

# A Literature Review on Prose Study

Gangni Chen

School of Foreign Languages

Northwest University

Xi'an, China

**Abstract**—Prose, as a literary genre, has been scantily studied. This paper attempts to survey the relevant studies of it. It firstly examines the concept of prose so that a clarification can be made. Then it surveys some perspectives of prose study namely, aesthetic, linguistic and semantic. It is expected that the present survey will not only enhance people's understanding of prose but also promote the further study of prose.

**Keywords**—*prose; aesthetic perspective; linguistic perspective; semantic perspective*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Prose is one of literary genres and it has undergone a long history from its coming into being to its present development. As a literary genre, its development is inseparable from that of novel. And it can be said that novel originates from prose. In seventeenth century, the novel started to rise as an independent literary genre with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the pioneering work (Wang, 1998:51-53). It is widely read among various walks of people, and differs from poetry in the sense that only the well-educated people with certain knowledge of literature can have access to it. Thus it may be said that to some degree, it is because of such easiness of understanding and comprehending that prose enjoys great popularity. Contrary to its popularity is that the study of it is scantier compared with that of other literary genres, such as fiction, drama and poetry. This directly leads to the fact that it seems that everyone knows prose but knows little about it. Therefore it is necessary to review what have been done on the study of it so that we know more about it and understand it better.

## II. CONCEPT OF PROSE

### A. Definition of Prose

For long time, the study of prose has been overlooked and even the definition of it lacks the precision and to some degree is very vague. For the convenience, it is required that a clear understanding of what is prose is necessary.

Originally, the word prose originated from the Latin one "prosa" meaning straightforward discourse. In the new Oxford American dictionary it is defined as "written or spoken language in its ordinary form, without metrical structure." This indicates that any writing not in verse form can be thought of prose. It can also be termed in two senses: the broad one and the narrow one as well as the one which is

in between. In a broad sense, it refers to a literary medium distinguished from poetry especially by its irregularity and variety of rhythm and its close correspondence to the patterns. According to this definition, fiction and drama fall within the scope of prose. In a narrow sense, however, it refers to a type of literary genres opposed to poetry, fiction and drama. And there are some features which make it possible to distinguish it from poetry, drama and fiction.

Poetry is mostly characterized by its meter and stanza which can strike reader immediately. And meter and stanza are the two obvious ways to differ a piece of poetry from prose. Sometimes poetry can be called verse, and this depends greatly on the natural rhythms and sounds of language for its special effects (Burton, 1973:1). Most often, the first word of every line begins with a capital letter, even in the middle of a sentence. While meters in prose are hardly unperceivable to reader and stanza does not exist which makes a prose passage seems to be shapeless.

Fiction is different from prose in its imagination. It includes characters who does not really exist, event which have never occurred and places which may not be real. As we read fiction our imagination is stimulated so that we become part of the action as it unfolds, sympathetic towards characters as they develop and aware of the world in which they live. The story in fiction can be narrative by different person, first person perspective, the third person, while prose is often concerned with the writer's experience, speculation or their preference. The narrator in most cases is the writer. While in fiction, the narrator and the writer are different persons.

Drama is literature designed to be performed by actions. Like fictions it may focus on a single character or a small number of characters and it enacts functional elements as if they were happening in the present, to be witnessed by an audience. Although most modern plays use prose dialogue, in the belief that dramatic speech should be as lifelike as possible, many play from the past like those of ancient Greece and renaissance England are in poetic form. It is mainly composed of the character's conversation or monologue, which is sometimes called line.

