

Research Notes

Literary Theory, Stylistics and Cognitive Poetics

Edebiyat Kuramı, Biçimbilim ve Bilişsel Şiirbilim

Aydın Görmez

Roger Alan Tunç

Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Turkey

Abstract

The desire to understand and interpret the underlying mechanisms involved in the creation and reception of literary texts, and the influence of these mechanisms on human cognition goes back at least to Aristotle's *Poetics*. However, the last century has witnessed a vast variety of approaches to the understanding of literature: a plethora of theories such as feminist, post colonialist, queer and reader response theories as well as some practical ways of analysis and interpretation such as formalism, new criticism, stylistics, cognitive poetics have shown themselves at the opposite end of the continuum. Stylistics and its evolved form, cognitive poetics have been significantly influential in the understanding of the processes involved in the creation and reception of literature. Although stylistics and cognitive poetics have usually been covered under the broad heading of literary theory, it has been observed that the divergence in the ways they operate makes such claims invalid because, unlike theory, empirical evidence is at the heart of stylistics and cognitive poetics. This paper aims to provide an overview of stylistics, and cognitive poetics and illustrate how they differ from literary theory.

Keywords: Stylistics, cognitive poetics, theory, criticism, linguistics

Öz

Edebi metinlerin yaratılması ve algılanması ile ilişkili temel mekanizmaları anlama ve yorumlama arzusu ve bu mekanizmaların insan bilişi üzerindeki etkisi Aristoteles'in *Poetika*'sına kadar uzanır. Bununla birlikte, edebiyatı anlamaya yönelik çok çeşitli yaklaşımların ortaya çıktığı geçen yüzyılda; feminizm, sömürgecilik sonrası, queer teorisi ve okur tepkisi kuramı gibi çok sayıda teorinin yanı sıra biçimcilik, yeni eleştiri, biçimbilim, bilişsel şiirbilim, gibi bazı pratik analiz ve yorumlama yolları, bu sürecin karşıt temsilcileri olarak belirmişlerdir. Biçimbilim ve geliştirilmiş formu olan bilişsel şiirbilim, edebiyatın oluşum ve algılanma süreçlerini kavramada önemli ölçüde etkili olmuştur. Biçimbilim ve bilişsel şiirbilim genel olarak edebi teoriler başlığı altında ele alınmış olsalar da, işleme biçimindeki farklılığın bu varsayımları geçersiz kıldığı görülmüştür. Çünkü teoriden farklı olarak, deneysel kanıt, biçimbilim ve bilişsel şiirbilimin merkezinde yer alır. Bu makale, biçimbilim ve bilişsel şiirbilime genel bir bakış açısı sunmayı ve edebi teoriden hangi açılardan ayrıştıklarını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Biçimbilim, bilişsel şiirbilim, teori, eleştiri, dilbilim

CUJHSS, June 2021; 15/1: 175-183.

© Çankaya University ISSN 1309-6761 Printed in Ankara

Submitted: Feb 4, 2021; Accepted: May 22, 2021

ORCID#: 0000-0001-7148-9630; 0000-0002-0055-5941; aydingormez@yyu.edu.tr

Introduction

Literary theory, which has also been called culture theory, may be defined as various ways, methods, and philosophical standpoints to the understanding of all sorts of literary works such as poems, plays, novels and short stories. Theory has gained a significance place in shaping the perceptual frames of the societies by addressing critical issues such as power relations, gender, ethnic issues etc., mostly since Frankfurt school, which consciously attempted to change social order in real life by directing literary arts. Two prominent figures of this school, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, criticised the conformist aspect of literature for helping pursue the social order that was based on inequality. Adorno rejected Lukacs' idea of literary realism and proposed that by deviating from the absolute representation of reality literature could critique and change the social order (Selden et al. 91-92). Not much different from Frankfurt school of literary criticism, in terms of their ideological standpoint, various other schools of theory and criticism such as "Soviet Socialist Realism" and "New left Marxism" have focused on literature in terms of the reflection and creation of power relations among socio-economic classes by taking Marxist ideology as their base.

Feminist literary criticisms and various other forms of criticism such as "gay theory," "lesbian theory," and "queer theory," which were inspired by the feminist movement, have been highly influential not only in decoding gender representation and construction in literature but also in creating a social awareness of gender issue in real society. Various forms of gender criticism have proliferated in the late 20th century and some of them have sided with other schools of criticism and philosophy such as Marxism, poststructuralist, postmodernism, etc. and they are still in practice today having a significant place in literary theory (Newton 210).

