Mind Style: Deviance from the Norm?

Linda Pillière
MIND STYLE: DEVIANCE FROM THE NORM?

Linda Pillière
Aix-Marseille Université – LERMA EA 853

Résumé: Cet article revient sur l’interprétation courante du terme « mind style », pour démontrer que d’autres facteurs, l’importance du contexte socio-culturel et le rôle du destinataire, jouent un rôle fondamental dans la mise en place du « mind style ».

Mots-clés: style, mind-style, stylistique, déviance, contexte socio-culturel.

In Chapter 6 of Style and Fiction, Leech and Short investigate the concept of mind style. The fact that they choose to dedicate a whole chapter to the topic reveals the importance that they attribute to this notion. The chapter demonstrates that a critical analysis of a mind style requires both a detailed linguistic study at the microtextual level, while engaging with wider issues, with studying how the fictional world is experienced. Yet in spite of its rich potential for textual analysis, the term mind-style has not enjoyed the same success as point of view or focalization. Even the second edition of Style in Fiction offers a relatively limited number of references for further reading. The aim of this article then is to seek to understand why this should be. Is the term mind style deviant from the norm of narratological terms? And how exactly should the term deviant be understood? In order to address these questions it will be necessary to re-examine what exactly is meant by mind-style and how it has largely been interpreted in recent research.

The term mind style was first coined by Roger Fowler as “any distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self” (1977, 103). He goes on to say that “it is created through the writer using cumulatively, consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or
another which give rise to an impression of a world-view” (76). For Fowler, mind-style is an alternative to Uspensky’s “point of view on the ideological plane” which he considers to be too “cumbersome” (1996, 214). Following on from Fowler, Leech and Short use the term to refer to the way the fictional world is perceived or conceptualized, in preference to ‘world-view’ (2007, 151).

In order to demonstrate what they mean by mind style, all three use precise examples from twentieth-century literature. Fowler refers to Halliday’s study of Lok, the Neanderthal man in Golding’s *The Inheritors*, while Leech and Short analyse a passage seen through the eyes of the mentally-retarded Benjy in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Both of these analyses focus on the various consistent linguistic features that are used to present a limited appraisal of events. In the case of the passage concerning Benjy, it is a game of golf, and in the instance of Lok, it is a man drawing a bow and arrow and shooting. Neither Lok, nor Benjy possess the adequate vocabulary to name these events. Nor do they fully understand the relationship between cause and effect (Leech and Short 2007, 196). The limited cognitive skills of both these two characters are reflected in the choice of lexico-grammatical patterns. So in both instances, the reader is presented with a world view that is markedly different from his/her own, and both studies offer clear examples of language that is deviant, in so far as the syntax and lexis used are markedly different from the linguistic norm.

Subsequent analyses of mind-styles have tended to focus on the same kind of deviance i.e. examples of a character’s abnormal thought processes. Elena Semino, for example, has analysed metaphor and mind style in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1996) arguing that the use of machine metaphors by the first person narrator, Bromden, contribute to the creation of his mind-style and reflect his mental illness. In her analysis of metaphors in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Semino (2007) argues that the problems experienced by the main character, Christopher, when he tries to understand other people’s use of metaphors can in fact be linked to the fact that the protagonist suffers from Asperger’s syndrome, a disorder that affects the sufferer’s communication skills and ability to form social relationships. A more recent article (Semino, 2011) focuses on the use of deixis and fictional minds that work “in a striking and peculiar way”. Ineke Bockting (1995) examines the narratives of the three Compson brothers in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and concludes that the different ways in which the characters’ speech patterns are represented reflects various types of mental disorder.

Obviously such mind-styles present clear examples of a specific way of apprehending the fictional world. But Semino and Swindlehurst (1996) take this further when they argue that
although in theory mind style applies to all texts, in practice its relevance is limited to cases where a text's view of reality is perceived by the reader to suggest a particularly striking, idiosyncratic, or deviant understanding of the world. In such cases, an analysis of mind style provides a useful way to understand the workings of the text and to explain its effects.

