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Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse, by Anita Naciscione,
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This is an important book, one written on those peculiarly difficult, and particularly fruitful, borderlands of psychology, linguistics and literary studies. Its subject is the phraseological unit (or PU), which Naciscione defines as “a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning” (p. 8), such as *all is fair in love and war* or *your home is your castle* (Naciscione provides a comprehensive list of phraseological units to which she makes reference in the book). It should be of particular interest to teachers of English because, as Naciscione demonstrates again and again, in ever subtler and illuminating readings, PUs saturate language in general, and literary texts in particular, with writers adopting and adapting them to construct or grasp complex meanings and to achieve certain effects in the reader. Without an understanding of what these PUs are, and the principles according to which they work, it is therefore often difficult to understand the linguistic complexities of literary texts. A text such as D.H. Lawrence’s short story “Rawdon’s Roof”, for example, is founded on, and saturated in, the common PU *under one’s/someone’s roof*, with the PU recurring in different forms and with different meanings throughout the text. Indeed, the short story can be read – perhaps should be read – as an exercise by Lawrence in exploring the possibilities and limitations of such figurative language.

Located very firmly within the tradition of research on phraseology, Naciscione’s book nonetheless challenges or extends this tradition in four different ways. First, Naciscione works on the elaboration of “key terminology and theoretical concepts in phraseology in general, and in stylistic use of phraseological units in discourse in particular” (p. 8). Work on phraseology

began in earnest in the 1990s (the European Society of Phraseology, or EUROPHRAS, was established in 1999) and, since then, there has been a real proliferation of work in the area, with the unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable, consequence that there is now, as Naciscione points out, “an abundance of various existing controversial terms” (p. 8). Naciscione writes her book, then, in an attempt to achieve a degree of terminological clarity, and she introduces three basic terms to describe different levels of the PU. One, the PU’s *base form*, which is “an archetypal conception”, “a decontextualised unit of language, stored in the dictionary or the long-term memory of the language user, accessed when a discourse situation calls for it” (p. 8). For example, when, in Edmund Gosse’s autobiographical novel *Father and Son* (1907), the narrator comments that he decided to “let sleeping dogmas lie” (Gosse 1907/1983, p. 185), we automatically think of the PU that it is based on (*to let sleeping dogs lie*), and know what this PU means, without its being realised lexically. Two, its *core use*, which, for Naciscione, is use of the PU in its “most common form and meaning”, such use therefore being “largely predictable” and offering “neither novelty nor surprise” (p. 8). Had Gosse’s narrator commented that he had decided to let sleeping dogs lie, then that would be an example of core use of the PU.

Third, and most importantly, Naciscione introduces the term *instantial stylistic use*, by which she means “a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a phraseological unit in discourse resulting in significant changes in its form and meaning determined by the thought and the context”, such use being “a boundless resource for writer or speaker creativity” (p. 8). Again, Gosse’s narrator’s comment that he decided to “let sleeping dogmas lie” is a fine example of such use. It draws and depends on our knowledge of the base form; it changes the form and meaning of the PU’s core use by replacing *dog* with *dogma* (the phonetic similarities between the two nouns are crucial, of course); it is unique, since it fits perfectly the particular thought and context in which it is used (the narrator is commenting on the fact that his intensely religious and

fiercely dogmatic father had forgotten to remind him that he should speak to his friends, “in season and out of season, of the Blood of Jesus”, and that he was not going to remind him); and it is hugely creative and witty, and therefore extremely memorable (I read the novel once, some thirty years ago, and still remember this passage and the gasp of astonishment that it precipitated). Moreover, in introducing the concept of the *pattern of stylistic use*, Naciscione also manages to show that “far more regularity exists in the instancial stylistic use of phraseological units than has been previously believed”, and she points to “a set of common features and rules of instancial use” of PUs, such as “extended metaphor, punning, allusion, or reiteration and their innumerable combinations” (p. 9). (In the Gosse example, I guess we are talking about both punning and allusion). In other words, such use – and, indeed, creativity itself – is not random or irregular, but, rather, works according to certain patterns of “mental technique”, and Naciscione does much in her book to uncover and explore these patterns. Crucially, Naciscione explores the use of PUs not only within a single sentence, but also across sentences, at the discourse level within a whole text, and shows that a PU can afford a text cohesion and coherence – precisely as it does in Lawrence’s “Rawdon’s Roof”, in fact.

