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De stijl van gewoon proza

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Summary

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Introduction

The introductory chapter of this dissertation stated that reintroducing Literary stylistics as a research discipline in the Netherlands is one of the main goals of this book. In that same chapter it also quickly became clear that 'Literary stylistics' is a container word, bringing together many related approaches to the analysis of style. In this dissertation, one specific approach within the broad field of stylistics is highlighted. Thus, the literary stylistics practiced in this book is emphatically not the 'only' or the 'only valid' approach. The specific theoretical and methodological principles of my research have been determined by my object of study: 'ordinary prose' in a set of modern Dutch novels, prose that is not characterized by extraordinary features such as style figures or tropes.

In this summary, the main results of the research performed in this dissertation are presented in the form of answers to the four research questions that were introduced in chapter 1:

1. In what way can literary stylistics be practiced?
2. In what way can linguistic-stylistic analysis give a scientific foundation to informal statements about style?
3. In what way can the relationship between style and theme of a novel be investigated?
4. In what way can quantitative data be used in stylistic analysis?

1. In what way can literary stylistics be practiced?

The fact that the field of Stylistics covers a broad array of research disciplines, provides the starting point for answering the first research question. In order to get started with stylistic analysis, fundamental choices need to be made regarding the study's goal, its object and the phrasing of the research question.

Firstly, it is important to note that stylistic analysis can be performed with many possible goals in mind. If a researcher is interested in readers' responses to a literary text, and the way meaning is attributed to texts, Cognitive stylistics is the appropriate domain of research; and still further choices need to be made, for subdisciplines like *text world theory, blending theory, schema theory* or *reader response* experiments. If the goal is author identification, Stylometrics will be the method of choice. Corpus stylistics on the other hand, is a suitable research method for those who want to study the occurrence of a specific stylistic feature in different genres, for instance whether speech and thought representation (STR) in literary texts differs from STR in newspaper articles. If the researcher is interested in investigating the relationship between style and literary interpretation, several other subdisciplines (such as *foregrounding theory, figure-ground analysis* or grammatical analysis) are at his disposal. Since this dissertation has centered upon investigating the relationship between linguistic style and literary interpretation, corpus stylistics and stylometrics were judged to be less suitable approaches (chapter 6).

Secondly, fundamental choices also need to be made regarding the object of study. The object of study of this dissertation was determined by the realization that prose is less often the object of stylistic analysis than poetry; and furthermore by the fact that whenever prose is stylistically analyzed, attention almost always goes out to *foregrounded* language use (chapter 4, see also Lanham 2003). By contrast, this dissertation sheds light on more *transparent* types of language use. Furthermore, the choice has been made to analyze specific grammatical features. My research is related to that of a relatively small group of stylistic researchers who analyze and describe the stylistic effect of rather inconspicuous grammatical features, such as sentence construction or the use of subordinate clauses (for instance Overdiep 1946, Leuvensteijn & Wattel 2002 and 2008, Toolan 2010). My choice for stylistic analysis of grammatical features stemmed from the wish to reconnect literary studies and linguistic analysis, two disciplines that have grown apart in Netherlandic studies since the 1960's (Introduction, chapter 1 and 2). In this way, it was my aim to continue the tradition of literary-linguistic analysis that was present in Netherlandic studies in the 1930's and 1940's (by G.S. Overdiep and others, see chapter 3) with a 21st century approach.

My decision to focus on the relationship between style and literary interpretation also entailed consequences for the amount of data that was analyzed in this dissertation. Jeffries & McIntyre point out that it is not possible to indicate in general terms how many texts a stylistician should use:

> The question of how much data and what kind of data should be analysed is difficult to answer in general terms as it is dependent on the research questions, the methodology and the tools of analysis to be used. In qualitative studies, the more data to be collected, the more sparse the analysis will be to cover it all. Conversely, a study looking only at one linguistic feature (such as speech presentation) will be able to cover a larger collection of texts than one where a number of tools of analysis are to be used (Jeffries & McIntyre 2010, 174).