However, I would contend that the theory of mind style is indeed relevant for all kinds of text and that, as Fowler himself argues, language constructs “a point of view which systematically transforms our common-sense world” (1996, 225). In fact, when we turn to look at what Fowler and Leech and Short have to say about mind style, we find a far more comprehensive approach than most recent studies on mind-style might suggest. Fowler (1977, 103), for example, states that

A mind style may analyze a character’s mental life more or less radically; may be concerned with the relatively superficial or relatively fundamental aspects of the mind; may seek to dramatize the order and structure of conscious thoughts, or just present the topics on which a character reflects, or display preoccupations, prejudices, perspectives and values which strongly bias a character’s world-view but of which s/he may be quite unaware.

Similarly, Leech and Short (2007,158) point out that mind style can be applied to a writer’s style in so far as it reflects his or her world view. They demonstrate that Henry James’s use of syntactic embedding is both a characteristic of his style and a linguistic feature that contributes to his creation of a fictional world bound up in intricate social codes i.e. his mind-style.

So why have so many subsequent studies focused on limited cognitive skills? And what have been the repercussions on the use of the term mind style in general? One answer to the first question is that unusual mind styles are immediately obvious to any reader because their linguistic features do not correspond to Standard English. When you read a passage such as

They were hitting little, across the pasture. I went back along the fence to where the flag was. It flapped on the bright grass and the trees. (Leech and Short 2007, 163)

there is no need to be a linguist, to realize that something strange is happening here, and that a very idiosyncratic way of viewing events is being created. Another reason, which is linked to the first, is that an unusual mind style is perceptible in a short passage and therefore offers clear examples for the critic. The extract from Golding’s The Inheritors that Halliday analyses, or the extract from Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury that features in Style in Fiction are just a few paragraphs, offering an ideal length for textual analysis.

However by limiting mind style to analysis of the unusual, less attention has been paid to the wide-reaching definitions given by Fowler and developed upon by Leech and Short that I quoted earlier. Indeed it may explain why
narratology has preferred to talk of voice or point of view. For, while it is obvious that critics consider that consciousness (Fludernik 1996) or cognitive style (Margolin 2003) play a vital role and should be analysed, they seem to fight shy of using the term mind style. This is particularly striking in Alan Palmer’s work, Fictional Minds. Although he insists upon the importance of the notion of “mind”, arguing that it includes “all aspects of our inner life” and that “the constructions of the minds of fictional characters by narrators and readers are central to our understanding of how novels work” (2004, 12) – he never actually uses the term “mind style” even though Style in Fiction figures in the bibliography and he does quote Leech and Short when he examines various kinds of discourse. Instead he opts for a term first introduced by Marie-Laure Ryan (1991), “embedded narratives”, to refer to “the whole of a character’s various perceptual and conceptual viewpoints, ideological world views” (2004, 15).

I would therefore argue that by focusing on mind styles that reflect limited cognitive skills, the concept of mind style has become far more limited than its original authors intended, and perhaps attracted fewer supporters than it actually deserves. From this two other hypotheses follow. Firstly, that the idea of deviance that is considered in most of the subsequent work on mind style is but one kind of deviance. Secondly, that the abnormal mind styles studied automatically lead to a focus on the individual, thus limiting the wider-reaching importance of the concept. To address the first point, I wish first to consider what exactly is meant by deviance, before examining two mind-styles that do not feature the abnormal deviance so frequently analysed.