### B. Categorization of Prose

There are different categorizations of prose varying with different people. Generally speaking the influential and widely accepted ones are the categorization of prose into three types and that into four types. The representative of the

former is Alexander (1963) who categorized prose into three types: narrative, description and argument. The first type refers to writing which describes an action or a series of actions to tell a story; the second refers to writing which describes scenes, object, people, or even a person's feeling in such a way that we can imagine them vividly. For the last type he remarks that it differs from the previous two in "idea, not about action or object: a problem is presented, an argument is built logically round it and often, but not always, the author draws conclusions from his argument, giving his view of the question that he is discussing" (Alexander, 1963:68). Besides Alexander, another one who holds such kind of categorization of prose is Sheridan (1981). According to him, "in essence, description is spatial, and narration is temporal" (1981: 165) which well illustrates the difference between description and narration. He also makes it clear that sometimes in a piece of writing description and narration blend so effectively so that it is almost indistinguishable. Tao is one who holds such view in China and further explicates there are different forms of prose, such as letters, diary, reminiscent, traveling account (2002: 1).

Generally speaking, the categorization of prose into three types to some degree has made its own contributions to the understanding of the various types of prose writing, but the deficiency it has lies in the fact that the different types of prose based on such categorization may overlap. As it is generally known that narrative, descriptive and argumentative which are actually three modes of expression always occur in the same piece of writing simultaneously. Thus when this happens, it will be hard to decide to which type a piece of prose writing should belong.

Those who are the proponents of categorization of prose into four types regard that prose can be categorized into: narrative, argument, object, lyric (Fang, 2004:35). Their definitions of descriptive, narrative and argument are almost like that by Alexander. In this categorization, lyric is defined as the writing of feeling expression. Though such a categorization is apparently much finer and more delicate than the previous one, still some problems are involved in it. Firstly it excludes some prose writings concerned with scenes and objects hence breaches the "principle of inclusiveness"-one of the principles of categorization proposed by Ye (Fang, 2004:31). Secondly there is no consistent standard with respect to categorization for the standard of narrative and argumentative is based on the mode of expression, while object and lyric are on the subject-matter dealt with in the prose writing.

Due to the deficiencies mentioned in the above categorizations, the present paper would like to divide prose into four types according to the subject-matter involved in it, namely character, scenery, event, as well as argument. The advantages obviously lie in the consistency in categorization on one hand and on the other there is neither inclusiveness nor exclusiveness involved.

### III. THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES OF PROSE STUDY

#### A. Study of Prose from the Aesthetic Perspective

Aesthetics is the study of beauty in nature and arts (Ross et al, 1998:5). It is originally a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty. And it was established as a discipline by German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. The word "aesthetics" can be employed to mean the appreciation of the qualities perceived in works of art or the mind and emotions in relation to a sense of beauty. Thus there are two factors involved in the composition of aesthetics; one is objective and the other subjective. The former refers to the aesthetic qualities which lie in the object and the latter points to human being without whose perception it will be hard to define the former.

Generally speaking, the object which possesses the aesthetic quality and can arouse certain emotion in human being can be called aesthetic object. It can be the concrete and tangible thing in nature as well as the artistic work created by the intelligence of human being. Without doubt, the various genres of literary works belong to the category of aesthetic object. Prose as one of genres of literature, is without exception aesthetic. That is, it gives reader pleasure. And the "beauty" characteristic of prose is mainly embodied in its formal and non-formal levels. Thus to appreciate prose is to recognize and enjoy the beauty both at formal and non-formal level. In this dynamic process the reader takes initiative to discover the beauty (Zhu, 2002:178). And it is mainly the sound, syntax, which are the formal level.

The formal level refers to the various figures of speech or rhetoric devices which are related to the phonological level, lexical level and sentence level. Mao illustrates some figures of speech at phonological level, such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, onomatopoeia. At lexical level, he mainly focuses on those figures of speech, such as metaphor, zeugma, at sentence level, he mainly discuss parallelism (Mao, 2005). All of the rhetoric devices can be used to achieve aesthetic function. The employment of various figures of speech as the aesthetic rhetoric for language used in this way will be more colorful and expressive; the images created on the reader will be more vivid and impressive.