As the aforementioned cultural and literary theories have been flourishing and gaining strength in the analysis and creation of fiction and social reality, a new philosophical standpoint that questioned all the conventional ways of perception and challenged the idea of objective reality has shown itself in the form of postmodernism. The frontiers of postmodern philosophy, not much different from feminist and Marxist critics, have asserted that the ownership of power has been solidified through institutions, and literature, without a doubt, constitutes one of these institutions with its power to shape and pursue social order. Not surprisingly, postmodernism has merged with schools of criticism that were based on gender and social order, and; this has paved the way to the emergence of such theories as postmodern feminism and postmodern Marxism. Linda Hutcheon's *A poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) has been probably the first attempt to solidify poetic framework of postmodernism, which was mostly based on the ideas of French intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard and arguably Michel Foucault. Hutcheon describes the nature of postmodern literature as:

(postmodernism) it is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativised rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation,

decentring, indeterminacy and antitotalization. What all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes –dis, de, in, anti) is incorporate that which they aim to contest-as does, I suppose, the term postmodernism itself. (Hutcheon 3)

Literary theory has not always been based on ideology and culture as it has been the case with the schools mentioned above. Of the three aspect of literature; writer, text, reader, some schools of theory and criticism have particularly focused on the text itself, ignoring the autobiographical traits of writer and the psychological and cultural elements that are brought into the play by the reader. Formalism, as its name suggests, was the precursor of these schools that came to be divided into schools such as Russian formalism and its western version New Criticism. One of the founders of New Criticism Allen Pen Warren states the significance of the text by asserting that: “Poetry does not inhere in any particular element but depends upon the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem” (Cited in Dobie 33).

Despite the fact that all these schools of theory and criticism, and some others that are not mentioned here because of space problem, have been highly influential and are still widely practiced by professors and students of literary studies, literary theory has been criticised for being too subjective in decoding literary works because it does not have any systematic methods of analysis. S. A. Saif Abdulmughni, in his article on the comparison of literary theory, stylistics, discourse analysis and linguistics, points to this problem by stating that: “The only difference between stylistic analysis and literary criticism is that literary criticism goes directly to its text evaluation subjectively and is impressionistically independent from the linguistic form of the text” (Abdulmughni 417). And, for this very reason stylistics, and cognitive poetics, which is a newly emerging field of literary studies as a result of the developments in stylistics, cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, corpus linguistics and discourse studies, have been increasingly used in the analysis of literary works in the recent years.

Cognitive Poetics should not be confused with cognitive sciences. “Whereas cognitive science research in general focuses on features common to all human cognition, cognitive poetics focuses on ways in which human cognitive processing constrains and shapes both poetic language and form, and readers' responses to them” (Freeman 451). The main tenets of, and currents developments in stylistics and cognitive poetics as well as their difference from literary theory will be analysed in the following sections of this paper, and it will be argued that the scientific tools of analysis developed by these two fields of study should be integrated into literary criticism.

Stylistics

Stylistics is the study of literary texts in the light of scientific findings of linguistics. Although stylistics as a field of study was developed in the middle of the 20th century by Leo Spitzer, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, it is rooted in the studies of rhetoric that were based on Aristotle's tripartite “ethos,” “logos,”

and “pathos,” which respectively focused on the speaker’s authority, the emotional state of delivering the speech, and the logical organization of language (Stockwell, “Cognitive Poetics and Literary Theory” 135). Later, in renaissance period, a broader framework was proposed by Peter Ramus that consisted of “inventio,” “memoria,” “pronuntiatio,” “dispositio,” and “elocutio”. While the first three parameters placed emphasis on the production of speech, the last two were basically concerned with its delivery. The field of stylistics took its base from the parameter “elocutio,” and also put emphasis on the content of the text (Stockwell, “Cognitive Poetics and Literary Theory” 136).

Though stylistics has been used to analyse literature for a long time now, it is not confined to the understanding of literature. Political speeches, news articles, advertisements and other modes of language, spoken or written, can be the subject of stylistic interrogation as well. It is well known that there have been strong arguments between stylisticians and literary theorists in terms of the extent to which stylistics can discover the hidden meanings that are socio-culturally created in the text, and the shortcomings of literary theory to provide objective criteria for the analysis and interpretations of literature. Literary critics mostly blame stylistics of being merely a formalistic approach that ignores reader and writer as indispensable parts of the creation and interpretation of literary meaning. However, it should be noted that, with the developments that have taken place in linguistics in last few decades, stylistic analysis has moved far beyond the boundaries of close reading, and it is able provide accountable explanations for the claims it puts forward (Berenike et al. 27; Hall 139).

