



## The Foreign Literary Discourse via the Eyes of the Non-native Critic: Which Type of Competence?

### Le discours littéraire étranger à travers le regard du critique allochtone: quel type de compétence ?

**Fatima Yahia\***

Ghardaia University- Algeria

yahia.fatima@univ-ghardaia.dz

**Received:**  
31-10-2022

**Accepted:**  
09-01-2024

**Publisher online :**  
26-01-2024

**Abstract:** Literary criticism studies the style of oral and written literary discourses. It is based on the principles that can explain the particular choices made by individuals and social groups in their use of language. The texts style varies according to the factors of genre, context, era and the author's thought. Hence, literary criticism can be affected by the critic's cultural/historical background and worldview. So, this paper deals with the problematic of how the non-native critic can achieve such neutrality that enables him/her to successfully interpret the foreign literary discourse. It aims also at presenting the main types of competences (linguistic, literary, and cultural) needed by the critic to enrich his/her ability of studying this kind of discourses.

**Keywords:** literary criticism; non-native critic; literary discourse; competence.

**Résumé:** La critique littéraire étudie le style des discours littéraires oraux et écrits. Elle s'appuie sur les principes qui peuvent expliquer les choix particuliers opérés par les individus et les groupes sociaux dans leur usage de la langue. Le style des textes varie selon les facteurs de genre, de contexte, d'époque et de pensée de l'auteur. Par conséquent, la critique littéraire peut être affectée par le contexte culturel/historique et la vision du monde du critique. Ainsi, cet article traite de la problématique de la manière dont le critique non natif peut atteindre une telle neutralité qui lui permet d'interpréter avec succès le discours littéraire étranger. Il vise également à présenter

---

\* Corresponding author

les principaux types de compétences (linguistiques, littéraires et culturelles) nécessaires au critique pour enrichir sa capacité d'étude de ce type de discours.

**Mots clés:** la critique littéraire; le critique non natif; discours littéraire; la compétence.

### **1. Introduction:**

Studying foreign literary texts by the critic requires a high competency since this kind of discourses is written in a foreign social context that differs from the critic's one. In addition to the linguistic and literary competences, He/she needs also enough background about the social and cultural circumstances of the author. In other words, the topics of literary works, language aesthetics, idioms, the characters' behavior and costumes are all affected by the cultural nature of the community of the author. So, the way the critic, who belongs to the same society of the author, interprets the literary discourse differs from that of the foreign one, who adopts another language and social background.

In the light of this, this paper deals with the following problematic: to what extent can the non-native critic be neutral and successful in interpreting foreign literary texts? Hence, the sub-questions below can be raised:

1. Can the author's style be affected by his/her social and cultural background?
2. Which kind of competences does the critic need to study a foreign literary discourse successfully?
3. How can the critic overcome the difficulties of interpreting figurative language in the foreign literary texts?

In order to answer the questions above, the following points can be hypothesized: interpreting foreign literary texts involves a competent critic who is familiar with the author's foreign language and social background.



1. The author's style is affected by his/her social and cultural background.
2. The critic must have the linguistic, literary, and cultural competences.
3. Studying figurative language in the foreign literary texts needs the critic's cultural competence.

So, this article aims at highlighting the case of stylistic analysis of literary texts by the foreign critics. It also seeks to prove that the critic needs to be familiar with both the foreign language and the social behavior and rules of the author that govern his/her choice of words and style.

Via this paper, the nature of literary criticism and stylistics is explained in details. In addition, the different types of the critic's competences (linguistic, literary, and cultural) are clarified and their importance in ensuring a correct and successful literary analysis is studied deeply through this article. Hence, the reader will be able to recognize the influence of the critic's social background, which differs from the authors' one, on his/her vision of the discourse under the study.

