

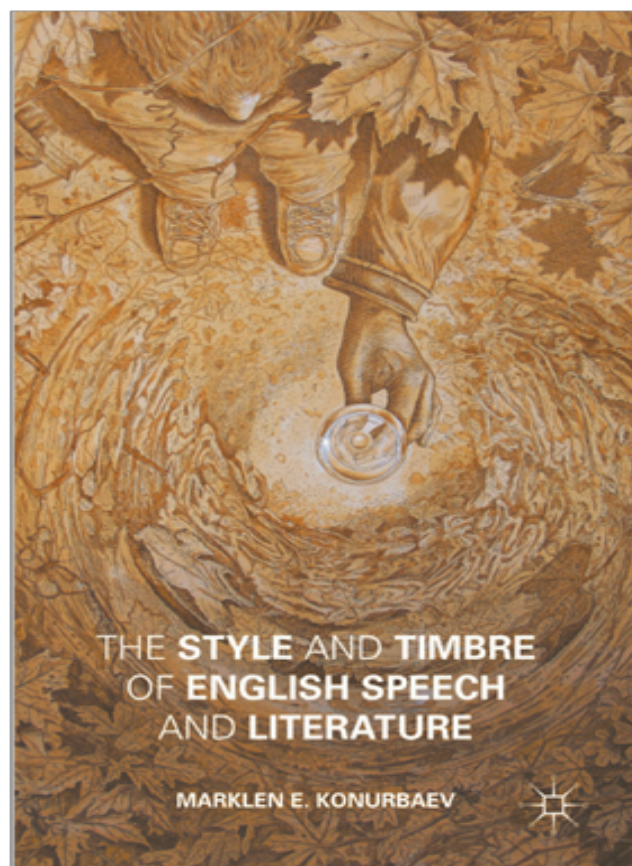
The Style and Timbre of English Speech and Literature. Marklen E. Konurbaev. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 203 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-51947-4

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Professor Marklen E. Konurbaev offers a relatively new approach to the study of voice in literature based on a new understanding of foregrounding. This well-established notion in the theory of stylistics, however, has been presented in an unusual light in the book – not as a set of stylistic and semantic features defamiliarizing a unit of speech and triggering its latent expressive potential, but as a canvas of expression that spans between the elements that are made variously prominent in a text or speech. Foregrounding in this sense is not viewed as ‘a single point in space and time’, but rather as a perception landscape bracketed by mental strings that connect such prominent elements in the minds of the perceiving audience. This vision of foregrounding (pp. 9-29) presents the expression potential that goes over and above a single element’s semantic features in speech but liaises expressive capacity to a span of deictic references in the text, both anaphoric and cataphoric.

The book focuses on the aspect of the text that determines its adequate understanding viz. the author’s voice and the overall ‘timbre of writing’ (pp. 3, 12–31, 126). Presumably, the foregrounding of the linguistic elements used in text activates the mechanisms of perception triggered by the auditory zones of the brain. Professor Marklen Konurbaev refers to a relatively recent research by Olaf Sporns (2011) that aims to develop a map of neural connections (‘connectome’) determining understanding and the effect of mental hearing (pp. 103). A rather subjective estimate of the role and place of style is thus rooted in the activity of the zones of the brain directly involved in the process of speech perception. Foregrounding is a double-sided process. On the side of the reader, it is fully justified by his or her experience, culture, memory and immediate emotional reactions to a speech element that is considered to be more prominent



than others. On the writer’s side, it seems to be fully instrumental, being based on syntactic, compositional and other linguistic means.

In this sense, every element in speech remains contextually defamiliarised until the moment of its full pragmatic resolution. Once the canvas of perception is completed in the mind of a reader of a text – straight a voice or timber arises as a focal point of perception spanning between the ‘impact zones’ of

the text – a term that the author occasionally uses as a synonym for prominence (p.129, pp.131–132). The author claims that the oral and mental ‘timbre’ have the same nature and origin in the auditory zone of the brain. Having equipped himself with the theory of human brain connectome, the author of the book draws associative lines between his theory of timbre and the neurophysiological basis of the process of speech comprehension.

