Chapter Three

LINGUISTIC FUNCTION AND LITERARY STYLE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LANGUAGE OF WILLIAM GOLDING’S THE INHERITORS (1971)

My main concern, in this paper, is with criteria of relevance. This, it seems to me, is one of the central problems in the study of “style in language”: I mean the problem of distinguishing between mere linguistic regularity, which in itself is of no interest to literary studies, and regularity which is significant for the poem or prose work in which we find it. I remember an entertaining paper read to the Philological Society in Cambridge some years ago by Professor John Sinclair (1965), in which he drew our attention to some very striking linguistic patterns displayed in the poetry of William McGonagall, and invited us to say why, if this highly structured language was found in what we all agreed was such very trivial poetry, we should be interested in linguistic regularities at all. It is no new discovery to say that pattern in language does not by itself make literature, still less “good literature”: nothing is more regular than the rhythm of Three Blind Mice, and if this is true of phonological regularities it is likely to be true also of syntactic ones. But we lack general criteria for determining whether any particular instance of linguistic prominence is likely to be stylistically relevant or not.

This is not a simple matter, and any discussion of it is bound to touch on more than one topic, or at the least to adopt more than one angle of vision. Moreover the line of approach will often, inevitably, be indirect, and the central concern may at times be lost sight of round some of the corners. It seems to me necessary, first of all, to discuss and to emphasize the place of semantics in the study of style; and this in

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The paper will fall into four parts: first, a discussion of a “functional theory of language”; second, a reference to various questions raised at the Style in Language Conference of 1958 and in other current writings; third, an examination of certain features of the language of *The Inheritors*; and fourth, a brief résumé of the question of stylistic relevance. Of these, the third part will be the longest.

1 The concept of “function” in language and linguistics

The term *function* is used, in two distinct though related senses, at two very different points in the description of language. First it is used in the sense of “grammatical” (or “syntactic”) function, to refer to elements of linguistic structures such as actor and goal or subject and object or theme and rheme. These “functions” are the roles occupied by classes of words, phrases, and the like in the structure of higher units. Secondly, it is used to refer to the “functions” of language as a whole: for example in the well-known work of Karl Bühler (1934), in which he proposes a three-way division of language function into the representational, the conative and the expressive (see also Chapter 2 of Vachek 1966).

Here I am using “function” in the second sense, referring, however, not specifically to Bühler’s theory, but to the generalized notion of “functions of language”. By a functional theory of language I mean one which attempts to explain linguistic structure, and linguistic phenomena, by reference to the notion that language plays a certain part in our lives, that it is required to serve certain universal types of demand. I find this approach valuable in general for the insight it gives
The demands that we make on language, as speakers and writers, listeners and readers, are indefinitely many and varied. They can be derived, ultimately, from a small number of very general headings; but what these headings are will depend on what questions we are asking. For example, if we were to take a broadly psychological viewpoint and consider the functions that language serves in the life of the individual, we might arrive at some such scheme as Bühler's, referred to above. If on the other hand we asked a more sociological type of question, concerning the functions that language serves in the life of the community, we should probably elaborate some framework such as Malinowski's (1935) distinction into a pragmatic and a magical function. Many others could be suggested besides.

These questions are extrinsic to language; and the categorizations of language function that depend on them are of interest because, and to the extent that, the questions themselves are of interest. Such categorizations therefore imply a strictly instrumental view of linguistic theory. Some would perhaps reject this on the grounds that it does not admit the autonomy of linguistics and linguistic investigations. I am not myself impressed by that argument, although I would stress that any one particular instrumental view is by itself inadequate as a general characterization of language. But a purely extrinsic theory of language functions does fail to take into account one thing, namely the fact that the multiplicity of function, if the idea is valid at all, is likely to be reflected somewhere in the internal organization of language itself. If language is, as it were, programmed to serve a variety of needs, then this should show up in some way in an investigation of linguistic structure.

