit an account of a reader's competence to interpret a literary text. In terms of their model, pragmatic competence presumes linguistic competence, and literary competence presumes both the previous systems. The three systems interact to produce interpretive competence. The model provides an account of the way in which multiple valid interpretations can be made for a single literary text. In terms of this model, interpretations are assessed as an issue of stronger and weaker judgements rather than as a matter of absolute distinction between right and wrong.

3   Sinclair & Winckler (1991), in their discussion of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory; outline the way in which hearers seek for 'optimal relevance' (1991:67) in achieving an interpretation for an utterance. In terms of this theory, Sinclair & Winckler describe the principle of relevance as implying that 'certain features of its linguistic structure may have an influence on the effort required to process an utterance and, consequently, on the contextual effects produced by the utterance' (ibid. 62). According to a relevance-theoretic account of style, 'Style

arises ... in the pursuit of relevance' (ibid. 64).

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