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Article:

Reader response research in stylistics

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue. In it, we argue that research into reader response should be recognised as a vital aspect of contemporary stylistics, and we establish our focus on work which explicitly investigates such responses through the collection and analysis of extra-textual datasets. Reader response research in stylistics is characterised by a commitment to rigorous and evidence-based approaches to the study of readers' interactions with and around texts, and the application of such datasets in the service of stylistic concerns: to contribute to stylistic textual analysis and/or wider discussion of stylistic theory and methods. We trace the influence of reader response criticism and reception theory on stylistics and discuss the productive dialogues which exist between stylistics and the related fields of the empirical study of literature and naturalistic study of reading. After offering an overview of methods available to reader response researchers and a contextualising survey of existing work, we argue that both experimental and naturalistic methods should be regarded as 'empirical', and that stylistics is uniquely positioned to embrace diverse approaches to readers and reading. We summarise contributions to the special issue and the valuable insights they offer into the historical context of reader response research and the way readers perceive and evaluate texts (either poetry or narrative prose). Stylistic reader response research enables both the testing and development of stylistic methods, in accordance with the progressive spirit of the discipline, and also the establishment of new and renewed connections between stylistic research and work in other fields.

Keywords: cognitive stylistics; data collection methods; empirical study of literature; empiricism; experimental methods; naturalistic study of reading; reader response; reader response criticism; the reader; stylistics.

1. Introduction

The stylistic study of textual form and interpretative effect is grounded on the understanding of literary works (indeed, all texts) as heteronomous objects; that is, objects which are brought into being by the observing consciousness of a reader (Ingarden, 1973a, 1973b; Stockwell, 2002: 135-6). This view of literary works means that stylistics is, and always has been, inherently and inescapably concerned with reader response. Yet throughout the history of the discipline and across its various applications and permutations, the readerly dimension of stylistic theory has received different levels of emphasis.

The majority of stylistic studies make some reference to a reader or audience in the articulation of a particular textual analysis, yet the precise identity of this reader, and particularly their ontological status, can vary considerably. Reader response can be largely implicit in the analyst's application of a stylistic framework in the discussion of the meanings and effects of a text. As Allington and Swann (2009: 221) point out, references to a 'reader' in such work often presuppose an implied or ideal reader on the basis of such analysis. More explicit attention to reader response is evident when, for instance, an analyst engages with published criticism and reviews about a work; offers (anecdotal) descriptions of reader reactions observed first-hand during seminars or conferences; or postulates interpretative differences (for instance, in discussions of textual ambiguity). Mentions of 'the reader' in this

more explicit work might ambiguously refer to the analyst themselves or to readers they have interacted with or imagined. The papers collected in this volume represent work at the most explicit end of the scale: that is, work in which reader response is studied formally through the collection and analysis of 'extra-textual' datasets (Swann and Allington, 2009: 247) that capture aspects of readers' behaviours, interpretations or evaluations in response to particular literary works (and in specific contexts).

This kind of work is not new, as will be discussed below. It also draws, methodologically, on a number of related disciplines that study the activities and reactions of readers. However, we posit that this type of research is set to become even more central to stylistics in the future. The impulse to collect extra-textual data about literary reading in order to inform, develop and reflect upon stylistic analysis is becoming increasingly widespread. This progression stems, at least in part, from stylisticians' recognition of an imbalance between the rhetorical power of 'the reader' in stylistic analyses and the analytical rigour and precision with which reader response is typically discussed. Stylistics has generated a vast 'toolkit' of frameworks designed for the analysis of textual form and holds the systematic, replicable and retrievable analysis of text as one of its foundational principles (Simpson, 2014: vii and 3-4). However, the same cannot always be said for its study of the effects of such textual forms, despite the fact that claims about reader response are so central to stylistic argumentation.