In fact this functional plurality is very clearly built into the structure of language, and forms the basis of its semantic and “syntactic” (i.e. grammatical and lexical) organization. If we set up a functional framework that is neutral as to external emphasis, but designed to take into account the nature of the internal semantic and syntactic patterns of language, we arrive at something that is very suggestive for literary studies, because it represents a general characterization of semantic functions – of the meaning potential of the language system. Let me suggest here the framework that seems to me most helpful. It is a rather simple catalogue of three basic functions, one of which has two subheadings.

In the first place, language serves for the expression of content: it
has a representational, or, as I would prefer to call it, an *ideational* function. (This is sometimes referred to as the expression of "cognitive meaning", though I find the term "cognitive" misleading; there is, after all, a cognitive element in all linguistic functions.) Two points need to be emphasized concerning this ideational function of language. The first is that it is through this function that the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness: his reactions, cognitions, and perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding. We shall in no sense be adopting an extreme pseudo-Whorfian position (I say "pseudo-Whorfian" because Whorf himself never was extreme) if we add that, in serving this function, language lends structure to his experience and helps to determine his way of looking at things. The speaker can see through and around the settings of his semantic system; but he is aware that, in doing so, he is seeing reality in a new light, like Alice in Looking-Glass House. There is, however, and this is the second point, one component of ideational meaning which, while not unrelatable to experience, is nevertheless organized in language in a way which marks it off as distinct: this is the expression of certain fundamental logical relations such as are encoded in language in the form of co-ordination, apposition, modification, and the like. The notion of co-ordination, for example, as in *sun, moon, and stars*, can be derived from an aspect of the speaker’s experience; but this and other such relations are realized through the medium of a particular type of structural mechanism (that of linear recursion) which takes them, linguistically, out of the domain of experience to form a functionally neutral, “logical” component in the total spectrum of meanings. Within the ideational function of language, therefore, we can recognize two sub-functions, the *experimental* and the *logical*; and the distinction is a significant one for our present purpose.

In the second place, language serves what we may call an *interpersonal* function. This is quite different from the expression of content. Here, the speaker is using language as the means of his own intrusion into the speech event: the expression of his comments, his attitudes, and evaluations, and also of the relationship that he sets up between himself and the listener – in particular, the communication role that he adopts, of informing, questioning, greeting, persuading, and the like. The interpersonal function thus subsumes both the expressive and the conative, which are not in fact distinct in the linguistic system: to give one example, the meanings ‘I do not know’
(expressive) and ‘you tell me’ (conative) are combined in a single semantic feature, that of question, typically expressed in the grammar by an interrogative; the interrogative is both expressive and conative at the same time. The set of communication roles is unique among social relations in that it is brought into being and maintained solely through language. But the interpersonal element in language extends beyond what we might think of as its rhetorical functions. In the wider context, language is required to serve in the establishment and maintenance of all human relationships; it is the means whereby social groups are integrated and the individual is identified and reinforced. It is, I think, significant for certain forms of literature that, since personality is dependent on interaction which is in turn mediated through language, the “interpersonal” function in language is both interactional and personal: there is, in other words, a component in language which serves at one and the same time to express both the inner and the outer surfaces of the individual, as a single undifferentiated area of meaning potential that is personal in the broadest sense.  

These two functions, the ideational and the interpersonal, may seem sufficiently all-embracing; and in the context of an instrumental approach to language they are. But there is a third function which is in turn instrumental to these two, whereby language is, as it were, enabled to meet the demands that are made on it; I shall call this the textual function, since it is concerned with the creation of text. It is a function internal to language, and for this reason is not usually taken into account where the objects of investigation are extrinsic; but it came to be specifically associated with the term “functional” in the work of the Prague scholars who developed Bühler’s ideas within the framework of a linguistic theory (cf. their terms “functional syntax”, “functional sentence perspective”). It is through this function that language makes links with itself and with the situation; and discourse becomes possible, because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader can recognize one. A text is an operational unit of language, as a sentence is a syntactic unit; it may be spoken or written, long or short; and it includes as a special instance a literary text, whether haiku or Homeric epic. It is the text and not some super-sentence that is the relevant unit for stylistic studies; this is a functional-semantic concept and is not definable by size. And therefore the “textual” function is not limited to the establishment of relations between sentences; it is concerned just as much with the internal organization of the sentence, with its meaning as a message both in itself and in relation to the context.  