Because it is my aim to investigate how style and literary interpretation interrelate, the unit of interpretation in this study is formed by an entire short story or a novel. As a consequence, the number of texts in the corpus is limited: two short stories by Jan Arends and Maarten Biesheuvel, and a comparison of stylistic features in Arnon Grunberg's novel *The asylum seeker* with features in *The darkness that divides us* by Renate Dorrestein and Hafid Bouazza's *Paravion*. It was not my purpose to analyze certain language features in a broad spectrum of texts; instead, I investigated a limited number of linguistic features per novel and their effect on the literary interpretation of the texts involved. As a consequence, a limited amount of literary texts proved sufficient for my research.

Thirdly, the importance of a good research question in stylistic research cannot be emphasized enough. In chapter 7 it became clear that literary-linguistic analysis with the purpose of investigating the relationship between style and theme cannot take place without a prior hypothesis (*top-down* research). Without a hypothesis, listing and describing all stylistic features of a novel or short stories would first of all be an immense task, and secondly it is unclear what purpose charting such an indiscriminate amount of features would serve. It is possible to use the Checklist of Dutch stylistic features (see paragraph 7.3) to chart potentially relevant language features, but after this heuristic phase has been completed, a hypothesis is needed to further investigate the workings of the selected language features in a particular texts.

In this dissertation, two different approaches have been used to set up hypotheses. The first approach starts out from statements in literary reviews about the particular style of a particular writer. In chapter 8 statements from reviews give rise to hypotheses about the style of the two stories 'The breakfast' by Jan Arends and 'Mr. Mellenberg' by Maarten Biesheuvel. The main research question investigates in what way statements by literary critics can be related to linguistic features of the reviewed novels.

The second approach (used in chapter 9) to formulating a research question starts out from literary analysis and interpretation of a novel. In this type of research it is investigated how the theme of a novel is also expressed in its style. In chapter 9 for instance, the main hypothesis centers on the issue in what way the 'standstill' that is thematically present in *The asylum seeker* by Arnon Grunberg, is also present stylistically.

By formulating specific hypotheses, the scope of the research is further confined. The stylistic investigations in chapters 8 and 9 have by no means resulted in complete or exhaustive analysis. If another research question had been chosen, different stylistic features might have come into play, and the result would have been a different stylistic analysis. A single text can give rise to multiple, complementary, stylistic research questions. The best illustration of the consequences of choosing a particular research question can be found in chapter 9. In that chapter, the main hypothesis was basid on the theme of the novel *The asylum seeker*. Had not that novel been the starting point, but if the theme of *Paravion* had been chosen, this would have given rise to a completely different stylistic investigation. The analysis would then have been based on the theme and style of *Paravion* instead of *The asylum seeker.*

Once a clear stylistic hypothesis has been established, attention should turn to the choice for a particular research method. This topic pertains to the second and third research question of this dissertation, repeated here for ease of reference:

2. In what way can linguistic-stylistic analysis give a scientific foundation to informal statements about style?
3. In what way can the relationship between style and theme of a novel be investigated?

These two research questions will be discussed in two different ways. In this paragraph they will firstly be discussed from a methodological perspective, by way of a summary of part I of this dissertation (Theoretical and methodological principles, chapters 2-7). Below, in paragraph 2 and 3 of this summary, these research questions will be discussed retrospectively, in light of the research results from chapters 8 and 9 (Part II of this dissertation).

After the research goal, object of study and main research question have been established, the search for the right research method commences. In what way should the stylistic analysis be approached? It is important to point out that there is no universal stylistic 'method'. Each individual text sparks off not only its own research question, but also its own research method. Stylistics is essentially an eclectic research discipline, that makes use of various insights and research methods from the field of (cognitive) linguistics. As Jeffries & McIntyre (2010, 170) explain, this appeal on various strands of research and methods is not a shortcoming in Stylistics: 'This eclecticism is not a weakness, but a theoretically-legitimate strength. The purpose of theories is to shed light on the subject under consideration […].' There is no way of knowing beforehand what linguistic theories will be needed: in the analysis of the Arends and Biesheuvel stories the research question led to an investigation of subordinate clauses, and cognitive linguistic insights on use and function of complement clauses provided helpful clues in explaining the stylistic effects of their sentences (chapter 8). In Grunberg's *The asylum seeker* the hypotheses resulted in an analysis of sentence aspect and verb use. A different branch of linguistics, a Halliday-inspired transitivity analysis, was used to analyze these stylistic features (chapter 9). In both cases, quantitative as well as qualitative research was performed.