The second way in which Naciscione challenges the current state of phraseological research is in her insistence that PUs are not purely linguistic phenomena (as Saussurian and Chomskyan linguists would aver), but are, like all uses of language, cognitive at root. Language, in other words, as cognitive linguists are right to argue, is a phenomenon of mind, and can therefore only be understood, finally, as a manifestation of cognitive processes. All PUs in their base form are a product of how our minds work, and in particular of how we understand things abstract or schematic in terms of things real or physical. For example, we can use the PU *to let sleeping dogs lie* to describe a situation in which we do not mention something for fear of arousing some force which might be dangerous to us, with the sleeping dogs acting as a metaphor for that

potentially dangerous force. There is a huge disparity between the abstract situation in which we find ourselves and the concrete experience of seeing dogs sleeping, but we know effortlessly what the PU means because we know that a dog can be a dangerous animal, particularly when roused from sleep (*to let sleeping sheep lie* would not work, of course). PUs are therefore cognitive because they are based on our fundamental cognitive ability – perhaps the most fundamental cognitive ability of all – to understand the abstract in terms of the concrete (this is the reason that we see time in terms of space, incidentally). What writers do when they make instantial stylistic use of a PU – in other words, when they use a PU creatively, as Gosse does – is call on the reader to perform additional cognitive processes in order to understand the PU in its new, unique form and meaning, and it is in the performance of this extra cognitive process that the value, pleasure and power of literature resides. The creative use of PUs is not restricted to literature, though, as Naciscione demonstrates throughout her book, but is a feature of other aesthetic forms, such as visual representations, and also of advertising and other, everyday uses of language (such as jokes). In basing her analysis of PUs within the framework of cognitive linguistics, Naciscione is able to uncover the cognitive aspects of instantial use, and to demonstrate the role of such cognitive processes in our involvement with PUs such as long-term memory and working memory, and the processes of identification (perception, recognition, comprehension and interpretation). And, in doing so, she is able to show also that instantial stylistic use is not (as traditional linguists such as Chomsky would suggest) “a mere deviation, a distortion, a violation, or a strange exception”, but something rooted in our very cognitive make-up (p. 9).

Third, and relatedly, Naciscione provides a diachronic perspective on the stylistic use of PUs, and discloses “cross-century stability of patterns of figurative use” (p. 10). Thus, Chaucer drew creatively on PUs in much the same way as D.H. Lawrence (these are the two writers that Naciscione discusses most

in her book), and in much the same way as advertising copyists do today. This cross-century stability is inevitable, and indeed proves Naciscione's central argument, for how our minds work today, as members of the human species, is broadly similar to how our minds worked many centuries ago. Such a diachronic approach enables Naciscione to perceive fundamental connections between writers separated by vast expanses of time (to use the TIME IS SPACE metaphor), and to raise important questions as to the nature and function of literature in the world of human, cognitive beings.

Fourth, and finally, in her final long and exhilarating chapter, Naciscione argues for an "applied stylistics", for a field of special interest which will develop the language user's stylistic competence in the diverse fields of teaching language and literature, translation, lexicography, visual representation and advertising (p. 10). Such training in stylistic awareness, and in particular in our awareness of how PUs work, in both their core and instancial stylistic use, will lead, Naciscione hopes, "to significant gains in stylistic literacy", which itself will result in "functional ability to use stylistic skills sufficiently well for applied purposes and activities" (p. 10). In other words, if we learn better how language works to make us think and feel certain things, and behave in certain ways, then we will become better – more creative and critical – readers and writers of language. Developing this awareness of language, and of how we experience language, is something which I.A. Richards argued for almost a century ago (in *Practical Criticism* (1929), for example), but is something which is certainly not taught by the vast majority of teachers of English, at school or university level, today – to the great detriment and shame of the profession of English.

Naciscione's book is at the forefront of research into phraseology, but its approach – cognitive, diachronic, applied, stylistic – makes it relevant and interesting in the field of literary studies, too. If we want to make the subject of English relevant and important again, then we need to adopt a similar approach

to Naciscione's and to see literary texts as linguistic products of human minds. Naciscione's book is an invitation to begin that process of renewal of our subject.

References

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David West is currently taking time out from the travails of academic life to look after his three small children, but he will soon be looking to re-enter the academic world, before the patience of his children expires. His book *I.A. Richards and the Rise of Cognitive Stylistics* will be published by Continuum in January 2013.