This special issue is particularly timely, representing a developing strand of stylistic research that gives equal attention to the text and data evidencing the text's reception. The contributions herein issue arise out of the 'Reader Response Research in Stylistics' special interest group (established by the editors of this special issue), which ran a popular series of panels at the 2015 Poetics and Linguistics Association conference. The primary aim of the

special interest group is to facilitate connections between the increasing number of stylisticians who are involved in the collection and analysis of reader response data, in its many forms.

Reader response research in stylistics is characterised by the commitment to rigorous and evidence-based approaches to the study of readers' interactions with and around texts. And it is also, crucially, characterised by the application of such datasets in the service of stylistic concerns in order to contribute to a stylistic textual analysis and/or wider discussion of stylistic theory and methods. Such research enables the testing and development of stylistic methods and theories, in accordance with the progressive spirit of the discipline. It also establishes or renews connections between stylistic research and work in other disciplines concerned with the nature of reading. This special issue showcases the productive diversity of work in this field. The present article sets the collection in context with a review of methods and influences in the field, before introducing the contributions and offering some reflections on future directions.

2. The study of reader response

Interest in reader response is usually traced to the rise of interest in the reader within literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the work of what has come to be known collectively as 'reader response critics' (Culler, 1975; Fish, 1980; Holland, 1975; Fetterley, 1977) and 'reception theorists' (see Jauss, 1982; Iser, 1974, 1978; see Holub, 1984; Freund, 1987 and Tompkins, 1980 for overviews; for parallels in education see Rosenblatt 1970 [1938], 1978 and Allen 1991 for an overview). Reader response criticism famously departed

from viewing literary meaning as a property of authorial intention or the text itself, and instead emphasised the role of the reader as the active creator of meaning. This reorientation of literary study was manifest across a heterogeneous collection of work, rather than advocated by a particular movement. Reader response critics modelled readers in various ways, with notions of the 'implied reader' (Booth, 1961; Iser, 1974); 'ideal reader' (Culler, 1975); 'informed reader' (Fish, 1970); the 'super reader' (Riffaterre, 1966); 'resisting reader' (Fetterley, 1977) and 'communities of readers' (Fish, 1980) emerging in this critical period. However, as is often pointed out, reader response criticism's interest in readers was predominantly theoretical: it used 'the idea of the reader as a means of producing a new kind of textual analysis' (Tompkins, 1980: xi, our emphasis) rather than 'looking at the actual responses of real readers to literary texts' (Peplow and Carter, 2014: 441). Nevertheless, the impact of this reader-centred approach to literary study is still felt today, particularly in the disciplines of stylistics and the empirical study of literature, which emerged roughly contemporaneously and combined these reader-focused literary theories with methods and insights from linguistics, psychology and cognitive science.

In stylistics, the combined influence of reader response criticism in literary theory and pragmatics and discourse analysis in linguistics cemented the discipline's interest in texts in their 'interactive discourse context' (Wales, 2006: 216). There are parallels between the 'ideal' or 'implied' readers evoked by reader response critics and the implicit notion of 'the reader' in stylistics, which, as Allington and Swann point out, is typically produced when 'a lone academic scrutinizes the linguistic structure of a text in order to pronounce upon its meanings and effects' (2009: 221; see also Hall, 2009: 331-2). Nonetheless, such introspective, interpretative studies of reader-text interaction have given rise to the current wealth of nuanced and productive stylistic frameworks (see Simpson, 2014 and Stockwell,

2002 for overviews), and continue to generate valuable insights into reader response. As noted above, however, there is room in stylistics for other approaches to the study of readers, and these approaches borrow and adapt methods from related fields.

In the empirical study of literature, reader response criticism and reception theory blended with the psychology of reading and empirical aesthetics (Schram and Steen, 2001: 3). Studies of reader response in this field, established in work such as Schmidt (1982 [1980]), adopt a 'strictly observing standpoint' with regard to readers (Steen, 1991a: 61) and view literary reading 'as an object for scientific investigation' through the collection of data from actual readers (Steen 1991b: 559). Such research is characterised by adherence to an experimentalist paradigm concerned with the controlled testing of hypotheses in accordance with scientific principles (Schram and Steen, 2001; van Peer, Hakemulder and Zyngier, 2007).

