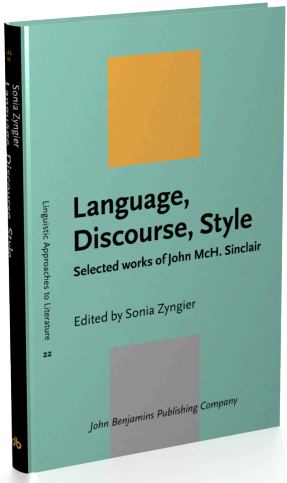
Linguistic Approaches to Literature
22

Introduction

John Sinclair: Papers on Stylistics by Ronald Carter

https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.22.intro



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Language, Discourse, Style: Selected works of John McH. Sinclair
Edited by Sonia Zyngier
[**Linguistic Approaches to Literature**, 22]
2016. xxiii, 282 pp.

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> *It is my belief that a new understanding of the nature and structure of language will shortly be available as a result of the examination of large collections of text. The language looks different when you look at a lot of it at once….*
>
> (Sinclair 1991: xvii)

John Sinclair: Academic worlds

John Sinclair (1933–2007) is one of the major figures in the field of linguistics. In a world of hype in which every academic appears to be undertaking cutting-edge research or to be paradigm-shifting or to be ground-breaking or internationally renowned, it is difficult to find words other than clichés to describe John Sinclair's achievement. It is perhaps merely sufficient to say that, like the production of J.R. Firth, by whom John was much influenced, his work will still be read and consulted fifty years from now; and that can be said of only very few academic researchers. And of very few can be it said that they have laid influential foundations for the establishment of two new academic sub-disciplines.

John Sinclair has a remarkable breadth of publications. He wrote and edited over thirty books and more than 100 articles in the fields of grammar, vocabulary, discourse analysis, lexicography, stylistics, language teaching and corpus linguistics and in the process laid significant foundations for two new sub-disciplines: those of spoken discourse analysis in the 1970s and corpus linguistics in the 1980s.

And in the 1980s he developed one of the largest-scale English language research projects the world has seen which produced the 400 million-word Bank of English corpus and resulted in a whole range of innovative dictionaries, grammars and teaching materials as part of the COBUILD project. Published in 1987 and dismissed at the time by most major publishers, the first COBUILD dictionary was so influential that all dictionaries and reference books, especially those for learners of English, are now based on corpora and have been affected by the principles of description and research which John Sinclair developed. In the 1990s and to the present day he has continued to innovate and push back frontiers of description, most markedly in the computational analysis of patterns of vocabulary and

grammar and has continued to develop accounts of the central importance of lexis in the theory of language.

John Sinclair is in a distinct tradition of British linguistics and applied linguistics which owes much to the foundations built by Professor J.R. Firth in the 1950s and extended by Professor Michael Halliday from the 1960s. In theory and practice, it runs counter to the dominant worldwide traditions for the study of language instigated by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s and 1960s. For Chomsky, language is a cognitive, biological phenomenon and has to be studied largely by means of methodologies which trust the intuitions of the researcher concerning language structure.

The position of John Sinclair is determinedly against such an orientation to language description and theory. Sinclair firmly holds the Firthian perspective which states that language should be studied as far as possible in naturally occurring social contexts of use, that it should work with extended examples (where possible complete texts), and should have at its centre the analysis of meaning. Indeed, at the heart of Sinclair's view is the inseparability of form and meaning.

> […] in all cases so far examined, each meaning can be associated with a distinct formal patterning […] There is ultimately no distinction between form and meaning […][The] meaning affects the structure and this is […] the principal observation of corpus linguistics in the last decade. (Sinclair 1991: 496)

This descriptive and analytical position regarding the inseparability of form and meaning has exerted a major influence on research into and analysis of language within the past decade. It has affected the design of pedagogical materials such as dictionaries and grammars, the place of linguistics in education, the analysis of literature and the fields in particular of discourse analysis and lexicology. It is a deeply and uncompromisingly empirical position. The key word for Sinclair is *evidence*. By 'evidence' he means the data provided by extensive multi-million word collections of texts together with the statistical support provided by the techniques of corpus linguistics. It also means an uncompromising rigour and descriptive detail when it comes to the analysis of the language used in literary texts.

John Sinclair: Language and literature worlds

What, therefore, can be said to be the core messages offered by John Sinclair for the study of language and literature?

