

The Language Teacher

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Interview: Talking with Michael Toolan about stylistics, coherence, and language teaching

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Michael Toolan is a stylistician with a particular interest in narrative analysis, creativity, and language in literature. In this interview he talks about his teaching and research, some aspects of narrative studies, and how stylistics research makes increasing use of corpus linguistics and often features multimodality. His single-authored books include *The Stylistics of Fiction* (1988), *Total Speech* (1996), *Language in Literature* (1998) and *Narrative* (2nd ed., 2001). Much of his work is supervising masters and PhD research at the University of Birmingham, UK, in the areas of corpus linguistic and critical discourse analysis of mass media, stylistic analysis of poetry (especially 20th/21st century), linguistic analysis of literary narratives, and integrational linguistic theory. He was a visiting consultant at Kanda University of International Studies in December 2013.



TARA McILROY (TMC): First, as a bit of background, how did you become interested in stylistics in general and narrative studies in particular?

MICHAEL TOOLAN (MT): I've always been interested in literature and in writing—in the how—at [The University of] Edinburgh, in my language of literature final year course, then in my PhD on Faulkner's style at [The University of] Oxford. I had a widening interest in linguistics (Halliday, Chomsky, Harris's integrational linguistics) and especially socially-contextualised language use such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics and stylistics. Roger Fowler's stylistics publications were especially inspiring, along with numerous others; I was asked to teach narrative analysis in my first full-time lecturing post (at NUS [National University of Singapore]), and did so co-teaching with the brilliant Rukmini Bhaya Nair (now at IIT [Indian Institute of Technology], Delhi).

TMC: Your interests vary across areas such as literary linguistics, narratology and narrative studies, literary translation, and corpus stylistics. What kinds of things might language teachers in Japan be interested in amongst that selection?

MT: Stylistics, and the stylistics of translation, because these sensitize the teacher/student to the very specific effects of the language being used (in the present case, English), so are a powerful learning tool at the top end of language proficiency. Stylistics is always asking, "Why this wording and not that?" Even very minor details

can have a stylistic motivation. For example, why the nursery rhyme runs “Jack and Jill went up the hill” and not “Jack and Jill went up a hill.” There won’t always be a clear answer, but the lack of a clear answer is also often instructive!

TMC: You have suggested that *coherence* can be seen as the ways in which parts of a story link together, perhaps helping the reader to understand moments of excitement, prepare for an ending, etc. Could you explain a bit about this concept?

MT: It goes back to Aristotle, the unities of time and place, the sense of an ending, and sense of a beginning. Aristotle’s idea of a story having to have a beginning, middle, end looks and sounds trivial until you have thought hard about how the very idea of a beginning (say) can be justified, warranted. I think I now understand how narratives must have a beginning and a middle, but would not claim yet to understand the logical necessity, the meaning, of endings!

TMC: Talking about narratives specifically, what are some of the features in narrative texts which cause readers to be so involved in the text, and can be so interesting to research?

MT: It all comes down to situation, and the reader’s imaginative involvement or engagement with situation, in my opinion. I’ve written about this in the journal *Narrative*, recently, *apropos* stories by Alice Munro (whom I was delighted to see recently won the Nobel Prize for literature). Various linguistic features can be the reflexes, the stimuli, the cues (almost like Gumperz’s contextualisation cues) of this involvement/engagement: *visualisability* of the situation; plausibility of a character’s express or implied reactions (e.g., through free indirect thought); credibility through similarity of views; or a clear and motivated grasp, by the reader, of why they do *not* share the point of view of the character or narrator (e.g., Humbert Humbert in Nabokov’s *Lolita*). Throughout, involvement is achieved by effects or *inducements*. For example, in a narrative which is mostly simple syntactically and even lexically, if a scene, which is *prima facie* a crisis point anyway (in terms of plot events), is rendered in complex syntax and lexis and repetition, the reader may be strongly and differently affected by such a passage (than they are by the rest of the story). We get quite parallel effects in high-intensity climactic passages in operas, classical music symphonies, narrative dance and theatre . . .