Peter Barry draws three distinctions between stylistics and close reading: The first distinction is about how they view literary language. While close reading starts with the assumption that literature has its own peculiar language that markedly differs from other texts, stylistics does not make such a distinction and strives to better understand language as a whole. The second difference is about the terminology used in close reading and stylistics. Critics employing close reading use bookish vocabulary to interpret text. Nonetheless, this vocabulary is not specialized or technical. Stylistics, on the other hand, uses technical and scientific vocabulary which is also used in other branches of linguistics to describe language. And the last difference is about objectivity and methodology, which is closely related to the first two differences. Close reading consciously avoids bringing in a particular methodology and calls for sensitivity towards the text under analysis, whereas stylistics offers a set of tools that can be used by anyone to achieve the same results (Barry 201-202).

Stylistics is markedly different from literary theory in terms of its applicability. For example, literary theories such as Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, queer theory, postmodernism etc. can only be employed to explicate certain works created in certain periods. One cannot analyze *Beowulf* with the poetics of postmodernism; even if an attempt was made, it would probably be rather unrealistic. To further illustrate, it is curious how gender theories could be

applied Craig Raines poem *A Martian Sends Home a Postcard* because it does not bear any traces that might be associated with gender representation. For that reason, it can be argued that theory, except for the formalistic ones such as Russian formalism, new criticism, structuralism etc., just provides certain perspectives in terms of the representation and creation of ideology in certain text. This does not necessarily mean that theory is fruitless and should be avoided in the analysis and interpretation of literature. Contrarily, it might be more useful to develop certain schemes concerning certain literary periods, genres and social issues in the understanding of literature. However, the problem lies in the fact that these philosophical and political assumptions that are put forward by literary theory are being rather subjectively evaluated by individual critics. At this point, stylistics might be viewed as a tool kit to confirm or refute the assumptions made by literary theory.

While literary critics have advocated close reading, they have consciously rejected to use the tools proposed by stylistics. As a result, the term close reading has remained too vague, lacking any systematic framework to be applied. Even literary critics such as Terry Eagleton have stated that students of literary criticism need to be educated in linguistic features and “slow reading,” a term he borrows from Frederic Nietzsche, with almost the same meaning as close reading, in the preface to his book *How to Read Literature* (2003) and on various other occasions. However, it has not been stated how students of literature will be able to gain a better understanding of linguistic features in literary texts without having any systematic ways of reading and evaluation. It should be noted that the integration of stylistics into literary theory might address this pivotal problem.

Cognitive Poetics

As a field of literary analysis and interpretation, cognitive poetics is a relatively new area. The term cognitive poetics was first used by Reuven Tsur, the professor of Hebrew literature from Tel Aviv University. Although, Tsur’s use of cognitive poetics was first confined to the analysis of poetry, it has gained popularity as a way of analyzing all literary genres. Cognitive poetics aims to bring a new perspective into literary criticism, claiming that literary theory has been short of providing solid explanations for the processes involved in the creation and perception of literature, the latter being of utmost importance. Gerard Steen expresses this paradigm shift in literary theory by asserting that: “We are in the middle of a genuine revolution in literary studies: a revolution because it renders almost every aspect of the discipline questionable, and genuine because it is greater than the numerous false generated crises that have defined literary study for the past half century (Steen as cited in Stockwell, “Literary Resonance” 25).

Cognitive poetics is closely related to literary disciplines such as stylistics, rhetoric and formalism. What is new in cognitive poetics is that it tries to bring in new perspectives from different fields of study such as cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, text linguistic etc. to account for the questions of literary theory such as what is literature, what are the common patterns in genres,

what kind of processes are involved in the creation and the reception of literature. In so doing, cognitive poetics, endeavors to create a new mode of understanding by re-conceptualizing and assimilating the terms that have been used in the analysis of literary and non-literary texts. The use of metaphor is a fine example to this re-conceptualization. While metaphor has been seen just as a figure of speech in the study of literature, cognitive poetics takes it one step further by trying to account how our mental faculties represent one domain or entity in terms of another (Middeke et al. 248). To illustrate, we might think of the proverbial phrase “If life gives you lemons, make lemonade” in terms of this new approach. In this phrase, it is known that lemon has been metaphorically used for “unpleasant,” “bitter” experiences. Cognitive poetics does not suffice with this explanation: it tries to understand how the “target” domain (unpleasantness, bitterness) is understood in terms of the “source” domain (lemon). By analyzing such literary devices and mental processes involved in the creation and reception of these devices, it tries to make the study of literature more scientific and accountable.

