

The Lang-Lit Lab

Teaching Ideas 1

Teaching the stylistics of poetry at A-level

A guest post by Megan Mansworth

Providing students with access to linguistic terminology and grammatical concepts can be highly empowering in facilitating nuanced interpretations, as long as they are directed to utilise these as stylistic tools which are used to help them explore the effects. In my chapter for the forthcoming Routledge book *Teaching English Language and Literature 16-19*, I demonstrate how the explicit teaching of linguistic features as a tool for analysis can help students to conceptualise complex differences in the way in which two poets present emotions. I explore an example from my own teaching where I directed students towards the identification and exploration of lexical and grammatical features in Plath's and Hughes' 'Rabbit Catcher' poems in order to facilitate a comparison of how the poets use language to convey different feelings about the same event in their marriage. Here is a short description of one activity I outline in the chapter.

While it is undoubtedly often appropriate to provide students with texts without any sort of framing to allow their ideas to be unconstrained, directing students towards the exploration of key linguistic concepts can be a productive means of helping them to develop perceptive interpretations – particularly when they are at an early stage of developing their confidence in using linguistic approaches to literary study. Straightforward 'feature spotting' and labelling of language without analysis should of course be avoided, but if a broad comparative question is provided to students, stylistic tools can provide an enabling bridge between the challenges of the question and the development of students' analysis.

In my chapter, I exemplify the affordances of introducing students to several different linguistic features as a mechanism of analysis. For example, I show how teaching students about the different categorisations of **dynamic verbs** (relating to movement or processes) and **stative verbs** (relating to existence or states of being) can be a productive method of helping them to explore the ways in which the poets present their emotions and viewpoints.

I saw you
Ripping up precarious, precious saplings
Of my heritage,

Ted Hughes

And we, too, had a relationship—
Tight wires between us,

Sylvia Plath

Teaching students about the differences between these verb types led them to be able to explain, for instance, how Hughes presents himself as a passive recipient of his wife's anger in his own poem, and the way Plath presents herself as a victim of nature and the world around her. Interestingly, debate also arose with my class regarding to what extent Hughes uses some dynamic verbs to paradoxically represent his passivity. The exploration of verb categorisations can help students to develop critical and evaluative interpretations by encouraging them to formulate strongly substantiated ideas with their roots in language. This methodology can, of course, be adapted for use when analysing any poems – not only those such as Plath's and Hughes' 'Rabbit Catcher' poems that exist in dialogue with each other.

Further ideas

- The grammatical categorisation of stative and dynamic verbs can enable students to begin to develop a conscious understanding of how lexical and grammatical choices transmit meaning. However, a further option which I do not explore within my chapter might be to provide students with Halliday's notion of verbs as *processes*, which are categorised as material, mental, behavioural, relational, verbal and existential, and to use these as a springboard for analysis. See also a previous blog post on verb processes [here](#).
- A class might also explore how writers' verb choices can interact with syntactic features such as use of the active and passive voice, to convey emotions within poetry.
- At an even higher level, exploration of notions of action and passivity could lie in the use of cognitive grammar to explore the notion of action chains and force dynamics, to help identify, for example, the agent and the patient of a grammatical clause and subsequently analyse interpretative effects. (For further exploration of potential uses of cognitive grammar as a resource for linguistic analysis, see Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018.)

References

Giovanelli, M. and Harrison, C. (2018) *Cognitive Grammar in Stylistics: A Practical Guide*. London: Bloomsbury.

Halliday, M. (2013) *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 4th Ed. London: Routledge.