Through its concern with the observation of actual readers, the empirical study of literature has developed a range of methods designed to tap into different aspects of reader response, and it is useful to review these briefly. Reader response can be accessed (always indirectly) at different moments: before, during and after the act of reading (sometimes referred to as 'online' (during) and 'offline' moments of reading – see Castiglione, this volume), and in different ways: through the collection of verbal or non-verbal data (Steen, 1991b; see also Miall, 2006 and van Peer et al., 2007). Verbal data is collected in the form of linguistic expressions, when participants volunteer responses or are asked to say or write something about their reading experience. Common experimental methods that generate verbal data are thinking aloud, in which participants are asked to verbalise their immediate responses to a text at pauses during the reading of it, and self-probed retrospection (Seilman and Larsen, 1989) in which participants are asked to read and mark a text and then afterwards report on

the motivations behind their markings. Verbal data can also be collected through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Researchers can have a variable amount of control over verbal data: restricting participants' responses through closed questions, for instance, or asking for open responses over which the researcher has minimal influence (Steen, 1991b: 567-72). Non-verbal data is collected in the form of measurements, such as reading times, reaction times, or through the use of specialist equipment to track physiological features such as eye movement. Because of its preoccupation with the controlled testing of hypotheses, in the empirical study of literature both verbal and non-verbal data tend to be collected in laboratory or laboratory-like settings in which variables are specifically controlled.

There is a long history of productive dialogue between stylistics and the empirical study of literature, which is continued in this volume. This dialogue includes the use of experimental methods to interrogate stylistic assumptions about the nature of reading, to study the effects of specific formal features on readers, and to examine phenomenological aspects of reading which are then related to textual features. An interesting early example of the first aspect of this productive dialogue is Short and van Peer's (1989) paper: 'Accident! Stylisticians evaluate: Aims and methods of stylistic analysis'. Motivated by the observation that: 'in their discussions of poems both literary critics and stylisticians 'pretend' that they are reading the text line by line and for the first time' (1989: 23), the authors conduct a think-aloud experiment on themselves in which they respond in writing to an unfamiliar poem selected by a third party, reading it line-by-line, so that 'the form of the reading process…replicated the critics' conventional ideal' (1989: 24). Their aim was to 'observe the ways in which the experimenters had built up their interpretations' (24), and to explore whether their data would generate 'things for consideration that stylistic analysis cannot at present deal with' (62).

Short and van Peer reproduce the protocols from the experiment in full, and subject them to detailed, transparent content analysis. The poem itself is also analysed stylistically and the authors reflect on the explanatory power of the stylistic approach, arguing that it can account for most of the interpretative aspects contained in the protocols except a series of unexpected evaluative remarks about the final stanza of the poem. This leads them to develop a sketch of how evaluation might work, in order to improve stylistics' ability to explain reader experiences and set out new directions for future research. Because Short and van Peer's study focuses on the authors' own responses rather than those of other readers it is perhaps best regarded as a thought-provoking exercise, but nonetheless we think it is a good example of the way reader response data can be used to test and develop stylistic approaches to texts and reading. Other studies which apply the think-aloud method in order to reflect upon the explanatory power of stylistics and the nature of interpretation include: Alderson and Short, 1989; Jeffries, 2002 and Short, McIntyre, Jeffries, and Bousfield, 2011. This use of data to inform and reflect upon stylistic analysis is also evident in the questionnaire studies of Burke (2011), Gibbons (2012) and van Driel (2015).