A tentative categorization of the principal elements of English syntax
in terms of the above functions is given in Table 1. This table is intended to serve a twofold purpose. In the first place, it will help to make more concrete the present concept of a functional theory, by showing how the various functions are realized through the grammatical systems of the language, all of which are accounted for in this way. Not all the labels may be self-explanatory, nor is the framework so compartmental as in this bare outline it is made to seem: there is a high degree of indeterminacy in the fuller picture, representing the indeterminacy that is present throughout language, in its categories and its relations, its types and its tokens. Secondly it will bring out the fact that the syntax of a language is organized in such a way that it expresses as a whole the range of linguistic functions, but that the symptoms of functional diversity are not to be sought in single sentences or sentence types. In general, that is to say, we shall not find whole sentences or even smaller structures having just one function. Typically, each sentence embodies all functions, though one or another may be more prominent; and most constituents of sentences also embody more than one function, through their ability to combine two or more syntactic roles.

Let us introduce an example at this point. Here is a well-known passage from Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There:

“I don’t understand you,” said Alice. “It’s dreadfully confusing!”
“That’s the effect of living backwards,” the Queen said kindly: “it always makes one a little giddy at first—”
“Living backwards!” Alice repeated in great astonishment. “I never heard of such a thing!”
“—but there’s one great advantage in it, that one’s memory works both ways:”
“I’m sure mine only works one way,” Alice remarked. “I can’t remember things before they happen.”
“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” the Queen remarked.
“What sort of things do you remember best?” Alice ventured to ask.
“Oh, things that happened the week after next,” the Queen replied in a careless tone.

To illustrate the last point first, namely that most constituents of sentences embody more than one function, by combining different syntactic roles: the constituent what sort of things occupies simultaneously the syntactic roles of Theme, of Phenomenon (that is, object of cognition, perception, etc.) and of Interrogation point. The theme represents a particular status in the message, and is thus an expression of “textual” function: it is the speaker’s point of departure. If the
Table 1  Functions and ranks in the grammar of Modern English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Ideational</th>
<th>Logical</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Textual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank:</td>
<td>EXPERIENTIAL</td>
<td>LOGICAL</td>
<td>INTERPERSONAL</td>
<td>TEXTUAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clause</td>
<td>TRANSITIVITY</td>
<td>condition</td>
<td>MOOD</td>
<td>THEME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>types of process</td>
<td>addition</td>
<td>types of speech</td>
<td>types of message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participants and circumstances</td>
<td>report</td>
<td>function</td>
<td>(identity as text relation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(identity clauses)</td>
<td></td>
<td>modality</td>
<td>(identification, predication, reference, substitution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(things, facts, and reports)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(the WH-function)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Group</td>
<td>TENSE</td>
<td>catenation</td>
<td>PERSON</td>
<td>VOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(verb classes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary tense</td>
<td>&quot;marked&quot; options</td>
<td>(&quot;contrastive&quot; option)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominal Group</td>
<td>MODIFICATION</td>
<td>classification</td>
<td>ATTITUDE</td>
<td>DEIXIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(noun classes, adjective classes)</td>
<td></td>
<td>sub-modification</td>
<td>attitudinal modifiers</td>
<td>determiners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;MINOR PROCESSES&quot;</td>
<td>narrowing</td>
<td>intensifiers</td>
<td>&quot;phoric&quot; elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepositional relations</td>
<td>sub-modification</td>
<td>(qualifiers)</td>
<td>(definite article)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(classes of circumstantial adverb)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverbial</td>
<td>LEXICAL &quot;CONTENT&quot;</td>
<td>compounding</td>
<td>LEXICAL &quot;REGISTER&quot;</td>
<td>COLOCATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. prepositional group)</td>
<td>(taxonomic organization of vocabulary)</td>
<td>derivation</td>
<td>(expressive words)</td>
<td>(collocational organization of vocabulary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>INFORMATION</td>
<td>TONE</td>
<td>INFORMATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. lexical item)</td>
<td>UNIT</td>
<td>intonation systems</td>
<td>distribution &amp; focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
speaker is asking a question he usually, in English, takes the request for information as his theme, expressing this by putting the question phrase first; here, therefore, the same element is both Theme and Interrogation point – the latter being an expression of “interpersonal” function since it defines the specific communication roles the speaker has chosen for himself and for the listener: the speaker is behaving as questioner. What sort of thing is the Phenomenon dependent on the mental process remember; and this concept of a mental phenomenon, as something that can be talked about, is an expression of the “ideational” function of language – of language as content, relatable to the speaker’s and the listener’s experience. It should be emphasized that it is not, in fact, the syntactic role in isolation, but the structure of which it forms a part that is semantically significant: it is not the theme, for example, but the total Theme–Rheme structure which contributes to the texture of the discourse.

