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Literary Language and Ordinary Language

Does literature have a language of its own, perhaps rather unrepresentative of, or rather different from, ordinary language (e.g. old-fashioned, obscure, pretentious, generally ‘difficult’)? The simple answer to this old question is no, there is nothing uniquely different about the language of literature. But a fuller answer will reveal why the language to be found in literary texts is often particularly interesting for language learners. Of the three broad areas surveyed in Part 1, culture and curriculum (Chapter 2), reading of literature (Chapter 3) and the language of literature (this chapter), research to date has told us most about the language of literature. This is a well-researched area, and some issues and conclusions are already relatively well defined, though ongoing research, particularly in corpus linguistics, is also opening up fascinating new dimensions of the topic.

- there is no clear and obvious literary/non-literary divide to be defined on strictly linguistic principles;
- literary language cuts across dichotomies like spoken/ written (oral/ literate) and formal/ informal;
- creativity may be a larger category than the literary, and with more explanatory power across both literary and more everyday discourses;
- it is now recognised that discourse types such as metaphor or narrative are central to all language use, whether literary, professional or more everyday spoken interactions;
- literature, especially modern literature, is a kind of writing unusually, perhaps distinctively, tolerant of linguistic variety, including incorporation of many features of spoken language.

This chapter reports five influential areas of research into literary language:

- ‘literariness’ in Russian, Czech and other ‘Formalist’ writings;
- oracy and literacy, and variety, including corpus linguistic findings;
- linguistic creativity: metaphor, idiom and formulaicity;
• the study of narrative;
• dialogics: literature as discourse (language in use).

Paradoxically, the study of literary language has indirectly provoked a better understanding of language and language use as a whole, just as diverse areas of descriptive linguistics, cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis have unexpectedly shown us the pervasively poetic and creative nature of everyday language use. Far from a peripheral concern, in sum, language used in literature is in many ways central to understanding language and language use in more general terms. Literature is made of, from and with ordinary language, which is itself already surprisingly literary. In so far as literature exists as an identifiable linguistic phenomenon, independent of readers and contexts of reading (Chapters 2 and 3), ‘literariness’ is a matter of degree rather than kind:

**Quote 1.1 Literary language**

Features of language use more normally associated with literary contexts are found in what are conventionally thought of as non-literary contexts. It is for this reason that the term literariness is preferred to any term which suggests an absolute division between literary and non-literary. It is, in our view, more accurate to speak of degrees of literariness in language use.

(Carter and Nash 1990: 18; also quoted and discussed in Verdonk 2002)

Common sense nevertheless traditionally opposes a stereotype of ‘literary’ language to ordinary language. Literary language in this view is flowery (or, more positively, ‘elevated’), unusually figurative, often old-fashioned and difficult to understand, and indirect (for example, ‘symbolic’); all in all totally unlike the language we use and encounter in everyday life. Our prototype of literary language is perhaps obscure modernist poetry. Where everyday language is used to exchange information, we tend to think, literary language has designs on our souls and deals with metaphysical ideas or ethical dilemmas. Readers and teachers of literature will recognise a limited validity to these kinds of charges. Those who resist the introduction of literary texts into language learning classrooms have often relied on such characterisations of literary language, as have those who wish to preserve their own literary turf. Those who advocate literature in language classrooms need to be able to offer an informed response to these charges of linguistic irrelevance and inappropriate difficulty.

In practice, as we shall see, research has found it difficult to identify any clear boundaries between literary and non-literary uses of language, or to catalogue any definitive list of distinguishing features. Although some tendencies undoubtedly emerge from linguistic investigations into the language of literary texts, even these do not quite conform to the stereotype with which