Peter Stockwell’s *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2002) might be thought of as the first step of theorizing the main tenets of cognitive poetics. In this book there are twelve chapters, and each of eight chapters introduce the framework for one aspect of cognitive poetic criticism, some of which will be overviewed in the following sections of this paper. One year later after the publication of Stockwell’s book that drew the theoretical frame, *Cognitive Poetics in Practice* (2003) edited by Johanna Gavins and Gerard Steen accompanied it. Gavin and Steen provide sample literary text analysis using cognitive poetics methodology developed by Stockwell, and provide further insight into how cognitive poetics view literature. “Cognitive poetics, too, sees literature not just as a matter for the happy few, but as a specific form of everyday human experience and especially cognition that is grounded in our general cognitive capacities for making sense of the world” (Steen and Gavins 1).

One of the most important tools used for the analysis of literature in cognitive poetics is the idea of “figures” and “grounds”. The proposition that human brain perceives the world as figures and grounds is not a new one, having its root in Gestalt psychology. The basic fact underlying this theory is that our brains selectively choose the entities, objects, or concepts that are more relevant to our lives or that are different from their supposed representations, and ignore the rest. When we think about literature in this way, we can see that there are some universally used techniques in the creation of literary texts to attract our attention. Some of this effect is achieved by the use of literary devices such as deviance, defamiliarization, foregrounding, imagery, attractors, trajectory, etc. By tracing the use of these devices, and the way they affect our perception and reception of the literary text, cognitive poetics, explains and interpret mental process involving literature.

Another important argument made by the proponents of cognitive poetics is that of “embodiment”. It has been argued that traditional literary theory has evaluated reason as something separate from human body, which cannot be

supported scientifically. Considering the wide range of variants involved in human perception and reason, cognitive poetics, regards all mental processes such as reason, emotion, beliefs etc. to be innate, biological processes that are continuously shaped by the environment. Thus, the term embodiment is used to refer to the significance of both nature and nurture in reading literature. Stockwell, argues that our perception of literary text, just as we perceive any other piece of information is processed in a radial way; meaning that mental networks are created with different levels of relevance; good examples at the center, then secondary and peripheral ones. Having this argument as basis, cognitive poetics brings the terms and concepts such as genre, mode, sources, intertextuality, point of view, modes of writing etc. into question and tries to understand how we divide literary texts into genres and sub-genres and how this mental principle of prototyping is violated in different genres to create an effect in readers' mind.

The question how the use of deictic expressions influences our understanding of the text has covered an important space in text linguistics and philosophy. Cognitive poetics tries to understand and re-conceptualize literary concepts such as narrator, narratee, implied author, perspective, point of view, voice etc. in relation to the use of deictic expressions and it goes beyond the prototypical deictic theory that takes its reference from "zero-point" by focusing on the projection of perceptual, spatial, temporal, relational, textual and compositional deixis in literary text, and the literary effect created as a result of this projection.

Cognitive poetics aims to combine the philosophical aspect of literary theory with the practical aspect of stylistics and create a scientific base for the analysis of literature. In so doing, it also integrates various techniques from critical discourse analysis, practical criticism, rhetoric, corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics etc. into the understanding of literature. As it may be observed from the terms, this is an interdisciplinary way of looking at literary text. While cognitive grammar has been highly theoretical and abstract in linguistics, literary studies have ignored the stylistic and formal features of literary text for a long time and focused on the thematic elements mostly. By applying these theoretical methods of the analysis and understanding of language to literature, and interpreting the findings with the philosophy of literary theory, cognitive poetics gives us a far better understanding of literature.