Thus the constituents themselves tend to be multivalent; which is another way of saying that the very notion of a constituent is itself rather too concrete to be of much help in a functional context. A constituent is a particular word or phrase in a particular place; but functionally the choice of an item may have one meaning, its repetition another, and its location in structure yet another – or many others, as we have seen. So, in the Queen’s remark it’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards, the word poor is a Modifier, and thus expresses a subclass of its head-word memory (ideational); while at the same time it is an Epithet expressing the Queen’s attitude (interpersonal), and the choice of this word in this environment (as opposed to, say, useful) indicates more specifically that the attitude is one of disapproval. The words it’s . . . that have here no reference at all outside the sentence, but they structure the message in a particular way (textual), which represents the Queen’s opinion as if it was an Attribute (ideational), and defines one class of memory as exclusively possessing this undesirable quality (ideational). The lexical repetition in memory that only works backwards relates the Queen’s remark (textual) to mine only works one way, in which mine refers anaphorically, by ellipsis, to memory in the preceding sentence (textual) and also to I in Alice’s expression of her own judgement I’m sure (interpersonal). Thus ideational content and personal interaction are woven together with, and by means of, the textual structure to form a coherent whole.

Taking a somewhat broader perspective, we again find the same interplay of functions. The ideational meaning of the passage is enshrined in the phrase living backwards; we have a general characterization of the
nature of experience, in which things that happened the week after next turns out to be an acceptable sentence. (I am not suggesting it is serious, or offering a deep literary interpretation; I am merely using it to illustrate the nature of language.) On the interpersonal level the language expresses, through a pattern of question (or exclamation) and response, a basic relationship of seeker and guide, in interplay with various other paired functions such as yours and mine, for and against, child and adult, wonderment and judgement. The texture is that of dialogue in narrative, within which the Queen’s complex thematic structures (e.g. there’s one great advantage to it, that . . .) contrast with the much simpler (i.e. linguistically unmarked) message patterns used by Alice.

A functional theory of language is a theory about meanings, not about words or constructions; we shall not attempt to assign a word or a construction directly to one function or another. Where then do we find the functions differentiated in language? They are differentiated semantically, as different areas of what I called the “meaning potential”. Language is itself a potential: it is the totality of what the speaker can do. (By “speaker” I mean always the language user, whether as speaker, listener, writer, or reader: homo grammaticus, in fact.) We are considering, as it were, the dynamics of the semantic strategies that are available to him. If we represent the language system in this way, as networks of interrelated options which define, as a whole, the resources for what the speaker wants to say, we find empirically that these options fall into a small number of fairly distinct sets. In the last resort, every option in language is related to every other; there are no completely independent choices. But the total network of meaning potential is actually composed of a number of smaller networks, each one highly complex in itself but related to the others in a way that is relatively simple: rather like an elaborate piece of circuitry made up of two or three complex blocks of wiring with fairly simple interconnections. Each of these blocks corresponds to one of the functions of language.