## **2. Literary Criticism and Stylistic Analysis: an Overview:**

Literary criticism is defined as the study of particular cases. It involves the reading and interpretation of a specific text or texts which have been designated as literature. The literary critic analyses a particular text or set of texts so that s/he can make a claim about it. A clear distinction is made between literary theory and literary criticism. Literary theory is defined as the study of general principles. It recognizes that the assumptions made by some critics about writers, readers and what we consider to be "reality" must be questioned and reformulated. This process may alter the ways in which we read and interpret. The literary theorist tries to understand the nature and functions of literature, and its relation to the author, reader, language, society, and history etc.<sup>1</sup>

The literary critic studies the style and method that an author uses in his/her artistic creation. Stylistic analysis has two main objectives: first, it enables the readers to make meaningful interpretation of the text itself. Second, it expands knowledge and awareness of the language in general.<sup>2</sup>

A lot of studies have been presented on the difficulties that may face readers of English literature when reading a literary text. This issue may result from a basic literary inadequacy and their poor knowledge of the FL with all its linguistic and cultural implications. This is why many researchers feel the need to help the readers to develop reading strategies to improve their literary competence.

So, the aim of them is to increase the readers' awareness of the way of approaching the reading of a literary text. Study strategies with this aim is seen by Isenberg (1990) as '*... a useful integration into the syllabus even by teachers in countries where tradition advocates a historical approach to the study of literature.*'<sup>3</sup> Hence, it is needed to train the readers in FL from their beginning stages of learning to develop their reading competence in the future.

Culler (date unknown) presented the term literary competence which refers to the principles of decoding texts. For researchers, any reader has the competence of interpreting discourses that is acquired by time through dealing with different types of texts<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, the critic needs to be familiar with the foreign language of the text under study via having the linguistic competence. In other words, the vocabulary, syntactic structures, and the grammatical rules of the text's language affect its style and form.

The techniques of literary competence enable the critic/reader to transform the text into meanings and to decipher figurative language, literary devices, literary eras, and the text genres<sup>5</sup>. However, the critic must be familiar with the culture behind the text's language in order to interpret it successfully. In other words, poetic imagery interpretation



involves having background about the different conventional social/cultural features of the writer; these principles decide the implicit sense transmitted by the metaphorical expressions in the text.

‘Naturalization’ is the term that refers to the task of realizing a deep comprehension of the text. It also deals with the critic’s information about the conventions of literary discourses and their language. In this regard, Saussure developed ‘semiotics’ (*langue* and *parole*) that establishes the communities’ linguistic rules and their use in the different social contexts. Consequently, these conventional rules govern the form/style of literature.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, studying symbolism by the critic, for example, is another part of ‘naturalization’ where decoding symbols requires the competence of studying various meanings in their specific social/cultural context that differs from the critics own worldview: symbolism in literary texts is original, popular, and ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> This ambiguity is related to the foreign culture from which these symbols are derived.

Bressler (date unknown) suggests some basic questions, among them those that are related to cultural issues in literary texts, which literary critics can ask when analyzing a text; these questions are about philosophical, psychological, functional, and descriptive nature of the text itself:

- Have a text only one correct meaning?
- Is a text always didactic – that is, must a reader learn something from every text?
- Can a text be read only for enjoyment?
- Does a text affect every reader in the same way?
- How is a text influenced by the culture of its author and the culture in which it is written?

- Can a text become a catalyst for change in a given culture?<sup>8</sup>

So, when studying texts, a literary critic considers cultural elements that affect the outcomes of analyzing them: according to him/her, texts, like all forms of discourse, help shape and are shaped by social forces. Also, writers, as texts, are subjected to social biases and cultural influences.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Types of Competences in Literary Criticism:**

Studying a literary discourse involves the ability to interpret it at many levels: the language aesthetics, the characters behavior, the choice of words and their appropriate use, etc. However, all these elements can be affected by and related to the foreign social environment of the author where the critic must be aware of these sources that differ from his/her own culture.