The notion of deviance is a complex one and in Language and Literature, Leech evokes three categories of deviation: primary deviation, secondary deviation and tertiary deviation. There is not space to examine all three in detail here, and for the present discussion it is primary deviation which is the most relevant and which, according to Leech, is of two kinds:

a) Where the language allows a choice, the poet goes outside the normally occurring range of choice.

b) Where the language allows a choice, the poet denies himself the freedom to choose, using the same item in successive positions. (2008, 59)

In other words, deviance is perceived as being different from “norms of linguistic expression in general” (2008, 62). Studies on abnormal mind style have been mainly concerned with primary deviation type (a), with the normally occurring range of choice being that of Standard English grammar. Again, this is probably because such deviance is the most salient type. But this kind of deviation need not be so spectacular. It can simply be an unusual collocation
Mind Style: Deviance from the Norm?

which is salient at a microtextual level – and perhaps less easily noticed. To illustrate this point I will examine a few short extracts from Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, and the use that the butler Stevens makes of the adjective ‘professional’.

Within the context of the novel, Stevens is obsessed with his profession and what the correct behaviour of a butler should be. He speaks at length on The Hayes Society and what it means to be a great butler, and who fulfils the role most fittingly. So it is all the more striking that he should describe his relationship with Miss Kenton in terms of “a fine professional understanding” (1996, 173). The adjective “professional” is, in fact, used on several occasions to refer to their relationship, where “the normally occurring range of choice” might have suggested “personal”. Miss Kenton’s possible departure from Darlington Hall would be, for Stevens, a “professional loss” (1996, 180). And when he sets off to see her again some twenty years later, he convinces himself that their interview will “be largely professional in character”. Even his cozy cups of cocoa at the end of the day with Miss Kenton are “overwhelmingly professional” (1996, 155), but the hyperbolic adverb implies the contrary.

Other unusual collocations can be found in Stevens’s use of “triumph”. The noun is used to describe his feelings on recalling the evening of his father’s death (1996, 115) and curiously placed in the same sentence as “sad associations”. Similarly, when he fails to comfort Miss Kenton on the news of her aunt’s death (1996, 239), his mood is “downcast” only to be then qualified as “a sense of triumph”. In both contexts, “triumph” becomes salient, and the linguistic discrepancy, the use of a word in an unusual context, suggests to the attentive reader that Stevens’s version of events is not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In other words, the use of “triumph” is deviant in so far as its use is at odds with the context. How aware the reader may be of primary deviation type b over a long stretch of text will obviously depend to some extent on the reader’s attentiveness. Once again, *The Remains of the Day* offers some interesting examples.

One of the dominant features of Stevens’s narrative is his excessive use of negation. This use of negation takes various forms, frequently combining negation of the verb with a lexical item that contains a negative affix, so that the result is in fact a double negative where a simpler affirmation would have been possible. Thus he says “the pressures [...] were nevertheless not inconsequential (1996, 80) instead of simply that they “were consequential”. “not at all out of keeping” (1996, 139) is preferred to “in keeping”, “would not be an unsuitable setting” (1996, 92) is used instead of “would be a suitable setting.” “it would not be unfair to suggest” (1996, 142) instead of it “it would be fair to suggest”, and “it was not impossible that” (1996, 186) rather than “it was possible that”. These forms occur throughout the novel, but how easily
they may be recognized will depend on many factors, including the reader’s attentiveness to detail. Moreover, a reader versed in Freud’s work on repression, might well bring another reading to the text. In his essay ‘Negation’, Freud states that “the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated […] To negate something in a judgement is, at bottom, to say: ‘This is something which I should prefer to repress!’ A negative judgement is the intellectual substitute for repression; its ‘no’ is the hallmark of repression, a certificate of origin – like, let us say, ‘Made in Germany’” (1995, 666-9). If we follow this reasoning it would follow that when Stevens says “it is not for me to suggest that I am worthy of ever being placed alongside the likes of the ‘great’ butlers (1996, 114), he is in fact repressing his belief he does indeed consider himself worthy. When he comments on the mistakes he has been making under his employer by saying “there is no reason to believe them to be signs of anything more sinister than a staff shortage” (1996, 149) he is in fact repressing that very idea. The negations therefore contribute to creating not simply a character who represses his emotions, but also someone who denies the true state of things. In all the examples studied so far, then, there is deviance but not from the norm of Standard English. The mind style of Stevens, while idiosyncratic, is not mentally abnormal.

