

# *Comparing theoretical approaches towards style: Several possible criteria and changing cultural contexts\**

MICHAL KŘÍSTEK  
(Brno)

The main aim of this contribution is to propose a general scheme that provides the possibility to compare theoretical approaches to style, including approaches rooted in various cultural contexts. The contribution will begin with a revision relating to my previous work on issues of comparative stylistics, followed by an outline of the proposed modified scheme and by its brief test on two works emerging from the same cultural background, but published more than ninety years apart.

The reason for attempting to introduce a scheme of this kind is linked with my previous work, which tried to compare twentieth-century Czech and English (especially British) theoretical approaches to style (Křístek 2012). This work will be used as a starting point in this contribution. Although both compared groups of approaches were rooted in the European cultural context and although some other points of contact could be found (e.g. the influence of Roman Jakobson's works and of the Prague School in general), it was quite difficult to establish criteria for a comparison of this kind that would be general enough and at the same time offer some practical use. At that time, the general theoretical framework for my comparison was provided by a work on comparative

---

\* This study was supported by the project GAP406/11/0294 Nový encyklopedický slovník češtiny online (Enc-Czech online).

stylistics written by F. Miko (Miko 1976: 16–25), in which three levels of comparative stylistics are distinguished, namely: 1) the level of comparing values of particular means of expression, relevant from the viewpoint of stylistics, 2) the level of comparing the sphere of metalanguage in general (the number of styles distinguished in various approaches, the hierarchy of styles etc.), 3) the level of comparing languages with regard to the character of their particular language standards and also with regard to the relationships among varieties of the particular language in general.

Using Miko's work as the main source, I established four main criteria (Miko 1976, Křístek 2012: 67–70): 1) for the definitions of style and stylistics. They are mostly based on the principle of choice and variation, 2) the position of stylistics among other theoretical disciplines – Czech as well as British stylistics may be said to have the status of marginal disciplines, from the synchronic point of view both sharing points of contact, for example with general linguistics, literary theory, sociolinguistics, or psycholinguistics, 3) the stratification of stylistics (although from today's point of view I find it more appropriate to speak about branches rather than about "strata", which itself implies a certain hierarchy) – twentieth-century Czech theoretical stylistics may be said to be mostly descriptive, practical stylistics mostly prescriptive; however, the twentieth-century British theoretical works on stylistics are more evaluative than the Czech ones, 4) the extent to which the compared theoretical approaches use the concept of function – for the twentieth-century Czech theories of style this is the central concept. They operate mainly with functions of language varieties and with functions of means of expression belonging to these language varieties, and also occasionally with the functions of style as such. The twentieth-century British theories of style frequently employ the concept of functions of language in general and the concept of communicative functions of utterances in particular texts.

At this point it is appropriate to mention a well-known fact that was proved during the above-mentioned comparison of twentieth-century Czech and British theories of style, namely one of the facts linked with cultural diversity: a simple translation is not adequate in some cases, especially in the sphere of the humanities. It is, e.g. possible to translate the Czech term "stylovánorma", rooted in the tradition of the Prague School, and to speak/write about "stylistic norms", but this kind of approach seems to be a bit pointless, as the translation itself does not ensure that the translated term is comprehensible to the target

recipients and their cultural context – simply because the concept as such may not be a part of the target cultural context.

Despite the possibility of misunderstandings of this kind, and on the basis of the above-mentioned comparison, I have tried to move one step further and propose a modified, more general scheme from the area of comparative stylistics, as mentioned in the introduction of this study. An attempt of this kind follows. The modified scheme should in the future provide a possibility to compare works on style written in various periods, various areas, and various cultural contexts, also corresponding with various intellectual styles (Galtung 1981). Although in the sphere of the humanities the existence of different terminological systems must be taken into consideration, as mentioned above, in my opinion it is possible to introduce a general scheme of this kind.