The consequence of the fact that every stylistic analysis follows its own, singular path, is the obligation on the researcher to carefully account for each step he takes in his investigation. Accountability is required in order to meet the research demands of objectivity, verifiability and replicability. As a result, the case studies in Part II of this dissertation extensively explain the *process* of stylistic analysis, from phrasing the research question, via the choice for a specific research method to the interpretation of the data.

Because of the key role that accountability plays in this book, Part I of this dissertation is devoted entirely to a discussion of theoretical and methodological principles. Chapter 2 discusses the empirical basis of stylistic research. Statements on style should be objective (or at least intersubjective) and verifiable. Objectivity and verifiability can be achieved by basing statements on consensus between

language users, by using (cognitive-)linguistic research to analyze the data, and by comparing expressions with alternative ways of phrasing. Chapter 2 explains that comparative research has proven to be more useful than comparing stylistic features in a particular text with a 'universal norm' or 'average'. This is most of all because in most cases there is no 'universal norm' available to which an individual expression can be compared (it would take a lot of data to create such a universal norm). Furthermore, even if a 'norm' or statistical 'average' were available, comparing a specific text to the average does not always yield useful results.

Chapter 2 also discussed the distinction between authorial and textual style. This dissertation centers on textual style and does not intend to make statements about the style of a particular author. Also, the concept is stressed that there is no one-to-one relationship between language feature and stylistic effect (see also chapter 9). Context – such as the content of the novel, theme and other stylistic features – is a key factor in interpreting the stylistic effect of a linguistic element.

Chapter 3 set out to answer the question why the practice of 'literary linguistics' that flourished until the mid-1950's (with Stutterheim, Hellinga and Overdiep as key figures) was discontinued in Netherlandic studies. One of the main findings of this chapter was that 'linguistic analysis of literary texts' and 'structural analysis' used to be synonyms and that both concepts designate the wish to model literary research according to the principles of structural linguistics. Structural linguistics was the dominant linguistic research method of the first half of the twentieth century and was seen as a scientifically well-founded research discipline. Literary studies adapted the structural linguistic distinction between *langue* and *parole* for its own use, and strove to investigate the underlying 'structure' of literary texts. Biographical or psychological interpretations of texts were discarded in favor of a study of the literary text itself. Contrary to what one would expect, this 'linguistic approach to literature' did *not* entail close attention to grammatical (linguistic) phenomena in texts. An exception can be found in the works of Gerrit Overdiep, whose isolated position made him less than influential. Overdiep studied grammatical choices in ordinary phrases and the effect of those language choices on sentence interpretation. But he was an exception to the rule. Chapter 3 explained that in what became known in Netherlandic studies as 'structural analysis', all attention centered on *foregrounding* in language (most often in poetry, for instance in the work of Stutterheim and Hellinga), resulting in a lack of attention for 'ordinary prose'.

Chapter 4 discussed the problematic distinction between 'ordinary' and 'deviant' language use in prose. Even in stylistic analysis of prose, deviant language features are more likely to be studied than transparent texts. This became clear from an analysis of the concept of '*mind style*' (Leech & Short 2007, 151). *Mind style* is a helpful concept to describe deviant conceptualisations, made by 'special' literary characters: characters who have an incomplete grasp on reality or who show a lack of understanding of their environment, such as children, mentally disabled persons or psychiatric patients. The deviant conceptualisations of reality caused by the *mind style* of such a character will to some extent lead to *foregrounded* language use. Chapter 4 showed that the concept of *mind style* does not work properly in cases where the main character does *not* show a deviant conceptualisation of reality, and where the

language use is relatively transparent. However, paragraph 4.4 pointed out that *transparent* language too is able to construe a specific conceptualisation of reality. In this paragraph, the linguistic concept of *construal* was introduced (see also chapter 7). Systematic language choices, even in transparent language, invoke stylistic effects that cannot be captured in terms of *mind style*. *Mind style* is not able to describe situations in which there is no deviant conceptualization of the world. Besides that, the concept of *mind style* puts too great an emphasis on the relation between style and literary character, whereas in this dissertation the focus is on the relationship between style and theme.