What then of the mind style of authors? Why has that domain been neglected? The most probable answer to this question is that it is not always easy to distinguish between the two notions of style and mind style. Are they one and the same thing? In what follows, I seek to demonstrate that they are not.

A mind style, according to Fowler (1977) is a cumulatively consistent pattern of linguistic choice that reflects a specific mental state and way of seeing reality. He argues that mind style implies a “perspective on the topics treated” and portrays “the set of values, or belief system, communicated by the language of the text” (1996, 165). Style, on the other hand, need not necessarily reflect a specific way of viewing reality, even if very often the two overlap. To demonstrate this point, I will examine use of a single grammatical structure, as if, in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories. On one level, we might simply want to follow the literary critic Kessler who sees the use of as if as a typical trait of her writing, calling it “O’Connor’s poetic signature” (1986, 15). However, it is equally possible to interpret O’Connor’s use of as if as being fundamentally linked to her own vision of the world and as contributing to the creation of her mind style.

Two keywords in O’Connor’s fiction are mystery and revelation. Her fiction is deeply informed by her Catholic faith, and her essays reveal how she
struggled with the desire as a Catholic writer to “reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible” (1969, 98), while at the same time writing about “the concrete world of sense experience” (1969, 94). In her essays, there is no ambivalence, no hedging, when she writes “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered on our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that” (1969, 32). But in the short stories, she is all too aware that she cannot force this way of apprehending the world on her reader: “When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite” (1969, 162). One of the ways she is able to communicate the “mystery of existence” as a possibility to the reader is through her consistent use of the comparative structure as if.

From a grammatical point of view, the comparative structure as if both equates or identifies two terms, through the use of as, while introducing a hypothesis with if. One of the characteristics of this structure is that the hypothesis invoked may be known to be false, but on other occasions it can express genuine doubt and even introduce an event that is later confirmed to be true. The first use of as if is illustrated by the following:

“Hiram pulled Bailey up by the arm as if he were assisting an old man” (1990, 128).

Within the context of the short story, Bailey is clearly not an old man. The second use of as if is illustrated by the following:

A car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them” (1990, 125).

At this point in the story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, there is no way of telling whether the occupants of the car are indeed watching the grandmother and family or not. Unlike the first quotation, where it would not be possible to envisage terminating the sentence with “which indeed he was”, in this instance we could imagine either of the following endings:

[...] coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them, which indeed they were
[...] coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them, which they weren’t

It is only later in the story that we discover that the three men in the car were in fact watching the family. The extent to which the first statement may be identified with the hypothesis as being true or not will depend on several factors including the reader’s interpretation of the information in the subordinate clause, and also how that information relates to the context of the story itself. The use of as if is thus a means of generating diverse meanings, of opening up different possibilities, and of introducing an idea without necessarily asserting it. Within O’Connor’s short stories the structure enables
the narrator to suggest characters’ motives without necessarily asserting them, leaving it to the reader to infer:

He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again (1990, 129)

Norton turned what was left of the cake over as if he no longer wanted it. (1990, 447)

More importantly, when moments of revelation do occur in the short stories, when characters are on the brink of grasping the final mystery, O’Connor resorts to using an indeterminate (some) and as if, rather than making an assertion. In “The Artificial Negro” we read for example:

They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving like an action of mercy. (1990, 269)

This comparative structure is also used to suggest that ordinary prosaic elements may have symbolic significance. The peacock, in “The Displaced Person” takes on possible biblical symbolism through the use of as if:

The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from the sun-drenched hill to be a vision for them all. (1990, 198)

