

BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of *Forensic Stylistics*

REFERENCE: McMenamin, Gerald R., *Forensic Stylistics*, New York: Elsevier, 1993, 249 pp.

The audience for Dr. McMenamin's recent publication should encompass a diverse group of professionals within the American justice community. His topic will be of interest to, investigators, attorneys, document examiners and various practitioners in the forensic sciences. Because the author is a well respected and acknowledged expert in his specialty, this volume is a welcome addition to forensic science literature and is potentially the prime authoritative work on this subject.

The text of this book previously appeared as the entire subject matter of Volume 58, of *Forensic Science International* (1993). When published in the journal, it is understandable that it did not contain an index; republished as a book, the absence of an index is inexcusable. In this day of digital text manipulation and advanced word processing software, the exclusion of an index to this expensive volume (\$160.00 U.S.) amounts to a major affront to the purchaser and a severe impediment to the reader.

In the Introduction, the author envisions this work, "to provide a sound scientific basis for the practice and further development of forensic stylistics." The degree to which Dr. McMenamin achieves this ambitious plan remains to be evaluated. A principal assertion of this book is that "author-specific linguistic patterns are present in unique combination in the style of every writer, . . . can be objectively described, . . . often measured, . . . making author identification possible. . . ." Forensic stylistics' goal is defined as "the systematic interpretation or disambiguation of disputed language in a document, . . ." Elsewhere, in Chapter 3, two unpublished graduate theses are heralded as "(U)nderlying American stylistics as applied to issues of questioned authorship. . . ." Martha Blake, the author of one thesis concluded; "Before any discipline called 'forensic stylistics' is accepted as a serious discipline, it must become established through conducting experiments devoted to the forensic application thereof. Hopefully, these experiments will be performed by individuals who can accept and appreciate the challenge of combining schools of knowledge such as stylistics, statistics and computer science. When this happens we can expect 'forensic stylistics' to be recognized and respected by courts of law as providing evidence which can aid in the adjudication of legal concerns."

Dr. McMenamin has divided this work into two sections, one

encompassing the forensic application of stylistics and the other, covering the linguistics basis of stylistics. Preceding the coverage of the foundations for stylistics with the discussion of its applications may seem unusual, but is required by the unique manner in which the author has chosen to open the book.

Chapters One and Two are each devoted to illustrating a different application of stylistics to a case problem. These cases serve to immediately engage the reader in the book's subject matter in a compelling manner; nevertheless, a reader with little or no previous knowledge of stylistics may find a lack of familiarity with terminology distracting. The text of these chapters is essentially an expert's report or direct testimony. The value of the presentations could have been enhanced with the inclusion of questions or issues that opposing counsel might raise.

Chapter Three is a coherent, well organized and referenced introduction to a discussion of stylistics. Included in this presentation are the answers to questions regarding the use of scientific testimony based on linguistic stylistics. The answers to these questions display remarkable candor for an obvious proponent of forensic stylistics.

Regarding the validity (accuracy) of stylistic analysis—"Although the ease with which style characteristics are observed may differ on the data, therefore requiring a variety of methods for observation, description and measurement, the results of such a comparison *can be precise, coherent and relatively complete.*" (reviewer's italics)

Regarding the reliability of particular techniques for analysis of style—"The reliability of many techniques is *mixed*, due to the variable quality of such studies and the extent to which their methods and results have become less experimental and more demonstrable. Stylometry, for example, demonstrates high reliability *even amid discussions of its validity.*" (reviewer's italics)

Regarding the kind of conclusion and opinion supported by stylistic analysis—"Thus, unquantified descriptive (as well as measurable) facts form the basis for probability statements in forensic conclusions and opinions. This is especially important for linguistic evidence because *not all significant variation is quantifiable.*" (reviewer's italics)

Equally important questions however, are not addressed. Such questions include, *who* is qualified to engage in forensic stylistics analysis, *what* type of extended writing is amenable to such analy-

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sis, and *when* is the amount of text in a document sufficient for such analysis. The issue of a means for assessing the accuracy of the conclusions of forensics stylistics experts is also largely ignored.