The main goal of the book, as the author himself sees it, is to build the basis of understanding that includes both expression and perception (pp. 91-95). Marklen Konurbaev believes that the timbre of speech, viewed as a map of prominent elements in the text that are supporting the canvas of expression, could be effectively used to match the author’s intention and the reader’s comprehension of speech. The book covers a wide variety of texts and styles, ranging from everyday speech contexts to works of fiction. The author’s approach reveals most stunning semantic implications in the novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and E. M. Forster, Ursula K. Le Guin and George Orwell, Terry Pratchett and modern British young writers. The book is arranged as a series of analyses applying the author’s research methodology to four functional styles: everyday communication, official documents, journalism and fiction. The message of the text intended by its author is far from being the sum of facts, names and semantic cauls of words. Each of the four functional styles cumulatively foregrounds the message of its own that is discoverable on the map of the relatively significant ‘impact zones’ based on various means – not necessarily purely factual or linguistic. Journalism targets the reader’s opinion (p.159), fiction – immersion in a new reality (p. 173), everyday style of speech aims to create a comfortable atmosphere of interpersonal communication (p. 140). Professor Konurbaev’s analysis of a fragment from the novel by the 2017 Nobel laureate in literature Kazuo Ishiguro *The Remains of the Day* uncovers a psychological type of a samurai (as Marklen Konurbaev calls it) (pp. 177–178) lurching behind the ‘façade’ of a butler. These two images merge in the mind of the author whose vision of the English butler was a creation of his own and partially based on the scenes of his childhood in Japan (p. 176).

Professor Konurbaev’s vast erudition allows him to draw most unusual strings and associations to peoples, their customs and traditions that remain hidden or partially concealed behind the most ephemeral expression deeply rooted in culture. These examples, undoubtedly validate the author’s approach and reveal its powerful potential in interpretation of texts. The book is written as a fascinating research journey that will be easily grasped by a wide audience of students, young researchers, philosophers, linguists,

phoneticians, literary critics and even writers who would enjoy the author’s occasional playful metaphor and literary allusion – even in the argumentative part of its writing. The author offers to all of them a most intriguing vision of ‘a sound wave in mind’ rather than in the air, relating it primarily to general comprehension and understanding. This research is neither phonetic, nor strictly stylistic, but relates sooner to the general theory of understanding and hermeneutics. However, the author is quite positive about the role of ‘sound’ in this analysis, claiming that oral perception is an indispensable part of all speech comprehension. According to Marklen Konurbaev, timbre and voice appear as neural sensation in the auditory zone of the brain in the perception of the written speech – much like in the ordinary oral speech comprehension. While relying on the study of the mechanisms of speech dating back to the middle of the 20th century (the works by Professors Nikolai Zhinkin and Alexander Sokolov) and up to modern times (the LOT hypothesis by Professor Jerry Fodor and Mentalese by Stephen Pinker), the author claims that the oral impression in the perception of speech is the result of foregrounding (or prominence, as he prefers to call it). Automated expression in speech bypasses the zones in charge of articulation. But every unfamiliar linguistic element forces the reader to slow down, which inevitably switches on ‘oral comprehension’ in the brain. The map of such elements, claims Marklen Konurbaev, adequately reflects the depth of understanding and materializes in the form of mental ‘audition’ or auditory sensations in the brain.

Presumably, this approach to the study of literary and other texts that was initiated by the school of the late Professor Olga Akhmanova at Moscow State University back in the late 1960s, stands apart as a yet not clearly defined lane of research never clinging to any traditional linguistic discipline. The author of the book calls this approach philological, implying that it best reveals the essence of the true understanding of texts based on the dialectics of the oral and the written forms of speech which are, arguably, its only form of existence (p. 1).

The Style and Timbre of English Speech and Literature by Marklen E. Konurbaev is surely an important and useful book for all those who are inclined to study the language broadly and often philosophically. It describes ‘the knots’ – the points where different sides of the natural human speech meet for the collective fulfilment of their principal task to function as a means of communication and representation of the world around.

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