Chapter 5 illustrates how stylistics can add to existing narratological methods of analyzing perspective and focalization. In this chapter, it was found that Stanzel's four categories of perspective in fact were big 'catch-all' containers in which many different ways of narrating were grouped together, *bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble*. In this chapter, I set out to show the additional value of a linguistic-stylistic approach to current narratological theories on perspective and focalization (Stanzel and Bal). Especially Paul Simpson's analysis of modal grammar in point of view provides a much needed specification. Simpson provides a method of characterizing narrator and character stances in particular novels as 'positive', 'neutral' and 'negative', based on the linguistic features (modality) used to characterize those narrators or characters. Simpsons modal analysis of point of view provides more than just a categorization. Simpson also relates form to function, by explaining the possible effects of choices in point of view (negative, neutral, positive) on the interpretation of a text. The linking of form and function of choices in point of view is a much needed addition to existing theories of focalization and perspective.

The use of quantitative data adds to the reliability and precision of stylistic analysis. For this reason, chapter 6 was devoted to a discussion of the added value of quantitative research in stylistics (see also chapter 8 and 9). Two main benefits were presented. 'Counting' linguistic phenomena first of all contributes to literary analysis in that those numbers provide an objective way of assessing, supporting or correcting intuitive stylistic judgments made by literary researchers. Secondly, quantitative research serves an important heuristic function: quantitative data can give clues about certain linguistic features that initially (in qualitative analysis) did not stand out.

On the other hand, quantitative research also has its limitations. First of all, the possibilities for using computational techniques in this dissertation proved to be limited. Several of the linguistic features I investigated – verb use, aspect, types of subordinate clauses – could not be counted 'automatically' (for instance with a software programme for computational analysis, such as Wordsmith). Categories like 'action verb', 'static verb' and 'verb of cognition' cannot not be automatically detected; interpretation by a researcher is needed to establish which verb belongs to which category. Another feature that turned out to be hard to quantify was *aspect*, a linguistic feature that is dependent on the interrelationship of verb, noun and temporal adverbs. Counting these types of features therefore remains a task for humans instead of computers.

Chapter 7 explored the cognitive-linguistic background of this dissertation. It explored the cognitive-linguistic principle of *construal* and discussed the added value and the limitations of the Leech & Short Checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories. Like chapter 6, this chapter continues

to stress the importance of interpretation before, during and after categorizing linguistic elements according to the Leech & Short Checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories. Some textual features, like sentence length, number of adjectives, main clauses or types of subordinate clauses can be distinguished and categorized easily. But other categories (like 'evaluative/emotive adjectives' or 'modality') are more open to interpretation. The Checklist is a valuable heuristic tool, but it does not tell you *how* to categorize, and it doesn't tell you how to interpret the data you found either. That task lies heavily on the shoulders of the stylistic researcher, who needs to conscientiously report on the process of his decisions and interpretations to ensure the objectivity, the verifiability and the replicability of his research. This process is extensively shown in the stylistic case studies in Part II of this dissertation. In the remaining paraphraphs below, the results of these case studies are examined in light of the research questions 2, 3 and 4 above.

2. In what way can linguistic-stylistic analysis give a scientific foundation to informal statements about style?

The main research question of chapter 8 asked in what way statements in literary reviews on the style of 'The breakfast' by Jan Arends and 'Mr. Mellenberg' by Maarten Biesheuvel could be linked to certain linguistic features in those short stories. The oppositions of 'simple' vs. 'complex' and 'objective' vs. 'subjective' gave rise to two hypotheses that investigated Arends' simple, neutral-seeming style and Biesheuvel's subjective and chaotic point of view. The starting point was formed by a grammatical analysis of sentence constructions in both stories. Sentence length, the ratio of simple and complex sentences, (deviant) sentence constructions (juxtaposition, coordination and subordination) and the number and type of subordinate clauses were investigated.