The proposed scheme describing theoretical concepts of style is a sequence of five simple what-questions (literally; in English, for the sake of simplicity the scheme could be referred to e.g. as a “5wh-sequence”): 1) WHAT definition of style is used? 2) WHAT kind of text is dealt with? 3) WHAT varieties of the particular language are taken into consideration? 4) WHAT is the purpose of work with texts? 5) WHAT other extralinguistic factors are taken into consideration?

This scheme definitely requires some commentary, as it is obvious from the questions above, that it is a scheme that includes five main criteria (linguistic as well as extralinguistic). 1) It begins with the definition of style used in the particular concept, simply to limit the territory within which the particular approach aims to operate. As mentioned above, this is necessary especially in the sphere of the humanities and its diverse terminology.

2) The types of texts taken into consideration must be included, as well. It makes a considerable difference if some theoretical approaches limit themselves only to the sphere of fiction, or whether they strive to convey the whole spectrum of texts, i.e. all kinds of fiction as well all kinds of non-fiction.

3) The same also applies to the varieties of the particular language used in texts – i.e. whether only standard language (and the stage of its development in the particular period) is taken into consideration when dealing with texts, or whether the approaches take into account the whole spectrum of language varieties, including non-standard ones.

4) The main extralinguistic factor proposed for the comparison of theoretical approaches to style (following the concepts of the Prague School) is the purpose

of work with texts, with the focus especially on prescription vs. description as the main aim of the work, i.e. on providing instructions on what texts of a particular kind should be like – that is on how to create them, or on providing information on what texts of a particular kind (with the focus on issues of style) are really like.

5) There are of course other extralinguistic factors to be taken into consideration, such as the recipients (implicitly already present in criterion 4, stated above), the situation in which texts operate, including the wider cultural context, and also the mutual interplay of these factors – similar to the description of the interplay of factors provided by J. Firbas (1997) when investigating issues of functional sentence perspective.

Since any proposed scheme must be tested in practice, two works have been chosen for a very brief test. They are two works dealing with Slovak stylistics, published over nine decades apart. In this particular case, this means each of them operated in a considerably different situation. The first work chosen for comparison is *Slovenská štylistika (Slovak stylistics)*; Šeňšel 1921 – although another place in the book says 1922, I will keep to the year stated in the imprint). This is the first modern Slovak work of this kind. The second is *Štylistika súčasnej slovenčiny (The stylistics of contemporary Slovak)*; Findra 2013) – up to now the most recent Slovak monograph on stylistics. When the proposed 5wh-sequence is used, the results are as follows:

1) WHAT definition of style is used? At this starting point, no major differences can be found. Both works operate with the concept of style based on the way of organizing means of expression in texts (Šeňšel 1921: 3; Findra 2013: 222).

2) WHAT kind of text is dealt with? At this particular point as well as in point 3) below, the above-mentioned changes in cultural context are perhaps most conspicuous. Šeňšel's work deals only with texts from the sphere of fiction written in Slovak, accompanied by examples taken from common usage, as was adequate to the situation of Slovak language in the 1920s – at that time officially a branch of the “Czechoslovak language”. Findra, on the other hand, takes into consideration the whole spectrum of texts, from the sphere of both fiction and non-fiction (scholarly texts, administrative texts, etc.), as adequate to the position of Slovak as the developed language of an independent country.

3) WHAT varieties of the particular language are taken into consideration? At this point, the situation is similar to the previous point. While Findra's work

is simply a monograph dealing with issues of only one scholarly discipline, as is normal in the context of modern and well-developed languages, ca. ninety years earlier Šeňšel's work had to function not only as a work on issues of style and stylistics (poetics, respectively), but also had to deal with general grammatical issues, also reflecting the purist tendencies of that time.

4) WHAT is the purpose of work with texts? The answer here could be quite simple: prescription vs. description. Šeňšel's work is a secondary school handbook on issues of style and stylistics (it also provides information on the basic concepts of classical poetics, such as metaphor, metonymy, etc., although a specialized Slovak work on poetics was published at the same time in Prague) (Menšík and Bujnák 1921). Šeňšel's work also focuses on the rules for using language properly. As no general authoritative works on Slovak were available at that time, it also includes basic grammatical rules, some purist recommendations, and examples of proper usage (how to avoid, e.g. elements rooted in Hungarian, etc.). Findra's work, on the other hand, is a stylistic monograph, aimed at university students and at the academic community in general, describing only issues of style in modern Slovak in all kinds of texts using all language varieties, and providing his own original theoretical approach based on the occurrence and functioning of special units (e.g. "štyléma", pl. "štylémy"). This is also linked with the final point.