It is up to the reader to make the connection at this point as the biblical reference is only clearly given some eight pages later when the priest sees the peacock raise its tail again: “‘The Transfiguration’, he murmured.” (1990, 226). A similar refusal to impose a Christian reading of events is to be found at the end of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” where we read “The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him” (1990, 132). In her correspondence, O’Connor writes of this story and of the role of the grandmother that “it’s a moment of grace for her anyway-a silly old woman-but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy” (1979, 373). The biblical reference here is clearly stated. But in the short story itself, the reference to the Garden of Eden is tentative as the comparison to being bitten by a snake can also be read at face value, as a simple reaction of self-defence. One of the roles of as if then is to allow O’Connor to introduce the notion of mystery of existence as a possibility, as one way of understanding events, which the reader would, in all likelihood, reject if it were asserted rather than suggested. Rather than assert Christian dogma, she chooses to offer a spiritual interpretation of events as one possible interpretation. As such, this grammatical structure reveals her set of values and beliefs, and is part of her authorial mind style.

The other problem created by much of the analysis of abnormal mind styles, that I now address, is that all too often the individual’s conceptual
framework has been focused upon, without due attention being paid to the image that the speaker has of his/her addressee and without taking into account the socio-cultural framework.

In examples of first-person narration, the addressee plays an important role in the creation of the narrator’s mind style. The “you” may be a fictional construct but its presence will necessarily influence the choice of structures and thought patterns. Just as a character’s mind style may be created through dialogue or narration so, too, it is revealed in the way s/he addresses the fictional addressee. In the novella, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, the main protagonist, Smith, is continually addressing a “you” who is never clearly identified, but against whom Smith positions and defines himself: “In-law blokes like you and them” (1994, 10) on the one hand, and someone to instruct and inform, on the other: “you’re wrong and I’ll tell you why” (1994, 8). In similar fashion Stevens, in *The Remains of the Day* addresses a person who at times appears to be a younger colleague and at others, someone in a position of power and authority, comparable to Lord Darlington. It is during these passages that Stevens often expresses his opinion on matters and even tries to analyze his motivations.

It is on occasions such as these, when the first person narrators “speak” to their addressees, that some of the most striking features of their mind-style are revealed. Take for instance the following passage, when Stevens remembers the night his father died and the professional pressures he faced in looking after Lord Darlington’s guests:

> Even so if you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least to some modest degree a ‘dignity’ worthy of someone like Mr Marshall – or come to that, my father. (1996, 114)

The combination of negation, modality and adverbs of degree reveal both Stevens’s inability to express his true feelings and his unreliability as a narrator. The only time the verb “delude” is used in the novel occurs at this point, but it is highlighted by the repetition of similar phonemes in *(un)duly.*

The socio-cultural framework also plays a role in creating the mind style of a character. As Flannery O’Connor remarks:

> An idiom characterizes a society, and when you ignore the idiom, you are very likely ignoring the whole social fabric that could make a meaningful character. You can’t cut characters off from their society and say much about them as individuals. You can’t say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context (1969: 104)
In The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner, it is very tempting to simply focus on the main character’s mind style as a very individualistic way of expressing himself. Smith’s frequent use of I is of course to be expected in a novella told in the first person, But to fully understand his use of pronouns, we need to understand how he positions himself in relation to society in general. His whole outlook on events and the world in general, is a refusal to conform to those in power, and this informs his linguistic choices. His refusal to use the first person plural “we” is but one illustration of this, and it plays a central role in demarcating himself from those in authority who always use we. As he says “They always say ‘We’ ‘We’, never ‘I’ ‘I’ –as if they feel braver and righter knowing there’s a lot of them against only one” (1994, 32). Indeed, Smith’s idiolect with its regionalisms and inconsistent non standard forms is less a reflection of his social standing than a way of marking him apart from the powers that be. He sees authority as a threat to his individuality, and independence. So he attempts at every turn to assert himself and just as he refuses to win the race so he refuses to be subservient to the rules of Standard English.