#### B. Study of Prose from the Linguistic Perspective

With the advent of modern linguistics which has established itself as a scientific discipline at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Saussure being described as "father of modern linguistic" (Liu & Feng, 2002:94), Linguists start to be attracted to literary work, this is partly because "it represents data which can be accounted for in terms of models of linguistic description and the other that it represents data which can not be so accounted for" (Widowson, 1975:7).

In 1967 Miss Miles published her book entitled *style and proportion: the language of prose and poetry* which can be regarded as the earliest prose study from the linguistic perspective in modern times. It can also be considered as the earliest stylistic study of literary genres, for in 1969, two years later, Leech, Geoffrey's book exclusively concerned

with the study of poetry style made its appearance. Miss Miles's book is attempted at exploring the style of both prose and poetry. To achieve this end, the author sampled a corpus of 120 texts concerning both prose and poetry which range from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. On the basis of the relative number of adjectives, nouns, verbs, and connective, she categorized the corpus of both prose and poetry into three groups: predicative, the connective-subordinative, and the adjectival styles. Of the three styles, her counting results shows that the predicative emerges as the chief one in that nearly half the authors examined wrote in this style in preference to the others. (Hendricks, 1968:675)

The main attribution to the study of prose style made by Miss Miles can be that for the first time the previous vague description of prose style is replaced by something precise, for in the past people often resort to vague metaphorical description, characterizing an author's style as "crisp", "elegant", "ponderous", "formal", and the like without knowing precisely how they arrived at their particular judgment (Woodman, 1973:587).

Study of prose style similar to the above done by Miss Miles is also conducted by Lanham in 1983. He distinguishes noun and verb styles rather than predicative, the connective-subordinative, and the adjectival styles. According to him, verb style is 'based on verbs, on action', while a noun style is 'based on nouns, on stasis' (1983:11). Instead of building up a corpus and do the statistic work, he seems think that the sentence can be the basic structure of either noun style or verb style, such as:

(1) When we act in real life we often recognize it, either at the time or later. (Lanham, 1983:17)

Sentence (1) is often regarded as verb style, while for the following sentence:

(2) The connection between behavior in the socially real world and dramatic performance is a double link. (Lanham, 1983:16)

It is treated as noun style by Lanham. Furthermore based on the study of prose style at sentence level, he then turns to the prose style at the passage level. But his judgment and assessment of prose style at the passage level seems to be a little bit subjective and impressionistic for lack of the precise qualitative approach to support and testify his assessment. What is common between Lanham and Miss Mille's studies is that both of them start with 'grammatical perspective' (Hendricks, 1968:675). While the advantage of Miss Mill's study over that of Lanham is that she forms her claim on the sound basis of counting work. Anyhow both of them overlook the study of prose style from the semantic level. In the history the semantic level did have been explored, but not as a means to explore the prose style. And this semantic focus is on the evaluative meaning of prose. Actually we will brief survey such study in the following part.

### *C. Study of Prose from the Semantic Perspective*

Although the study of prose can date back to ancient times in western country, the study of prose from semantic approach only takes place in modern times, for in ancient

times; rhetoric is mainly concerned with investigating the various techniques in prose which are aimed at achieving persuasion (Luo, 2006) rather than semantic meaning. To be specific the semantic approach to the study of prose is largely focus on the evaluative meaning.

In the history of linguistics, "evaluative" has long been regarded as one of language functions on which linguists 'inherited Buhler's idea.' (Xu, 2006: 56) and different terms have been adopted for it which may differ from each other a little. Jacobson (1960: 353-359) uses 'emotive' which focuses on addresser, this is the function by which language is used to expressed the speaker's attitudes, feelings and emotions towards what he is talking about, while Hymes names what Jacobson called 'emotive' as 'expressive'. And this emphasis of evaluative function of language has also been reflected in the relevant studies of prose in which different terms, such as emotion, tone etc. are employed with respect to this evaluative meaning. Although such studies are scant and scattered, lack of comprehensiveness and system, the contributions they made cannot be ignored. They indicate that for the first time, the semantic meaning of prose is taken notice of.