The analysis mainly showed that numerical data only can give so much information. Qualitative analysis into specific type and function of the subordinate clauses was necessary to shed more light on the quantitative data. In Biesheuvel's 'Mr. Mellenberg' the absence of explicit causal relationships, an enumerative style and a predominance of coordinated sentences turned out to be the main factors in creating a literary effect of chaos. Arends' short sentences with their strong cohesion and coherence, and a temporal and causal description of events contributed to the effects of simplicity and clarity his readers experienced.

Nevertheless, 'objectivity' turned out to be a problematic concept. The analysis of effects of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' in Chapter 8 showed a discrepancy between everyday language use of these concepts and the way they are utilized in Cognitive linguistics (a.o. Langacker 1990, Verhagen 2005). Readers characterize Arends' story 'The breakfast' als 'objective', because the narrator mainly seems to be describing events that can be observed by anyone. Stylistic analysis of sentence constructions and other stylistic features – such as impersonal complement clauses, modality and as-if sentences – reveals that this narrator is in fact manipulative and interpreting. As a result, the analysis in Chapter 8 ended in the paradoxal conclusion that the seemingly objective narrator in 'The breakfast' is in fact *more subjective* than the psychiatric patient that narrates the story of 'Mr. Mellenberg'. Because it is

made explicit to the reader that the narrator of Mr. Mellenberg is 'insane', the reader knows exactly how to interpret his behavior and perspective on the events. Chapter 8 introduced the distinction between explicit (Biesheuvel) and implicit subjectivity (Arends), as an addition to the categorization first made by Anbeek & Verhagen (2001) between 'objective' (Voskuil) and 'subjective' (Van der Heijden) language use.

Despite the comparative nature of the stylistic analysis (Biesheuvel vs. Arends), in practice one of the texts always turned out to be the center of investigation, while the other one was used as a means of comparison. This was in part caused by the phrasing of the research question: 'What linguistic features are responsible for the effect of 'chaos' and 'confusion' in Biesheuvel's story?' puts 'Mr. Mellenberg at the center of attention in paragraph 8.4. This skewedness was corrected by using 'The breakfast' as a starting point in paragraph 8.5 ('What are the causes of the impressions of objectivity in 'The breakfast'?).

3. In what way can the relationship between style and theme of a novel be investigated?

Chapter 9 also presents a comparative stylistic analysis. Starting point of this case study is the literary analysis and interpretation of the novel *The asylum seeker* by Arnon Grunberg. The literary themes of standstill and distance in this novel sparked two research questions: are the distance and the standstill (respectively) also present in the *style* of *The asylum seeker*? Both questions are aimed at Grunberg's novel. To answer these hypotheses, *The asylum seeker* was compared to *The darkness that divides us* by Renate Dorrestein and *Paravion* by Hafid Bouazza. But the stylistic individuality of those other two novels is less visible because of the orientation of the research question on *The asylum seeker*. New, other research questions and stylistic analyses focused on these other two novels would be a welcome addition: there is ample opportunity for further research in this area.

Paragraphs 9.3 and 9.4 also stressed that there is no one-to-one relationship between language feature and stylistic effect. This became clear in Grunberg's use of the present tense. The present tense is commonly used to create an effect of contiguity and immediacy. However, in *The asylum seeker* the present tense was used in such a specific context (in definitions, aphorisms, repetitions and metaphors) and sentence constructions (aspect, generalizations, conditional sentences, iterative situations) that an effect of distance and standstill is created.