The questions raised by context and reader effect have covered an important space in literary studies. While some approaches such as formalism has been accused of ignoring readers' experiences of meaning making and interpretation, others such as reader response theory have been criticized to focus on readers psychological world rather than the text itself. It is widely accepted that the historical context and author's biography have significant implications for the understanding of literary texts. However, the terms such as background knowledge etc. which have been vaguely used to describe these implications cannot provide scientific evidence in how a poem written one

thousand years ago can interact with modern readers' mental faculties. Cognitive poetics aims to apply the scheme theories that have been used in artificial intelligence and other areas of linguistic studies, firstly to describe the common patterns and schemes of literary texts and genres, and then to interpret what kind of effects are created in readers mind by the use of these schemes and scripts.

In order to assess and evaluate the truth value of a given sentence, people who have been working on the semantic aspect of language, have proposed the "theory of possible worlds" in which it is claimed that the truth value of a sentence can only be assessed within a particular possible world. For example, if we think of Kurt Vonnegut's *The Slaughter House Five* as a possible world, in this possible world the sentence: "then he opened his eyes in 1942" would not be wrong because time travel is possible in this world. However, when we assess the truth value of this sentence in relation to our actual world, which is a richer possible world in terms of contextual elements, then the truth value of the sentence would be wrong because in our world people do not travel in time. Cognitive poetics, by adapting this theory to the study of literature, and taking the theory of "mental spaces" offers an explanation for the possible worlds created by fictional literature.

By applying analysis techniques that are developed in various branches of linguistics, cognitive poetics have come a long way from being just a theoretical approach. Stockwell and Mahlberg's 2015 article "Mind modeling with corpus stylistics in *David Copperfield*" by using CliC, a tool developed by corpus linguistics for the analysis of literature, shows how mind modeling strategies in the novel can be decoded within a scientific frame (Stockwell and Mahlberg 144).

Conclusion

Although it has always been an indispensable part of life in all human societies, literature has mostly been regarded as something sacred and mysterious that cannot be understood mechanically. Literary theory, which gained a noteworthy impetus in terms of the variety of perspectives it brought into the interpretation of literature, has attempted to decode the meanings hidden in literary works by focusing generally on one of the three dimensions of literature: writer, text and reader to interpret various social issues such as gender, social class, the distribution of material, racism etc. However literary theory has been criticized for not being able to offer any solid and accountable explanation for the propositions it has put forth.

Even if stylistics and cognitive poetics have been generally covered under the broad umbrella of literary theory, it has been illustrated in this paper that these two fields of literary study should be considered as practical ways of analysis that can provide literary theory with the tools to test its philosophical and ideological assumptions concerning literary works. The argument that stylistics and cognitive poetics ignore the socio-cultural elements that are involved in the creation and perception of literary works have been answered

by the recent developments in these two fields. And the developments in these two cross disciplinary fields have shown that linguistics as the study of language can shed light on process of uncovering the underlying mechanisms of literary production and perception by providing literary theory with a frame of reference to analyze its hypotheses systematically.

Works Cited

- Abdulmughni, Saleh Ahmed Saif. "Stylistics, Literary Criticism, Linguistics and Discourse Analysis." *International Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, p. 412, doi:10.5539/ijel.v9n2p412.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Berenike Herrmann, J., et al. "Revisiting Style, a Key Concept in Literary Studies." *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 25-52, doi:10.1515/jlt-2015-0003.
- Dobie, Anna B. "Formalism." *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Wadsworth, 2012. pp. 33-52.
- Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read Literature*. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Freeman, Margaret. "Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 31, no. 12, 1999, pp. 1705-07, doi:10.1016/s0378-2166(98)00045-9.
- Gavins, Joanna, and Gerard Steen. "Cognitive Poetics in Practice." *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, 2003, doi:10.4324/9780203417737.
- Hall, Geoff. "Stylistics and Ethical Literary Criticism." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015, pp. 62-72.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
- Middeke, Martin., et al. (Eds) *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Springer, 2012.
- Newton, K. M. *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. Macmillan, 1997.
- Selden, Raman, et al. "The Frankfurt School and After: Adorno and Benjamin." *A Readers Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Pearson, 2005.
- Stockwell, Peter and Michaela Mahlberg. "Mind-Modelling with Corpus Stylistics in David Copperfield." *Language and Literature*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2015, pp. 129-47, doi:10.1177/0963947015576168.
- Stockwell, Peter. "Cognitive Poetics and Literary Theory." *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 135-52, doi:10.1515/jlt.2007.008.
- . "The Cognitive Poetics of Literary Resonance." *Language and Cognition*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 25-44, doi:10.1515/langcog.2009.002.
- . *Cognitive Poetics: An introduction*. Routledge, 2002.