In Table 1, where the columns represent our linguistic functions, each column is one “block” of options. These blocks are to be thought of as wired “in parallel”. That is to say, the speaker does not first think of the content of what he wants to say and then go on to decide what kind of a message it is and where he himself comes into it – whether it will be statement or question, what modalities are involved and the like. All these functions, the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual, are simultaneously embodied in his planning procedures. (If we pursue the metaphor, it is the rows of the table that are wired “in
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series”: they represent the hierarchy of constituents in the grammar, where the different functions come together. Each row is one constituent type, and is a point of intersection of options from the different columns.)

The linguistic differentiation among the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions is thus to be found in the way in which choices in meaning are interrelated to one another. Each function defines a set of options that is relatively – though only relatively – independent of the other sets. Dependence here refers to the degree of mutual determination: one part of the content of what one says tends to exert a considerable effect on other parts of the content, whereas one’s attitudes and speech roles are relatively undetermined by it: the speaker is, by and large, free to associate any interpersonal meanings with any content. What I wish to stress here is that all types of option, from whatever function they are derived, are meaningful. At every point the speaker is selecting among a range of possibilities that differ in meaning; and if we attempt to separate meaning from choice we are turning a valuable distinction (between linguistic functions) into an arbitrary dichotomy (between “meaningful” and “meaningless” choices). All options are embedded in the language system: the system is a network of options, deriving from all the various functions of language. If we take the useful functional distinction of “ideational” and “interpersonal” and rewrite it, under the labels “cognitive” and “expressive”, in such a way as sharply to separate the two, equating cognitive with meaning and expressive with style, we not only fail to recognize the experiential basis of many of our own intuitions about works of literature and their impact – style as the expression of what the thing is about, at some level (my own illustration in this paper is one example of this) – but we also attach the contrasting status of “non-cognitive” (whatever this may mean) to precisely these options that seem best to embody our conception of a work of literature, those whereby the writer gives form to the discourse and expresses his own individuality. Even if we are on our guard against the implication that the regions of language in which style resides are the ones which are linguistically non-significant, we are still drawing the wrong line. There are no regions of language in which style does not reside.

We should not in fact be drawing lines at all; the boundaries on our map consist only in shading and overlapping. Nevertheless they are there; and provided we are not forced into seeking an unreal distinction between the “what” and the “how”, we can show, by reference to the generalized notion of linguistic functions, how such real contrasts as
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that of denotation and connotation relate to the functional map of language as a whole, and thus how they may be incorporated into the linguistic study of style. It is through this chain of reasoning that we may hope to establish criteria of relevance, and to demonstrate the connection between the syntactic observations which we make about a text and the nature of the impact which that text has upon us. If we can relate the linguistic patterns (grammatical, lexical, and even phonological) to the underlying functions of language, we have a criterion for eliminating what is trivial and for distinguishing true foregrounding from mere prominence of a statistical or an absolute kind.

Foregrounding, as I understand it, is prominence that is motivated. It is not difficult to find patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out in some way, or may be brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this way towards a new insight, through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer’s total meaning. But unless it does, it will seem to lack motivation; a feature that is brought into prominence will be “foregrounded” only if it relates to the meaning of the text as a whole. This relationship is a functional one: if a particular feature of the language contributes, by its prominence, to the total meaning of the work, it does so by virtue of and through the medium of its own value in the language – through the linguistic function from which its meaning is derived. Where that function is relevant to our interpretation of the work, the prominence will appear as motivated. I shall try to illustrate this by reference to The Inheritors. First, however, a few remarks about some points raised at the 1958 Style in Language Conference and in subsequent discussions, which I hope will make slightly more explicit the context within which Golding’s work is being examined.

2 Questions of prominence (from Style in Language, 1960)

There are three questions I should like to touch on: Is prominence to be regarded as a departure from or as the attainment of a norm? To what extent is prominence a quantitative effect, to be uncovered or at least stated by means of statistics? How real is the distinction between prominence that is due to subject-matter and prominence that is due to something else? All three questions are very familiar, and my justification for bringing them up once more is not that what I have to say about them is new but rather that some partial answers are needed if we are attempting an integrated approach to language and style, and
that these answers will be pertinent to a consideration of our main question, which is that of criteria of relevance.