For example, the non-native critic needs to be competent in analyzing metaphorical expressions that are influenced by the culture of the target language. So, to ensure skillful literary critics, it is necessary to train them over their educational carrier as FL learners at the different levels of teaching, at the university or the other beginning stages of teaching literature. Here, the researchers believe that it is needed to design a syllabus for teaching metaphor in order to raise the learners competence of interpreting metaphorical expressions. However, the instructors have to provide effective teaching materials. So, metaphorical competence must be acquired like the grammatical and communicative ones.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, a study was carried out by the scholar Danesi (1993) who asked a group of students in Italy to produce metaphorical expressions in their L1 and English, and to translate others from English to Italian language. However, the results show that difficulty raised in the step of translation more than thinking about new expressions. In the light of this, the translation difficulties may be the result of cultural



variation from one language to another and it is the role of the critic to be competent enough in order to recognise the deviation of meaning that characterizes the metaphor and rhetorical language<sup>11</sup>.

Hirschberg (2003) argues that the works of fiction dramatize the cultural attitudes of different societies. Also, Simpson (2005) asserts that drama dialogues offer the opportunity for exploring the common place and routine patterns that pass unnoticed in everyday conversation.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Wilhelm and Hegel (1993) point out that literary works provide the artistic expression of sensory aspects of the world. Forster (1990) sees that literary works reflect the eating habits of societies that differ from one culture to another. He says: '*Food in fiction is mainly social*'<sup>13</sup>. The transmission of ethics and values in different cultures with the help of literary works has also been studied by Erli *et al.*, (2008). Hence, literature plays the role of telling us how life might be lived.

Minnick (date unknown) has been interested in analysing spoken language variation (dialects), African American English speech in particular, in literary texts. It means, literature, language, and culture are interrelated in the sense that literature was considered as offering a privileged and prestigious access to distinct national cultures and languages. Therefore, literature is seen as a source that gives formal expression to the individual's awareness of a world beyond the reach of communal communication.<sup>14</sup>

So, exposing readers to literature from other cultures is an enriching way of increasing their awareness of different values, beliefs, and social structures: reading literature in English, for example, may encourage them to become aware of the social, political, and historical events which form the background to a particular literary work. At the same time, it can provide a way of contextualizing how a member of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation. Hence,

literature may enable students to gain useful and surprising perceptions about how members of a society might describe or evaluate their experiences<sup>15</sup>.

However, learners response to the cultural aspect of literature needs to be a critical one in the sense that the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions in literary texts are not absolutely accepted and reinforced, but they are questioned and evaluated.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1990s, a rapprochement, in Germany, took place between culture pedagogy and literature pedagogy, under the aegis of *didaktik des fremdverstehens* (didactics related to the understanding of the foreign). Several anthologies appeared in this field as Bredella and Delanoy (1999) who have introduced a discussion of the role of literature in language teaching. Kramersch (1993) is also interested in the poetics of language where she advocates not simply including literary texts in language teaching but making them the focal point. She stresses that literature and culture are inseparable. Also, like Risager (2007), she believes that literary practice is a form of linguistic practice, and therefore an analysis of the relationship between language and culture is in a certain sense not different as far as literature is concerned<sup>17</sup>.

In other words, since culture is a characteristic of language itself (as seen earlier), all works on linguistic material (i.e. literary texts) provide cultural insight. So, she thinks that literary texts reflect cultural aspects conveyed by the characters that may represent social behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals within a target society. In this regard, she argues: '*Cultural imagination is no less real than cultural reality.*'<sup>18</sup>

She means that the incorporation of literary reading tasks in the language classroom provides language learners access to cultural knowledge of the TL community. In this case, FL teachers focus on cultural understanding and direct the language learner to focus on the





meaning construction processes of a member or members of the target cultural group.

In this way, cultural knowledge may allow communication with understanding to take place among members of the target community and language learners (as linguistic knowledge provides structures enabling communication, cultural knowledge provides all the referential knowledge that allows understanding to take place). However, while some referential knowledge may be common to both the language learner and the member of the TL group, there are many situations in which this is not the case (the case of reading literary texts in FL)<sup>19</sup>.

Hence, cultural knowledge can be considered as one of the bases through which understanding is achieved because much of it is a social construct. In other words, it is not only a matter of acquiring an explicit knowledge base but, more importantly, an issue of how this knowledge is used in the construction and production of meaning in interaction with members or artifacts from the TC. In this sense, cultures develop specific oral and written genres that fulfill particular social functions.