Chapter Four presents a review of legal reference works as they relate to the rules for admission of stylistics evidence in the federal and state courts. Included are many case citations to specific aspects of such evidence.

Chapter Five examines the precedents and historical basis for the admission of stylistics evidence. Summaries of cases providing illustrations of the varieties of stylistic evidence and comments by the courts regarding them are included.

Chapter Six reviews the history of stylistic analysis in the practice of questioned document examinations. Beginning with the writings of Albert S. Osborn, the contributions of North American questioned document authorities are summarized and the writings of European authors are briefly explored. Unfortunately, Dr. McMenamin does not avail himself of the opportunity in this chapter to evaluating the material presented by these questioned document authors. For example, while noting that "the use of stylistics analyses as internal evidence for author identification has been part of the practice of document examination since the beginning of the 20th Century," he fails to mention the basis for such expertise or comment on the appropriateness of questioned document examiners engaging in such an enterprise.

Chapter Seven is the first of three chapters presenting the foundations of stylistics. The subject of written English, progressing from its fundamental alphabetical design through the elements associated with writer competence and concluding with development of idiosyncratic habits is covered in this chapter. The contrast of spoken to written language is highlighted, as well how they are affected by societal influences.

Chapter Eight is a presentation of the linguistic concept of style, including difficulties with the concept such as, "vagueness" of style. In portraying the characteristics of style, the author comments: "The concept of style that will provide a theoretical basis for successful stylistics analysis must lend itself to descriptive and *quantitative* analysis. (reviewer's italics) Further, while denoting style as a feature of written language and defining it in five different ways, the author observes: "... they form the theoretical paradigm within which the linguist applies the practice of descriptive and *quantitative* stylistics analysis. These five conceptional approaches to style are detailed in the remainder of the chapter.

Chapter Nine, continues with the definition of stylistics as the study of style, followed by descriptions of the various aspects of stylistics, viewed as; attributive or interpretive, formal or functional, and evaluative or objective. Forensic stylistics is identified as including the attributive, formal, functional and objective aspects.

Two appendices follow the nine chapters. The first, "Descriptive Markers of Style," inventories the markers under various categories and provides at least one literature reference for each marker. The second appendix, "Quantitative Indicators of Style," similarly treats the various indicators. It is incongruous that the reader is provided literature references for each marker and indicator but has no simple methods for locating specific topics in this book.

The author has concluded the book with an extensive reference section consisting of eighty-three legal sources and citations, twenty-four document examination references, and some seven hundred and twenty-three style and stylistics references. While these are impressive numbers of references, no bibliographies on style and stylistics are included. An Annotated Bibliography of Statistical Stylistics by Richard W. Bailey and Lubomír Doležal, (1968) and other bibliographies published near the same date are annotated and contain from 660 to 2000 entries. Their inclusion would have been potentially useful a reader interested in further material on this subject.

In completing the assessment of this book, we note the call for forensic stylistics practitioners to have linguistics and statistics foundations. Such statistical background should relate to the importance stressed on quantization. Disappointingly, quantization is only mentioned and neither in the case illustrations, nor elsewhere in the text, is quantitative data presented or statistically analyzed. As with many other forensic sciences employing comparative analysis, the reader is presented with subjective probability statements, highlighted by imprecise terminology, used to describe the hallmarks of quantity, uniqueness and significance. Finally, the topic of computer software programs that check spelling and grammar, thus compounding the existing hazards of edited text, is omitted by the author.

Hopefully, we can look forward to a subsequent edition of this book, in which the author will remedy the shortcomings in this effort and expand his substantial body of quality material, to include quantitative data and statistical procedures that may more fully establish "a sound scientific basis for forensic stylistics."