I have used the term “prominence” as a general name for the phenomenon of linguistic highlighting, whereby some feature of the language of a text stands out in some way. In choosing this term I hoped to avoid the assumption that a linguistic feature which is brought under attention will always be seen as a departure. It is quite natural to characterize such prominence as departure from a norm, since this explains why it is remarkable, especially if one is stressing the subjective nature of the highlighting effect; thus Leech, discussing what he refers to as “schemes” (“foregrounded patterns . . . in grammar or phonology”), writes “It is ultimately a matter of subjective judgement whether . . . the regularity seems remarkable enough to constitute a definite departure from the normal functions of language” (1965, p. 70). But at the same time it is often objected, not unreasonably, that the “departure” view puts too high a value on oddness, and suggests that normal forms are of no interest in the study of style. Thus Wellek: “The danger of linguistic stylistics is its focus on deviations from, and distortions of, the linguistic norm. We get a kind of counter-grammar, a science of discards. Normal stylistics is abandoned to the grammarian, and deviational stylistics is reserved for the student of literature. But often the most commonplace, the most normal, linguistic elements are the constituents of literary structure.”6

Two kinds of answer have been given to this objection. One is that there are two types of prominence, only one of which is negative, a departure from a norm; the other is positive, and is the attainment or the establishment of a norm. The second is that departure may in any case be merely statistical: we are concerned not only with deviations, ungrammatical forms, but also with what we may call “deflections”, departures from some expected pattern of frequency.

The distinction between negative and positive prominence, or departures and regularities, is drawn by Leech, who contrasts foregrounding in the form of “motivated deviation from linguistic, or other socially accepted norms” with foregrounding applied to “the opposite circumstance, in which a writer temporarily renounces his permitted freedom of choice, introducing uniformity where there would normally be diversity” (1965, p. 69). Strictly speaking this is not an “opposite circumstance”, since if diversity is normal, then uniformity is a deviation. But where there is uniformity there is regularity; and this can be treated as a positive feature, as the establishment of a norm. Thus, to quote Hymes, “. . . in some sources, especially poets, style may not be deviation from but achievement of a norm.”7
However, this is not a distinction between two types of prominence; it is a distinction between two ways of looking at prominence, depending on the standpoint of the observer. There is no single universally relevant norm, no one set of expectancies to which all instances may be referred. On the one hand, there are differences of perspective. The text may be seen as “part” of a larger “whole”, such as the author’s complete works, or the tradition to which it belongs, so that what is globally a departure may be locally a norm. The expectancies may lie in “the language as a whole”, in a diatypic variety or register characteristic of some situation type (Osgood’s “situational norms”), in a genre or literary form, or in some special institution such as the Queen’s Christmas message; we always have the choice of saying either “this departs from a pattern” or “this forms a pattern”. On the other hand, there are differences of attention. The text may be seen as “this” in contrast with “that”, with another poem or another novel; stylistic studies are essentially comparative in nature, and either may be taken as the point of departure. As Hymes says, there are egalitarian universes, comprising sets of norms, and “it would be arbitrary to choose one norm as a standard from which the others depart”. It may be more helpful to look at a given instance of prominence in one way rather than in another, sometimes as departure from a norm and sometimes as the attainment of a norm; but there is only one type of phenomenon here, not two.

There is perhaps a limiting case, the presence of one ungrammatical sentence in an entire poem or novel; presumably this could be viewed only as a departure. But in itself it would be unlikely to be of any interest. Deviation, the use of ungrammatical forms, has received a great deal of attention, and seems to be regarded, at times, as prominence par excellence. This is probably because it is a deterministic concept. Deviant forms are actually prohibited by the rules of whatever is taken to be the norm; or, to express it positively, the norm that is established by a set of deviant forms excludes all texts but the one in which they occur. But for this very reason deviation is of very limited interest in stylistics. It is rarely found; and when it is found, it is often not relevant. On the contrary, if we follow McIntosh (who finds it “a chastening thought”), “... quite often ... the impact of an entire work may be enormous, yet word by word, phrase by phrase, clause by clause, sentence by sentence, there may seem to be nothing very unusual or arresting, in grammar or in vocabulary....”