Mckay (1982) thinks that the key of success in using literature in the EFL class depends on the selection of literary works. A text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits. In addition to selecting literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, she sees that it is necessary to select themes with which the students can identify.<sup>20</sup>

However, Kramersch suggests other criteria that instructors may consider when selecting literary texts rather than depending exclusively on the basis of thematic interest and linguistic simplicity:

- Does the text lend itself more to an efferent or an aesthetic kind of reading?

- Is the narrative structure predictable or unpredictable?
- Are the cultural allusions clear or unclear to foreign readers?

Are the silences in the text understandable to foreign readers?<sup>21</sup>

According to Sell (2005), if literary texts are carefully chosen in accordance with the social and cultural environment (texts dealing with human relations, drugs, alcohol, racism, loneliness, fear, bullying, violence, dying, etc), it can be an effective tool for stimulating and achieving language learning and equipping learners with relevant linguistic and cultural competences. In this regard, Leech and Short (1998) analysed, in details, in literary works the various indicators of politeness which differ from one culture to another. They see that the study of the strategies of communication is needed in the stylistic analysis of literary texts.<sup>22</sup>

The focus on literature pedagogy as culture pedagogy has also been established by Burwitz-Melzer (2003) who deals with young pupils whose FL skills are typically not all developed. The overall aim of her project is to study what is needed for the students to undergo an intercultural learning process. She is interested in fictional texts (short story, poem, youth novel, comic strip) that the class works with in various ways (role-play activities, letters to the main characters, poems, etc.) and talk to each other about afterwards. Via the project, she examined fourteen different teaching sequences at various class levels. In each case, she chose the text, prepared the teaching along with the teacher, observed, and videoed the teaching situation. In addition, she gave the teacher a questionnaire. She subsequently did retrospective interviews with the teacher and with a selected group of students. All the data were ordered according to a comprehensive categorization table that gives a whole picture of the many facets of intercultural learning.<sup>23</sup>



Brøgger (1992), a teacher of American Studies at the University of Tromsø, was also interested in establishing a programme of teaching language, literature and culture. His aim is both to analyze the part that deals with cultural studies and to describe this part as an integral part of the overall study of language. He attempted to develop language subjects, at university level, with new perspectives which are characterized by the study of texts from a linguistic, a literary, and a culture theoretical point of view – both in teaching and in research. He introduces a procedure in teaching culture that consists of three stages: first, social analysis, cultural analysis, and textual analysis. Textual analysis includes an analysis of the cultural, ideological implications of the linguistic choices that have been made.<sup>24</sup>

In the light of this, in order to ensure competent critics or readers of literary texts, it is important to train them at the university via designing a syllabus that deal with culture as part of a foreign language. Literature also reflects these cultural features that are interpreted via the author's style.

#### **4. Discussion and Recommendations**

As hypothesized, the non-native critic can achieve neutrality in analyzing foreign literary texts only when he/she raises his/her awareness about the need to develop his cultural competence about the texts' language in addition to his ability of deciphering literary texts through his literary competence. Concerning the first question raised in the introduction, the author's style is influenced by his social circumstances and cultural background which affects his language so that the critic must be aware about author's extra-textual elements in order to interpret his/her language correctly. For the second question, the critic must not depend only on his/her literary competence; however, he/she must be linguistically and culturally competent to understand the writer's implicit themes and messages. As hypothesized for the third question, interpreting figurative language, as metaphorical

expressions, involves the critic's knowledge about the social background behind them.

So, the following tips can be recommended to achieve neutral and correct interpretation of literary texts: the critic must develop his/her cultural competence of the text's foreign language since the characters behavior, religious rituals, daily language and conversations, and eating habits are all related to the cultural background of the characters. Also, he/she needs to contact non-native speakers via direct chats and social media in order to improve his/her linguistic competence. In addition, he/she must increase his/her knowledge in the field of civilization and nations history because literature topics are affected by the author's environment.

### **5. Conclusion:**

As mentioned earlier, the foreign literary text has its special style, content, and social background that differs from the non-native critic who needs to be competent enough to successfully interpret this kind of discourses. Language aesthetics, the characters behavior, and their daily language are all derived from the culture to which the author belongs so that the critic must be familiar with its nature in order to interpret the texts appropriately.