TMC: I can see a lot of potential for language teaching projects amongst that topic. Thinking about linguistic creativity in particular, how can something so seemingly simple as repetition teach us about creativity?

MT: It’s useful to begin by talking about what is meant by the term creativity. It’s a broad term but we end up saying it’s hard to define creativity but I know it when I see it. It isn’t just innovation. To some extent creativity may well be the reworking of old stuff. There are all of these discussions about how there’s nothing fundamentally new under the sun in language. With every new technology, every cultural shift, all of our cultural practices including our poetry, literature, advertising—all of these have to adjust. Often, with linguistic creativity, the first wave of doing things is different and develops. So Twitter gives us 140 characters and before long someone comes along and says perhaps we can create a genre with 70 characters. There’s a self-imposed restriction and there’s a certain power that you get from that. Creativity is about newness but it’s also to do with finding a fit. It might mean finding a fit that you were not really aware of until this new art form came along and allowed you to work with it in a new way. A new best fit, for a newly-emerging situation.

So there’s that and the whole business of repetition. We say, for example, that there are 44 sounds in English and repetition of those 44 sounds in all kinds of ingenious combinations. Repetition, similarity, and difference are the driving forces of all of that. And then, there’s the paradox since we always think of repetition as being boring or ineffective and if we’re looking at a poem that there might be repetition but it is not bringing anything new. Repetition seems to be at odds completely with creativity but to my mind we only have to look at particular kinds of repetition. We can look closely at different types of repetition—what I would call bad repetition—in contrast to the repetition that we see in Shakespeare, Keats, and in any number of poets and writers who use repetition very, very effectively. Macbeth says, “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” which in context is a powerful use of repetition and also very creative (exceptionally fitting in the emerging situation). One of the powerful things that repetition does do is it focuses you in (again) on the thing previously mentioned. It creates a kind of unity. These things are risky, of course. There’s the risk that people might dismiss it as bad, weak expression, but there’s also the possibility of saying

more about that one thing, with greater depth and greater resonance. Another art form, which makes use of repetition of course, is music. All kinds of music use repetition and variation in a good way.

TMC: Thank you for mentioning creativity and evolution of language use. You talk about Twitter and uses of technology to help understand these things. My next question is about technology. What can you say about how corpus stylistics can help the teacher-researcher?

MT: The first thing that John Sinclair said about corpus studies is that you can look at a lot of language if you have a corpus, and that looking at a lot of language enables you to see it differently. That is true in a sense, however, we can't really look at any more language now than we could before because we can't read faster, and our eyes can't cope with looking at more text at any one time. But, we can now search through great bodies of language much more easily than we could 50 years ago. Corpus linguistics is particularly powerful in these areas and the great keyword at Birmingham in corpus linguistics is *collocation*. The company a particular word keeps makes you realise that we shouldn't look at language as a process of a word at a time selection, but rather as the use of chunks and multi-word units. There are very strong preferences in the shape of particular multi-word units. Two might look very similar to each other but one is frequently used by native speakers and the other one isn't ever used. That's the kind of thing that Michael Hoey has written about quite a lot in his theory of language *priming*, the natural and the unnatural. Whether we talk about it in terms of priming or collocation frequency we are focusing on the phrasal nature of language. I think that's the core of it. Looking at corpus work, to my mind it is quite grammatical, it is paradigmatic, it is saying that the paradigm is not one word wide, it's three or four words wide. The challenge for anyone looking at that kind of corpus work, from a discourse orientation, is to move from that paradigmatic framework to a focus on sequencing. How can we make corpus studies work for the long distance texture, the syntagmatic extension, of a narrative text? And that's what I've been most interested in.

Going back to the teacher/researcher, I think there's a lot we can do with poems. In poems we don't have so many issues with long-distance links but we have lots of local, powerful choices which may be highly predictable and primed,

or on the other hand they may be extremely exceptional and jarring in a sense or marked, or foregrounded. Bill Louw's work has been very interesting in that area. One of the simplest things he does is just take the opening lines of a Philip Larkin poem and takes out the lexical words and thus leaves the grammatical words in the string and puts a wild card in each of the places where the lexical words would be. Checking this modified chain against a corpus, he can show what that grammatical structure is typically used for, what kinds of phrases and expressions it is usually used for. He can then productively compare those 'norms' with the poet's actual lexical choices, and can reveal very interesting implicit evaluative meanings where Larkin has used some strange words in a grammatical frame that is used for some other purpose usually.