In 1973 The Literary critics' attention paid to the evaluative meaning of prose language was witnessed with Burton's the criticism of prose. In this book, Burton made a clear acknowledgement of emotional meaning of prose. To clarify his idea, he distinguished two kinds of word meaning, one is reference, and the other is emotive meaning. According to him, reference refers to the images and ideas that are associated with a word, while emotive meaning is concerned with the feelings that are associated with a word. At the same time, he recognized the importance of a meaningful context in determining the two kinds of meaning which can be clearly demonstrated by his statement that "little is gained by discussing single words in isolation from a meaningful context." (Burton, 1973:27) He also claims that there is variation of using the two kinds of meaning among different authors, for example, a scientist tends to use language more referentially, an orator more emotively. His contribution can be generalized as a. the address of the importance of context in determining the emotive meaning of a word, b. the awareness of emotive differences among different authors. In this sense, his understanding is quite deep and profound, but his aims are neither directed at distinguishing the various evaluative meanings nor at discovering other means which can achieve such emotive meaning besides words. Fortunately the weaknesses in those two aspects can be complemented by appraisal theory and appraisal stylistics. For the former makes a detailed and clear distinction of various appraisal meanings, and the latter give equal importance to all the various means conveying appraisal meaning, apart from words.

Stylisticians who study the style of literary works, without exception, as well, made their contribution to the studies of evaluative meaning of prose language with the employment of different terms rather than the word evaluative itself. Among them Leonora Woodman is the influential one. He compares two pieces of prose writings written by Hemingway and Cooper and shows that one of the

variances of different author rests with their different choice of diction. In the former's work, adjectives used are sensuous ones of simple description, depending on the external world for their significance and verification, in contrast, in the latter's writing, adjectives are often 'evaluative' in that they suggest qualities arrived at through mental discrimination. Since Woodman is attempted at exploring the prose style at different linguistic levels, such as phonology, lexicon, sentence structure, rather than the mere level of diction, inevitably, his discussion of the evaluative meaning of prose is superficial rather than thorough and profound. Though he mentions the adjective words which can encode the evaluative meaning, he does not discuss if the other classes of word can do the same as adjectives.

Admittedly, the study of evaluative aspect of prose is not exclusively the concern of literary critics and stylistician; scholars in other field also have an involvement in it. Miles, Bertonasco, Karns (1991) out of their pedagogical concerns stress the emotive aspects of prose. Instead they use the term 'tone' to refer to the emotion reflected in prose. According to them, this emotion is usually regarded as the sum of two attitudes. This first is the writer's attitude toward his/er subject, the second is writer's attitude toward his/er audience (1991:207). Such emotion toward subject can be infinitely diverse- can range from hatred to love, from sorrow to joy. And the emotion can vary widely within a single piece of writing-even within a single paragraph. Obviously this emotion just covers part or a small portion of affect in appraisal meaning. And what deserves our attention is that they notice the dynamic aspect of the emotion in the text. The second component of tone, unlike the first one, does not vary. It can be chatty, intimate, reserved or impersonal. And such attitude actually deals with the relationship between the author' and readers. According to Halliday & Hasan (1985) both of the attitudes form the interpersonal meaning of language. In this sense, Miles et al do make more achievement than their predecessors in prose study at semantic level.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper gives a general survey of the previous studies on prose. At the very beginning, the definition concept of prose is presented which can be understood in broad sense and narrow sense. But it seems that prose regarded as opposed to poetry, fiction and drama in the narrow sense is more acceptable. Then the categorizations of prose are provided. After that three perspectives for the studies of prose are introduced: aesthetic perspective, linguistic perspective and semantic perspective with a summary of their own advantages and deficiencies. It is hoped that the present survey will clarify some confusion among people and enhance people's understanding of prose as well as promote the further study of prose.

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