Literary discourse can be distinguished from the non-literary one in terms of its special effect on the reader. Literary discourse analysis is a branch of discourse analysis as a new approach to literature.

Discourse analysis exceeds the boundaries of the usual distinction between text and context. The critic has to consider two concepts, "textualism" and "sociologism." The former refers to the text's language whereas the latter studies the social context of the utterance. So, it is no wonder that in literary discourse analysis the notion of genre plays a key role.



Literary criticism and analysis is based on a theory of human action. In other words, literature is the result of linguistic socialization created by the interests of social groups. Consequently, the literary discourse cannot be considered as a textual property but as a result of social and cultural actions performed by individuals within an action system. Here, the critic needs to consider the literary response in terms of the aesthetic and polyvalence conventions.

Through reading literary texts that reflect the real society aspects, readers, especially critics, can have a view about the different social contexts of English native speakers: these contexts of communication provide them with the details used by them in performing various roles in their own communities. They recognize the different social behavior and people's ways of thinking.

Hence, the literary text differs from the scientific one in terms of cultural/social features that affect its structure and style. So, being an effective foreign critic is having linguistic, literary, and cultural competences together.

## **Bibliography**

### **Books :**

- Allen, J. P. B. and Corder, S. P. (1978). *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Forster, E. M.(1990). *Aspects of the Novel*. England: Penguin Books
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Leech, G. N. and Short, M. H. (1998). *Style in Fiction: a Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. England: Longman Group Limited

Lodge, D. (1992). *The Art of Fiction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd

Risager, K. (2007). *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Great Britain: MPG Books, Ltd

- Simpson, P. (2005). *Language Through Literature: an Introduction*. New York: Routledge

### Articles :

- Khattak, I. (2012). The Role of Stylistics in Interpreting Literature. *City University Research Journal*, 2(1), 97-110

- McKay, S. (1982). Literature in the ESL Classroom: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. *TESOL Journal*, 16(4), 529-536

### Websites:

-Rush, P. (date unknown). *Behind the Lines: Using Poetry in the Language Classroom*. Retrieved from [http://library.nakanishi.ac.jp/kiyou/gaidai\(30\)/05.pdf](http://library.nakanishi.ac.jp/kiyou/gaidai(30)/05.pdf)

### References

---

<sup>1</sup> Rush, P. (date unknown). *Behind the Lines: Using Poetry in the Language Classroom*. Retrieved from [http://library.nakanishi.ac.jp/kiyou/gaidai\(30\)/05.pdf](http://library.nakanishi.ac.jp/kiyou/gaidai(30)/05.pdf), (p.25)

<sup>2</sup> Khattak, I. (2012). The Role of Stylistics in Interpreting Literature. *City University Research Journal*, 2(1), 102

<sup>3</sup> Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (pp. 04-05)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 09



<sup>5</sup> In Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (p.10)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 12

<sup>7</sup> Lodge, D. (1992). *The Art of Fiction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, (p.139)

<sup>8</sup> Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (pp. 06-07)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid: p.223

<sup>10</sup> Danesi (1993), in Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (p.223)

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> Simpson, P. (2005). *Language Through Literature: an Introduction*. New York: Routledge, (p.176)

<sup>13</sup> Forster, E. M.(1990). *Aspects of the Novel*. England: Penguin Books, (p.61)

<sup>14</sup> Widdowson (date unknown), in Allen, J. P. B. and Corder, S. P. (1978). *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (p.209)

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 17)

<sup>17</sup> Kramersch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (p.207)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Kramersch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (p.208)

<sup>20</sup> McKay, S. (1982). Literature in the ESL Classroom: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. *TESOL Journal*, 16(4), 531-32

<sup>21</sup> Opcit:138

<sup>22</sup> Leech, G. N. and Short, M. H. (1998). *Style in Fiction: a Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. England: Longman Group Limited, (p. 316)

<sup>23</sup> Risager, K. (2007). *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Great Britain: MPG Books, Ltd, (p.147)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 135