Hence the very reasonable supposition that prominence may be of a probabilistic kind, defined by Bloch as “frequency distributions and
transitional probabilities [which] differ from those . . . in the language as a whole". 12 This is what we have referred to above as "deflection". It too may be viewed either as departure from a norm or as its attainment. If, for example, we meet seven occurrences of a rather specific grammatical pattern, such as that cited by Leech “my + noun + you + verb” (1965, p. 70), a norm has been set up and there is, or may be, a strong local expectancy that an eighth will follow; the probability of finding this pattern repeated in eight successive clauses is infinitesimally small, so that the same phenomenon constitutes a departure. It is fairly easy to see that the one always implies the other; the contravention of one expectation is, at the same time, the fulfillment of a different one. Either way, whether the prominence is said to consist in law-breaking or in law-making, we are dealing with a type

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Table 2  Frequency of transitivity clause types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>intransitive movement</th>
<th>ACTION (other)</th>
<th>transitive movement</th>
<th>location/possessor</th>
<th>mental process</th>
<th>attribution</th>
<th>other (equation, event)</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Process:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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* including two passives, which are also negative and in which the actor is not explicit: The tree would not be caught or persuaded.
of phenomenon that is expressible in quantitative terms, to which statistical concepts may be applied.

In the context of stylistic investigations, the term “statistical” may refer to anything from a highly detailed measurement of the reactions of subjects to sets of linguistic variables, to the parenthetical insertion of figures of occurrences designed to explain why a particular feature is being singled out for discussion. What is common to all these is the assumption that numerical data on language may be stylistically significant; whatever subsequent operations are performed, there has nearly always been some counting of linguistic elements in the text, whether of phonological units or words or grammatical patterns, and the figures obtained are potentially an indication of prominence. The notion that prominence may be defined statistically is still not always accepted; there seem to be two main counterarguments, but whatever substance these may have as stated they are not, I think, valid objections to the point at issue. The first is essentially that, since style is a manifestation of the individual, it cannot be reduced to counting. This is true, but, as has often been said before, it misses the point. If there is such a thing as a recognizable style, whether of a work, an author, or an entire period or literary tradition, its distinctive quality can in the last analysis be stated in terms of relative frequencies, although the linguistic features that show significant variation may be simple and obvious or extremely subtle and complex. An example of how period styles may be revealed in this way will be found in Josephine Miles’ “Eras in English poetry” in which she shows that different periods are characterized by a distinction in the dominant type of sentence structure, that between “the sort which emphasizes substantial elements – the phrasal and co-ordinative modifications of subject and object – and the sort which emphasizes clausal co-ordination and complication of the predicate”.

The second objection is that numbers of occurrences must be irrelevant to style because we are not aware of frequency in language and therefore cannot respond to it. This is almost certainly not true. We are probably rather sensitive to the relative frequency of different grammatical and lexical patterns, which is an aspect of “meaning potential”; and our expectancies, as readers, are in part based on our awareness of the probabilities inherent in the language. This is what enables us to grasp the new probabilities of the text as local norm; our ability to perceive a statistical departure and restructure it as a norm is itself evidence of the essentially probabilistic nature of the language system. Our concern here, in any case, is not with psychological problems of the response to literature but with the linguistic options
selected by the writer and their relation to the total meaning of the work. If in the selections he has made there is an unexpected pattern of frequency distributions, and this turns out to be motivated, it seems pointless to argue that such a phenomenon could not possibly be significant.

What cannot be expressed statistically is foregrounding: figures do not tell us whether a particular pattern has or has not “value in the game”. For this we need to know the rules. A distinctive frequency distribution is in itself no guarantee of stylistic relevance, as can be seen from authorship studies, where the diagnostic features are often, from a literary standpoint, very trivial ones. Conversely, a linguistic feature that is stylistically very relevant may display a much less striking frequency pattern. But there is likely to be some quantitative turbulence, if a particular feature is felt to be prominent; and a few figures may be very suggestive. Counting, as Miller remarked, has many positive virtues. Ullmann offers a balanced view of these when he writes “Yet even those who feel that detailed statistics are both unnecessary and unreliable [in a sphere where quality and context, aesthetic effects and suggestive overtones are of supreme importance] would probably agree that a rough indication of frequencies would often be helpful” (1965, p. 22). A rough indication of frequencies is often just what is needed: enough to suggest why we should accept the analyst’s assertion that some feature is prominent in the text, and to allow us to check his statements. The figures, obviously, do not alone constitute an analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of the style.