4. In what way can quantitative data be used in stylistic analysis?

The analyses in paragraphs 9.3 and 9.4 were qualititative in kind. Sentence aspect turned out to be a phenomenon that could not easily be captured in quantifiable data. Nevertheless, paragraph 9.5 set out to investigate whether quantitative analysis of verb use in *The asylum seeker* could confirm the effects that were found by qualitative analysis. Quantitative data did indeed back up the previous qualitative results, thereby immediately proving the usefulness of quantitative analysis. An analysis of static verbs, action verbs and verbs of cognition showed that *The asylum seeker* contained relatively more static verbs than comparative texts from *The darkness that divides us* and *Paravion*.

Despite the usefulness of using quantative data in analyzing style, several limitations of quantitative research became clear. The first limitation involved the role of sentence context: the verbs that were analyzed, were isolated from their context in the sentence in order to be able to categorize them as static, active or cognitive. The practical decision to analyze single verbs out of sentence context resulted in a loss of accuracy, for the effect of the context on the meaning of the verb was lost. But paragraph 9.5 also showed how new rounds of analysis could complement the first quantitative analysis, and add the missing information. The second limitation concerns the amount of data. Since this research concerned manual (and not computerized) analysis and categorization, a relatively small sample was selected: four representative text extracts of fifty sentences each were selected for analysis. A larger sample would have resulted in more data and – as a consequence – an increase in representativeness of the data.

Thirdly, the main results of the quantitative analysis were expressed in figures, without a clear guideline on how to interpret the data. For instance, Bouazza's *Paravion* contained a relatively high number of static verbs – just like *The asylum seeker*. Does this mean that both texts are similar in this regard, or are there differences in use of these static verbs in both novels? Only a new, qualitative or quantitative round of analysis would be able to tell. Such a further round of analysis fell outside the scope of this dissertation, but it would be a logical next step for further research.

The analyses in chapters 8 and 9 showed that quantitative research should not be a goal in itself. The aim should not be to produce a table listing frequencies of specific linguistic features. The data should always be combined with an analysis of the functional effects involved. The data analyzed in this thesis formed stepping stones for further research into the content and function of the language features under scrutiny. As a result, quantitative research provided more than just a confirmation of the results of qualitative research. It was also a starting point for further research: data that counter expectations should be scrutinized more closely and therefore this type of data can be seen as input for new rounds of analysis.

Generalization of the results of stylistic analysis that were presented in this dissertation remains a tricky issue. Jeffries & McIntyre comment on this issue as follows:

> The task that stylisticians often set themselves is to analyse texts and draw from their analysis any patterning or features that they find there, without necessarily wanting to generalise these findings beyond their data. (2010, 13)

The function and use of my quantitative and qualitative analyses was first of all to add information to existing interpretations of literary texts, while paying special attention to the way in which (grammatical) linguistic features create literary effects of objectivity and subjectivity. Besides that, this research also showed how qualitative interpretations of literary novels could be supplemented with quantitative data, and how quantitative data presented stepping stones for further research of specific language features. Furthermore, my literary-stylistic interpretations resulted in data that can be useful

for further cognitive linguistic analysis: specific stylistic effects of certain linguistic elements can for instance be studied in a cross-genre analysis, such as effects of subjectivity and objectivity in literary texts compared with newspaper articles and news reportages (see Stukker & Verhagen, to appear).

In conclusion

It was the programmatic goal of this dissertation to call attention to 'ordinary prose', to the way in which everyday language use and ordinary grammatical features like sentence construction, use of subordinate clauses and verb use created specific *construals* of reality in novels. By investigating linguistic features in literary texts I hope to have contributed to further close collaboration between linguistics and literary studies in the Netherlands. After all, linguistic elements are the building blocks of every literary text. Therefore, linguistic terminology and analysis are the best foundations for each and every literary analysis and interpretation. In this way, Stylistics contributes to increasing the objectivity, reliability, verifiability and replicability of literary interpretation.

In the years to come, more and more digital texts and corpora will become available for computational analysis. In turn, it can be expected that disciplines such as Computational stylistics, Stylometrics and Corpus stylistics will experience a real boom in the Netherlands. It is my hope that in this digital revolution, the specific type of literary linguistics that is aimed at investigating the relationship between style and theme in particular novels and stories will also establish its own niche in the study of Dutch Literature.