This refusal to obey conventional codes and standards is reflected in his reworking of old clichés, the way he coins compounds such as “lace-curtain lungs” (1994, 39), “jumped-up jackdaws”, “cutballed cockerel” (1994, 19) and deviates with unusual collocations “varicose beanstalks” (1994, 39). All authority is a threat for Smith – whether that be the police, the Borstal governor or Standard English itself. So unlike Lok or Benjy, Smith’s linguistic creativity is voluntary. He takes pleasure in alliterative combinations such as “plush posh seat” (1994, 20) or “gangrened gaffer” (1994, 49) or “tash-twitching” (1994, 13). He even reinterprets the semantic value of words as in his reflection on what it means to be honest “I know what honest means according to me and he only knows what it means according to him” (1994, 15). Such reasoning challenges the definition that might be found in a dictionary, the ultimate authority. His language then reflects the way he sees the world in terms of “us and them”. It is impossible to focus on his individual mind style without taking into account the sociocultural context whereby he defines himself.

If we take the example again of Stevens in Remains of the Day, then part of the deviance to be found in Stevens’ language is not deviance from Standard English, or semantic deviation, but deviance with his position in society. In other words, what is striking in the way he describes events and reveals his thoughts is the fact that his language does not totally correspond with the image that the reader has of a butler (although it could be argued that he does resemble a Jeeves-like figure). His use of English, his complicated syntax is foregrounded because it does not conform to what the reader might expect of a butler, just as it strikes a contrast with the more informal English of his upper-
class employers. His choice of Latinate vocabulary (implement, ascertain, remuneration, commence), of verbs created from nouns (this is evidenced by the fact, to depart the room), of complex prepositions (due to the fact that) are all examples of this idiosyncrasy, as is his predilection for the pronoun “one” which is so frequently used that it sounds stilted:

It is just that one never know when one might be obliged to give out that one is from Darlington Hall, and it is important that one be attired at such times in a manner worthy of one’s position (1996, 11)

Indeed nothing could be further from the register used by his American employer Mr Lewis, but even Lord Darlington himself uses a less elevated register than Stevens. On inquiring whether the location of two dismissed Jewish maids might still be discovered, Lord Darlington remarks “I suppose there’s no way of tracing them” Stevens’s rephrasing of the sentence is a masterpiece of circumlocution: “I am not at all certain it will be possible to ascertain their whereabouts at this stage” (1996, 159). His circumlocutions are underlined by other characters indicating their incomprehension “What do you mean, butler?” asks Monsieur Dupont when Stevens informs him “assistance is not immediately available at this precise moment” (1996, 111). There is deviation here, but it is deviation within a sociocultural context, and not the sign of an “abnormal” frame of mind. In a totally different novel, characters from the upper-class might well express themselves in this manner.

To conclude, rather than focus solely on the relationship between mind style and an individual cognitive state and, moreover, to take this relationship as a given, I suggest that is necessary to take into account two other important factors in the relationship: the sociocultural context and the addressee. The following diagram represents the interaction between the various factors that constitute any mind style:
In the centre of the diagram is mind-style itself, an abstract concept that both creates, and is created, by three factors: an individual cognitive state, a socio-cultural context and an addressee. The relationship between all three is a dynamic one, illustrated in the diagram by the arrows. In other words, an individual cognitive state will both create its addressee, just as it is in turn created by its addressee. In turn it creates and is created by a sociocultural context. If all three factors are taken into account, then the concept of deviance is no longer limited to abnormal minds, but can also be conceived as deviance in relation to a sociocultural context and/or the expectations of the reader.
Bibliography


RYAN, Marie-Laure, 1991. Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory, Bloomington, Indiana UP.


SEMINO, Elena and SWINDLEHURST, Kate, 1996. ‘Metaphor and mind style in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’, Style 30, 1, 143-166.