The productive dialogue between stylistics and the empirical study of literature is also visible in experimental work that investigates the influence of specific formal textual features such as metaphor, foregrounding and narrative perspective upon readers (Miall, 2006: 293; Peplow and Carter, 2014: 442). The methods used to investigate reader responses to such features tend be questionnaires, empirical tasks and non-verbal measurements of reading or response times. It is not possible here to offer a full review of this extensive field of research, only to proffer some illustrative examples. In his influential book, van Peer (1986) compared his stylistic analysis of semantic, phonological and grammatical foregrounding in poetry with the responses of real readers, asking them to read the same texts and mark the lines that they

found most striking. He found that, regardless of literary training, the participants identified stylistically foregrounded passages as striking, and thus his results offer some support for the importance which stylistics places on foregrounding effects in literature (this is an ongoing field of enquiry, see also Balint and Hakemulder, 2015; Dixon et al., 1993; Emmott et al., 2006; Hakemulder, 2004; Miall and Kuiken, 1994; Zyngier et al., 2007; and Peplow and Carter, 2014: 443-6 for an overview). Experimental studies have also used real readers to examine the effect of another major area of stylistic research: narrative perspective. Bray (2007a, 2007b) for instance uses questionnaires to investigate readers' responses to passages of free indirect discourse, reflecting back from the data to stylistic theories of point of view. Like Sotirova (2006) and van Peer and Pander Maat (1996, 2001) he investigates readers' perceptions of character voice and their emotional responses to the characters, noting overall that 'the way readers respond to FIT is more complex than has been supposed' by critics and stylisticians (Bray 2007b: 67). More recently, Bell's 'Reading Digital Fiction' project (readingdigitalfiction.com) and Macrae's (2016) work on deixis have contributed to stylistic understanding of the workings of point of view.

Finally, productive dialogue between experimental and stylistic work is also evident in phenomenological research into readers' responses to literature, which has examined issues such as the influence of reader personality (Dijkic et al., 2009; Djikic, Oatley and Carland, 2012; Mar, 2008) or story structure on response (Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1982; Brewer, 1998), or the experience of identification, empathy, sympathy and emotion during literary reading (e.g. Kuiken, Miall and Sikora, 2004; Oatley, 1999, 2002). These studies might 'start from readers' reactions and relate these to the qualities of the texts' (van Peer and Hakemulder, 2015: 94), or provide findings which can be integrated into stylistic frameworks (for instance see work in cognitive poetics on self-implication in reading: Gavins, 2007;

Stockwell, 2009). Sanford and Emmott's (2012) book applies the findings of empirical tasks from the psychology of language comprehension to the concerns of stylisticians and narratologists, and therefore encompasses the areas outlined above, offering an illuminating perspective on foregrounding, narrative style and emotional involvement.

For stylisticians, work in the empirical study of literature is most useful when it is properly contextualised within current stylistic research, and when experimental findings are used to reflect back upon stylistic theories or feed into textual analysis. Yet, experimentalist research (like any form of reader response research) has its limitations, most centrally with regard to ecological validity. Experimental tasks, questionnaires, thinking-aloud and so on all disrupt or mediate the process of reading they seek to examine. Whilst much stylistically-minded experimental research uses naturally occurring texts, it is also common within the empirical study of literature to use invented or manipulated texts as stimuli (e.g. see Kuzmičová et al., – this volume). Because of the need to control extraneous variables and operationalise theories for testing, experimentalist approaches can be quick to oversimplify the object of study so that, as Hall (2008: 31) points out, the work ends up telling us more about a 'suggestive but frustratingly parallel research universe' than the phenomenon it purports to study, particularly when that phenomenon is 'demonstrably complex, multifaceted and highly contingent' (2008: 21). Issues of text, textuality and context can easily be lost in the atypical reading situations created in experimental studies. As a result, Hall argues that 'what we think of as empirical research should not be limited to experimentalist paradigms' and that 'contextually-sensitive' investigations should complement more experimental studies (2008: 21).