5) WHAT other extralinguistic factors are taken into consideration? The factors are, especially, the way the authors make contact with the recipients (see point 4), using various degrees of explicitness (Šeňšel 1921: 89; Findra 2013: 10), and the way recipients are addressed, in accordance with the character of the particular works. Šeňšel's work gives direct instructions (e.g. Šeňšel 1921: 78f.), while Findra's work provides a description of facts and independent conclusions derived from them.

As it is possible to see from this comparison based on the 5wh-sequence, the main differences between the compared works are represented by two extralinguistic factors, namely by: 1) the aim – prescription vs. description (see above) and 2) the supposed reader – secondary school students vs. university students. Other differences are caused mainly by the different stages of the language, as well as metalanguage development, and also with the development of the language community in general. (See the above-mentioned fact that some brief grammatical notes as well as purist remarks were included in Šeňšel's

work, which is temporarily conditioned, due to the lack of widely available works of this particular kind.)

Although this was really a very brief test and although the proposed scheme definitely needs to be tested much more extensively, preferably on works rooted in completely different cultural contexts (and possibly complemented by a general scheme of comprehensive stylistic analysis), the above-stated observations seem to prove that the proposed scheme works. And at this point, one important question emerges – one more WHAT – namely, what is the scheme good for? Why is it desirable to pay attention to something as abstract as issues of metalanguage in the sphere of stylistics? In my opinion, the main reason to pay attention to works dealing with this particular abstract sphere of metalanguage may simply be to describe and to better understand the similarities and differences between the particular cultures the compared theoretical approaches are rooted in, which is all in all a task that reaches far beyond the issues of style and stylistics.

## Bibliography

- Bujnák P., Menšík J., 1921, *Slovenská poetika*, Praha.  
Findra J., 2013, *Štylistika súčasnej slovenčiny*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Martin.  
Firbas J., 1995, *Functional sentence perspective in written and spoken communication*, Cambridge.  
Galtung J., 1981, *Structure, culture and intellectual style*, “Social Science Information”, 20, 6, pp. 817–857.  
Křístek M., 2012, *A comparison of twentieth century theories of style*, Brno.  
Miko F., 1976, *Štylové konfrontácie*, Bratislava.  
Šenšel E., 1921, *Slovenská štylistika*, Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš.

### *Comparing theoretical approaches towards style: Several possible criteria and changing cultural contexts*

The main aim of this contribution is to propose a general scheme that provides the possibility of comparing theoretical approaches to style, including approaches rooted in various cultural contexts. This kind of general scheme from the area of comparative stylistics offers the possibility to compare works on style written in various periods and various areas. The proposed scheme describing theoretical concepts of style, moving from linguistic to extra-

linguistic factors, is a sequence of five simple what-questions (in English, for the sake of the scheme could be simply referred to, e.g. as a “5 wh-sequence”): 1) WHAT definition of style is used? 2) WHAT kind of text is dealt with? 3) WHAT varieties of the particular language are taken into consideration? 4) WHAT is the purpose of work with texts? 5) WHAT other extralinguistic factors are taken into consideration? Since each proposed scheme must be tested in practice, two works are chosen for a brief test – namely, two works dealing with Slovak stylistics, published over nine decades apart, which in this particular case means each of them operated in a considerably different cultural context. The main differences between the compared works are 1) the aim – prescription vs. description, and 2) the supposed reader – secondary school students vs. university students (the academic community in general, respectively). Other differences are caused mainly by the different stages of the language as well as metalanguage development, and with the development of the language community in general.

*Keywords: comparative stylistics, cultural contexts, 5wh-sequence, style, extralinguistic factors.*