First, literary texts are special texts. He believed that, if not central, they should certainly not be peripheral to the study of language and linguistics. For Sinclair, literary texts are instances of language in use and he regretted that such

texts were commonly neglected by linguists. Indeed, they represent for him a particular challenge as they involve processes of communication which are essentially displaced and indirect; the levels or planes of communication cannot be directly attributed to the voice or voices or 'authorial' positions in the text and such indirectness represents a particular challenge to description. He also regretted the relative neglect by literary scholars of the uses of linguistic methods in the exploration of literary texts; he believed very strongly that language and literary study could be integrated. He continued to be gratified by the increasing growth of language studies in departments of English and the continuing development of programmes, from high school through to postgraduate university courses, that promote this integration.

Second, literary texts are continuous with all other texts. Literary texts are commonly accorded special value within a community or culture and are also sometimes often taken as a sole point of departure for the study of English in educational institutions worldwide. Sinclair was, however, committed to the study, description and evaluation of a wider range of texts and believed that literary texts are an important focus but should not form an exclusive focus of study for English degrees. The study of English should be sufficiently catholic to embrace a wide a variety of texts and text types.

Third, if literary texts are to be studied within a framework of language and linguistics, then it should be done properly. By properly, he means that the text itself cannot be overlooked or be seen simply as some kind of illustration of general points about an author's life or about literary and cultural history or simply as the source of hermeneutical dispute. Every detail of the text has to be examined if a true picture is to emerge and that a text has to be seen not autonomously but as part of a network of other texts. In the latter stages of his research, that network is illuminated by reference to corpus databases as well as by corpus linguistic techniques so that statements made have to be verified with reference to other texts of the same or similar or of different types, each with their own disposition of linguistic features and each with their own provenance in the corpus. Descriptions of language are corpus-driven in that the corpus tells us what the facts are. And the larger and more representative the corpus the greater the attestation which is possible. It is a positive extension and enrichment of the Firthian tradition. As John Sinclair himself puts it in one of his most definitive books *Corpus, Concordance and Collocation* (1991: 4), "The ability to examine large text corpora in a systematic manner allows access to a quality of evidence that has not been available before." Literary texts draw from the same sources of language in use as any other text and should, according to John Sinclair, be examined in the same way.

Fourth, texts defined as literary are highly regarded. They may be valued differently at different times and by different reading communities but they can be

appreciated by the extent to which they endure over time. However, the notion of evaluation needs to be interrogated more fully at the interfaces between language use and all types of texts; this needs to be especially so at the interfaces between language and literary text. Such a practice is also central to the pedagogies underlying the teaching of language, of literature and of both in an integrated way.

For Sinclair, evaluation could not be said to take place unless the analyst gave a detailed, replicable and retrievable account of the linguistic constituency of the text. Too often, he would argue, literary critics become preoccupied with everything and anything except with the way that language works. Or, if they do consider language, discussion is undertaken at best impressionistically. For him, literature is made from language. He was not so naïve as to believe that meaning was wholly a text-immanent matter but language is the primary medium of a literary text and evaluation has to start and stop with the ways in which the language of that literary text is used. There are numerous exemplifications of this position and practice in this volume from the earliest days of the paper "Taking a Poem to Pieces" on a contemporary poem by Philip Larkin (Chapter 6) through to the paper "Passion Speechless Lies" on an Elizabethan sonnet (Chapter 14). In some cases, such as in his analysis of the Larkin poem, he would almost deliberately court charges of reductiveness and would stop provocatively short of any interpretation of the text, as if to underline the primacy of replicable description.

He stood, of course, for more than these four main foci and the volume of his papers here illustrates this abundantly; but these themes and concerns recur throughout all the papers over the many years they represent and have been highly influential on the field of stylistics.

Beginnings and endings

If I may be allowed a final personal note, I count myself extremely fortunate to have worked with John Sinclair over a period of thirty years. He supervised my Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham and was editor of a series which published two of my earliest books. Together we edited a series for OUP called *Describing English Language* and we worked together closely on *Trust the Text*, published by Routledge in 2004, and in which many of his most significant and influential papers on discourse and corpus linguistics were collected and re-edited.

As is often the case with the most major scholars, John Sinclair was a deeply modest man who taught those whom he supervised as postgraduates to become independent researchers, encouraging them to pursue challenges over a long period of time, as he did. He did not fear criticism and indeed often sought it out as a way of enabling him to challenge the tenets of his own thinking. He was

naturally combative, sometimes acerbically, but more often with a light and ironic touch. John was a kind man and endlessly supportive to friends and family. He was unfailingly generous with his time. Once you had his confidence he would never let you down; and he was always willing to share his ideas and analyses in a spirit of collaborative endeavor. He remained throughout Scottish at heart and was proud of it.

It is no more than yet another cliché to say that he continues to be much missed by many and that his inestimable influence will live on. But then clichés, like hype, are sometimes true. This volume is an eloquent and truthful testimony to all that he stood and stands for at the interface between language and literature.

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June 1, 2016