Indeed, alongside work in experimentalist paradigms there exists an alternative, methodologically very distinct approach to the study of reader response, which Peplow and

Carter (2014: 440) refer to as the 'naturalistic study of reading' or 'NSR'. Encompassing research in sociolinguistics, cultural studies, history and education, naturalistic approaches advocate the study of readers 'in their usual environment, engaged in habitual reading behaviour', with texts presented in their typical form, and readers interacting with texts and each other (Swann and Allington, 2009: 248). NSR emphasises reading as a social practice, carried out discursively in particular interactional contexts, including: reading groups (Benwell, 2009; Proctor and Benwell, 2015; Swann and Allington, 2009; Peplow, 2011, 2016; Peplow et al., 2016), social media platforms (Peplow et al., 2016; Rehberg Sedo, 2011), classrooms (e.g. Barajas, 2016; Barajas and Aronsson, 2009), mass reading events (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2013), and historically through diaries, letters, and publication records (Absillis, 2009; Halsey, 2009; Jardine and Grafton, 1990). NSR typically takes an ethnographic approach to data collection and employs qualitative methods of data analysis. Linguistic analysis of reader interaction tends to be carried out using interactional sociolinguistic, conversation analytic or discursive psychological frameworks (see, for e.g. Benwell, 2009; Peplow et al., 2016) which emphasise the way literary interpretation is socially-embedded and constructed through talk on a turn-by-turn basis.

In 2009, a special issue of Language and Literature showcased naturalistic approaches to reading in order to highlight their implications for stylistics (Allington and Swann, 2009). The editors noted that none of the featured articles 'amounts to stylistics' (Allington and Swann, 2009: 227), presumably because the language of the literary work is not an object of interest for analysts, and is a concern only if referenced by the readers themselves. From an NSR perspective, literary interpretation is wholly contingent upon the socio-interactional context of a particular reading event or activity, and the most interesting aspect for analysis is the way these socio-interactional contexts (involving individual and group identities, for

instance) are produced and reflected in the discourse. Because reading groups and the other forms of reading-related interaction studied to date tend to occur at some time after the initial moment of reading, the language of the printed text tends not to be regarded as a significant influence over interpretation. Canning (this volume) is the first to examine a real-time reading group in which readers respond to a literary text as it is read aloud.

When compared with experimental work that can zone in on readers' responses to specific textual features, Swann and Allington (2009: 249) note that naturalistic data is not controlled by the analyst, so that they must 'follow the research participants' lead' and 'take reading as it comes'. As a result, Peplow and Carter suggest that naturalistic studies 'seem to have limited applicability for stylistics', partly because 'the readers in [NSR] studies tend not to focus on the kind of fine-grained textual analysis in which stylistics is typically interested' (2014: 451). Whilst this is an accurate account of naturalistic data, it is not a particularly accurate representation of the potential which naturalistic data holds for stylisticians. It would be wrong-headed to look to everyday discourse about reading in order to obtain access to 'fine-grained textual analysis': this kind of specialist analysis is what stylisticians can provide. Instead, from a stylistic point of view, naturalistic data is useful for gaining insights into the range of uses to which a particular text is put by particular readers in particular contexts. It is up to stylisticians to make a case for relating textual cues to such interpretations – to examine 'how text-immanent cues map on to the evaluations and interpretations revealed in the talk of group members' (Benwell, 2009: 312).

To date, in stylistics, naturalistic methods appear to be particularly compatible with cognitive stylistic (also called cognitive poetic) approaches to literary reading. Cognitive stylistics applies theories from cognitive linguistics and the cognitive sciences to a literary context, and

is regarded as a 'major evolution' in the treatment of readers in stylistics' (Carter and Stockwell, 2008: 298) because its frameworks model the interaction between linguistic form and a readers' mental processing. Some examples of the use of naturalistic data in cognitive stylistics include the use of internet reader response data in Gavins (2013), Harrison (2013), Nuttall (2015; this volume), Stockwell (2005, 2009) and Whiteley (2016); and studies of reading group discourse in Canning (this volume), Finn (2015), Norledge (2015) and Whiteley (2011, 2014, 2015, Peplow et al., 2016).