TMC: In your book *Total Speech*, you discuss *integrational linguistics* and this approach questions the very idea of entities such as the English language. That might seem counterintuitive to members of JALT tasked with teaching English—what comments could you give about what an integrationist position is on this idea of a national language and what that might mean for language teachers?

MT: I edited a collection on that topic about four years ago with Routledge and I'd recommend some of those papers by people like Roy Harris and Chris Hutton. Chris Hutton teaches in Hong Kong and there are all sorts of local issues there, as I'm sure there are in Japan, around the business of teaching language, especially teaching English. Integrational linguists are constantly wanting to emphasise the gap between the ways we might think about language in theory and the practicality of factors which drive pragmatic activities such as teaching. *Integrationists*, in theory, question the existence of languages. They see no reason why English should be seen as a rounded, well bounded, distinct thing: a language. They see language everywhere, and then they see people do political things, such as creating boundaries between things and say, "That is English. That over there is not English." But, we know over and over again that we come across words like ciabatta and lasagne, and then people debate "Are these English words?" "Is cappuccino an English word?" And these boundaries begin to collapse as soon as you put any pressure on them. Supposing that nations were dispensed with, then we'd still have language, wouldn't

we? It's an add-on. These things such as calling English the national language of such-and-such a country are political acts. They are not trivial acts. Integrational linguistics is that it tries to get back to absolute fundamentals. If English and French are similar in being languages, why were they taught to him so very differently when he was at school, Roy Harris asks in his chapter. His conclusion is that his teachers had adopted a very unsatisfactory theory of language, treating language as essentially telementation via a shared, fixed code. The Hutton article talks about the role of English and correctness, and internal endonormative standards versus exonormative standards in Hong Kong. Rukmini Bhaya Nair provides an insightful discussion of the role of English in India. English is spoken by so many native speakers of English in India today that it is bound to become more important internationally as well as within that country.

TMC: I think a lot of what you say has relevance for English teachers in Japan. It might be part of the language teachers' job to question these norms. Additionally, what other tips can you give to teacher-researchers in Japan?

MT: One of the hot topics in the conference I tend to go to these days is *multimodality*. A renewed recognition that being effective in using language, whether it is learning English, or Japanese or whatever, is so much more than the speech stream or the writing and reading channel. That gesture, presentation of self, ambient factors, visual cues, setting, all of these multimodal things that we deploy everyday, are relevant to linguistic communication. Multimodality in a typical speech interaction has come back into linguistics studies in a big way. Some of it has been taken over by the psychologists, so gesture, for example, such an important part of speech, I think the psychology departments are doing more of it than the linguistics departments. There's no reason why studies can't combine the two. These are areas where the technology reflects these things. Forty years ago it was fiendishly difficult to get recordings of speech interactions of such quality that you could track gesture, posture, facial expressions, and so on along with the speech stream. Mostly, our recordings and transcripts did not capture whether or not the person was pulling a face as they spoke, was looking at the addressee or turned away, whether they were slumped in their chair when they spoke, even though we know that these

things all matter as they are part of the semiosis of the interaction. Multimodality applies even to something as old as poetry. The traditional way that people would encounter poetry would be to purchase a slim volume of poems published by Faber or someone like that and perhaps never hearing the poet's voice (and only seeing their face in a still photograph, at best). But today, poets are constantly travelling around the country doing readings, can be heard on radio and seen and heard on websites, and the visibility of the performance of poetry has changed hugely. People as often hear and encounter a performed poem on the radio or the Internet as they read it in textual form. So, for many reasons multimodality is a topic of great interest. So one of my suggestions to young researchers would be to be as aware as they can be of the emerging technologies that are available for the creation, recording, studying, capture, and segmentation of language in use.

TMC: Thank you so much for the points about how teachers can get into research. Thank you very much for your ideas and your time.

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