It might seem counterintuitive that a branch of stylistics so focused on the mind has such an attraction to rich, discursive data, which are usually temporally far removed from the initial moment of reading. But, naturalistic data is so attractive to cognitive stylisticians because of their grounding in cognitivism, which is characterised by a commitment to the study of 'experiential realism' (Stockwell, 2009: 2) and the activities and practices of 'natural readers' (Stockwell, 2005). Naturalistic data is used by cognitive stylisticians to gain an insight into the kinds of experiences which readers associate with particular texts, and to use these as a starting point for their textual analysis, often as a way of 'broadening the range of responses that stylistics tries to explain' (Myers, 2009: 338). Stockwell has argued that cognitive stylistics has the potential to make 'the discipline and institution of literature…more connected with the world outside university and college life' (2002:11), and the engagement with interpretative activity in contexts beyond university walls is one way of realising this aim.

Like experimental methods, naturalistic methods also have their limitations. They tend to result in the collection of large and complex datasets which require extensive interpretation on the part of the analyst. And like experimental methods, they also throw up questions about

the nature of 'reading', even when mediation or disruption from experimenter intervention is minimised. Swann and Allington characterise reading group discussions as 'one in a series of acts of reading for group members' (2009: 252, our emphasis), and Peplow et al. (2016, also Nuttall, this volume) refer to talk about books as a form of 'social reading'. Yet the relationships between the kinds of 'reading' performed in social contexts and the private, solitary, text-driven reading which is typically modelled by stylistic and literary analysis remain to be fully established (Long, 2003: 8; see Canning, this volume and Peplow et al., 2016: 36-8 for further discussion). With this data it is not possible to make solid claims about the influence of the printed matter of the text over the interpretations of readers: rather, the mapping between printed text and naturalistic data is something carried out by the analyst. Yet, as with experimental methods, naturalistic data also has the potential to generate worthwhile 'things for consideration that stylistic analysis cannot at present deal with' (Short and van Peer, 1989: 62).

As the above review has shown, research into reader response tends to take place in two separate and oppositional fields: experimental and naturalistic. Researchers in the empirical study of literature tend to limit their definition of empirical research to 'assertions that can be independently controlled through experiential tests' (Hakemulder and van Peer, 2015: 192), whilst researchers in the naturalistic study of reading are fundamentally opposed to the laboratory-based nature of such research (Swann and Allington, 2009: 248-49). We agree with Hall (2008) in asserting that both experimental and naturalistic approaches should be regarded as 'empirical', because both methodological orientations seek to evidence their claims about reader responses using data. Indeed, we go further to suggest that stylistics is the only discipline that can embrace both naturalistic and experimental methods and theories of readers and reading. We have organised the contributions to this volume in order to

encompass both experimental and naturalistic work, in order to demonstrate that reader response research in stylistics is methodologically eclectic and interdisciplinary (like so much good stylistics – see Carter and Stockwell, 2008: 300). The review has also proposed that stylistics, with its commitment to the study of textuality and its unique ability to describe the workings of style, has a great deal to contribute to the ongoing dialogues in reader response research. Reading is a complex, slippery phenomenon, and stylisticians' role in the study of reader response is to continually assert that one cannot study reading without proper attention to textuality. Below, we offer an overview of the articles in the special issue, before drawing out directions for future research.

3. Overview of the special issue

Above, we traced the origins of reader response research to the rise of the reader in literary criticism of the mid-late twentieth century, but noted that reader response critics did not collect data from actual readers in order to develop their claims. The first contribution to this special issue (West) argues that in fact the first experiments into reader response were those carried out by I. A. Richards in the 1920s and 30s. Offering a historical perspective on reader response research in stylistics, West traces Richards' influences and argues that his psychological investigations of reading are an important precursor to today's cognitive stylistics. He provides detailed discussions of Richards' methods and reflects on their implications for contemporary reader response research.

The remaining five articles are concerned with how readers perceive and evaluate texts, and draw on a range of reader response data in their examination of these phenomena. Cui,

Castiglione and Kuzmičová et al. are concerned with readers' perceptions of difficulty, point of view, and literariness, whilst Canning and Nuttall are interested in how these perceptions and evaluations fulfil social and interpersonal functions in online book reviews or shared reading situations.

Castiglione points out that stylistic work on difficulty has tended to rely on introspection rather than empirical observation of the responses of a wider pool of readers. Engaging with previous stylistic work on difficulty, he describes an experiment which uses psycholinguistic software to test stylistically-derived predictions about the difficulty of poetic texts using real readers. He focuses here on the role of narrativity in poetic difficulty, finding evidence to support the hypothesis that the existence of prototypical narrative features reduces the 'difficulty' of a poem (as measured by reading times). His work uses quantitative reader response data to inform a comparative stylistic analysis of seven poems which seeks to account for the different reading speeds exhibited for the poems. He argues that empirical stylistics is ideal for mediating between the study of poetic texture and the study of readerly experience.

Cui discusses a qualitative and quantitative study of readers' responses to shifts in narrative point of view in an extract from To The Lighthouse. Her methods combine the collection of online reading statistics (recording reading times) with the investigation of readerly perceptions and attitudes (using rating questionnaires). She finds that shifts in point of view affect readers' textual processing in different ways – either by slowing their reading time or increasing the sense of difficulty they attribute to the passage. These findings bolster existing critical opinion about the complexity of Woolf's style, and also suggest that textual effects may manifest differently for different readers or in different readings of a passage. She

concludes that the 'challenge' (p. X) posed to readers by viewpoint shifting suggests that more consideration should be given to the aesthetic function of viewpoint shifts in literary works. The intricate analysis of viewpoint shifting and its presumed effects on readers is a staple in stylistic work, and empirical investigations of this kind add further nuance to our understanding of how they affect the reading process. The focus on difficulty and challenge is interesting because it taps into experiential aspects of reading which are minimised by the re-reading involved in close stylistic analysis.

Indeed, both Castiglione and Cui's reader response research offers interesting new perspectives on difficulty. Both these approaches define 'difficulty' as existing in the interaction between individual readers and particular textual features, and as an experience which has a duration through time and can manifest in both attitudes and reading speed. As Short and van Peer (1989) point out, although a stylistician may present their analysis as though reading a text line-by-line for the first time, in fact they will have re-read many times during the conduct of their analysis. Sensations of difficulty are likely to be eroded or irrevocably altered through such analysis, and therefore the study of perceptions of difficulty in other readers, who are grappling with the text's language for the first or second time, can offer a fresh perspective on the text, so that analysts can triangulate their academic reading with more immediate responses.

Kuzmičová, Mangen, Støle and Begnum's contribution shows reader response research being used to probe complex stylistic and experiential features of reading, in an examination of the relationship between literariness and empathy. Their study is situated in dialogue with a raft of existing non-stylistic experimental work that has sought to examine the connection between literary reading and empathy, but has done so using largely quantitative methods and

with no stylistic awareness of their textual stimuli (e.g. Kidd and Castano 2013). Conversely, Kuzmičová et al. combine quantitative and qualitative methods and offer a stylistically-aware contribution to this seam of research. Using a Norwegian translation of Katherine Mansfield's 'The Fly', which forms their 'literary' condition, they employ a published author to adjust its style and reduce its stylistic foregrounding, with the modified text forming the 'non-literary' condition. They administer a range of open and closed questionnaires in order to measure readers' responses to the two conditions. Interestingly, their findings contradict recent, well-publicised reports 'that literary fiction is better suited than other genres for prompting empathy' (p.X), with the 'non-literary' form evoking more empathic responses from readers. Their discussion goes further to complicate the binary distinctions which are often drawn between literary and non-literary texts in this kind of work, and reflects upon the nature of empathy in literary reading. They also suggest that subjects' awareness of appropriate reading practices may have influenced their responses, something which is rarely acknowledged in experimental paradigms, before suggesting greater integration is needed between experimental and naturalistic approaches.

The final two articles employ naturalistic methods in their examination of reader response, and take a cognitive stylistic approach to literary texts. Drawing on data which reflects reading in particular social contexts: an online book review site and a real-time shared reading group, both Nuttall and Canning argue for the influence of textuality in readers' interpretations whilst maintaining a clear awareness of the embedment of interpretation within a particular socio-interactional context.

Nuttall analyses a sample of 150 online book reviews from the reading-based social network Goodreads and considers how reviewers discursively position themselves in relation to the

moral conundrum posed by Shriver's novel We Need to Talk About Kevin. The novel has an epistolary form and is told from the point of view of a mother whose fifteen-year-old son violently murders nine people in a high-school shooting. Nuttall observes that the book reviewers attribute blame for Kevin's actions to the various fictional characters and engage in rich mind-modelling inferencing (Stockwell, 2009) in the articulation of a particular perspective on the novel. Nuttall also analyses the narrative structure of the novel using Text World Theory in order to offer a text-driven account of the interpretative possibilities exhibited in the data, and proposes that the notion of 'construal' in Cognitive Grammar be applied to better describe the different configurations of blame exhibited across her reader response data.

Canning offers the first stylistic consideration of the interpretative activity performed in a 'real-time reading group', which was led as part of her 'read.live.learn' project in Hydebank Wood, Northern Ireland's only female prison. Real-time reading groups involve a facilitator who reads prose or poetry aloud pausing often to allow and encourage responses from within the group (and have been popularised by the The Reader Organisation's 'Get Into Reading' project in Liverpool). Using field notes from a particular session, Canning discusses the prisoners' responses to 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin. She uses Text World Theory to offer a cognitive stylistic analysis of the text's narrative structure before examining the readers' reactions to the text at particular points in the story. As well as considering the collaborative interpretations developed through the groups' interactions, Canning focuses in particular on one woman's transformative reading experience, arguing that Text World Theory tends not to capture the 'bi-directionality' of literary reading in which literature and life intermingle.

4. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The intention of this special issue is, amongst other things, to capture a range of approaches that reflect the productive diversity of reader response research in stylistics. As diverse as the articles included here are, they are all motivated by a common desire to understand more about how style affects how (and what) we read. Moreover, we advocate for the same diversity in methodological approach. In representing uses of quantitative and qualitative data and experimental and naturalistic methods we have sought to make a case for a more holistic, less restrictive approach to reader response research, and to demonstrate that while there is something here for everyone, there certainly need not be a 'one size fits all' approach. We hope that this collection of studies encourages future researchers to consider a more cohesive mix of empirical and naturalistic methodology than has traditionally been the case.

Another point worth raising here is that even within reader response research, 'the reader' remains a problematic concept, not least because it often merely just that - a concept. Different approaches to reader response theorise readers and reading contexts differently, and all have a tendency to homogenise 'readers' in some way – be it stylisticians making claims about what readers will take from a text, experimental methods characterising readers through set measures, or naturalistic methods characterising readers through theories of identity and interaction. We believe it is vital that stylisticians remain open to heterogeneous definitions of 'the reader', as long as language and text continue to be a feature of any investigation, as the contributions to this special issue show.

There is much to be learned from continuing to integrate approaches to reader response research and expand current analytical interests beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries; for example, research in reader response is being carried out in such diverse contexts as pedagogical environments and the workplace (see for example Fialho et al., 2016; Giovanelli and Mason, 2015; Hakemulder et al., 2016; Olinger, 2014; Mason, 2016; Warner, 2014). Collaborations such as the special interest group and interdisciplinary projects, for example, working with criminologists to assess the impact of reading literature in prisons on prisoner wellbeing and prosocial behaviour, or with sociololinguists to explore the impact of politeness in reading group discourse and interpersonal relationships, can advance the role of stylistics beyond its current disciplinary and methodological parameters.

Stylistics is well-positioned to make a significant contribution to the inherently social domain of reader response and this special issue is intended to raise awareness of the potential of research in this rapidly expanding field, and to provoke further dialogue regarding its practice and parameters. In future, we would like to see the development of a reader response 'toolkit' that matches that used by stylisticians in the study of text. It is our aim to foreground the importance of considering not just texts, but readers of texts in their various guises, without whom, texts are merely objects and stylistic analyses will never be held up to scrutiny.

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