But this is not, be it noted, a limitation on quantitative patterns as such; it is a limitation on the significance of prominence of any kind. Deviation is no more fundamental a phenomenon than statistical deflection: in fact there is no very clear line between the two, and in any given instance the most qualitatively deviant items may be among the least relevant. Thus if style cannot be reduced to counting, this is because it cannot be reduced to a simple question of prominence. An adequate characterization of an author’s style is much more than an inventory of linguistic highlights. This is why linguists were so often reluctant to take up questions of criticism and evaluation, and tended to disclaim any contribution to the appraisal of what they were describing: they were very aware that statements about linguistic prominence by themselves offer no criterion of literary value. Nevertheless some values, or some aspects of value, must be expressed in linguistic terms. This is true, for example, of metrical patterns, which linguists have always considered their proper concern. The question is...
how far it is also true of patterns that are more directly related to meaning: what factors govern the relevance of “effects” in grammar and vocabulary? The significance of rhythmic regularity has to be formulated linguistically, since it is a phonological phenomenon, although the ultimate value to which it relates is not “given” by the language – that the sonnet is a highly valued pattern is not a linguistic fact, but the sonnet itself is (Levin 1971). The sonnet form defines the relevance of certain types of phonological pattern. There may likewise be some linguistic factor involved in determining whether a syntactic or a lexical pattern is stylistically relevant or not.

Certainly there is no magic in unexpectedness; and one line of approach has been to attempt to state conditions under which the unexpected is not relevant – namely when it is not really unexpected. Prominence, in this view, is not significant if the linguistically unpredictable configuration is predictable on other grounds; specifically, by reference to subject-matter, the implication being that it would have been predicted if we had known beforehand what the passage was about. So, for example, Ullmann warns of the danger in the search for statistically defined key-words: “One must carefully avoid what have been called contextual words whose frequency is due to the subject-matter rather than to any deep-seated stylistic or psychological tendency” (1965, p. 27). Ullmann’s concern here is with words that serve as indices of a particular author, and he goes on to discuss the significance of recurrent imagery for style and personality, citing as an example the prominence of insect vocabulary in the writings of Sartre (Ullmann 1965, p. 29; see also 1964, pp. 186–8); in this context we can see that, by contrast, the prevalence of such words in a treatise on entomology would be irrelevant. But it is less easy to see how this can be generalized, even in the realm of vocabulary; is lexical foregrounding entirely dependent on imagery?

Can we in fact dismiss, as irrelevant, prominence that is due to subject-matter? Can we even claim to identify it? This was the third and final question I asked earlier, and it is one which relates very closely to an interpretation of the style of *The Inheritors*. In *The Inheritors*, the features that come to our attention are largely syntactic, and we are in the realm of syntactic imagery, where the syntax, in Ohmann’s words, “serves [a] vision of things. . . . since there are innumerable kinds of deviance, we should expect that the ones elected by a poem or poet spring from particular semantic impulses, particular ways of looking at experience” (1967, p. 237). Ohmann is concerned primarily with “syntactic irregularities”, but syntax need not be deviant in order
to serve a vision of things; a foregrounded selection of everyday syntactic options may be just as visionary, and perhaps more effective. The vision provides the motivation for their prominence; it makes them relevant, however ordinary they may be. The style of *The Inheritors* rests very much on foregrounding of this kind.

The prominence, in other words, is often due to the vision. But “vision” and “subject-matter” are merely the different levels of meaning which we expect to find in a literary work; and each of these, the inner as well as the outer, and any as it were intermediate layers, finds expression in the syntax. In Ruqaiya Hasan’s words, “Each utterance has a thesis: what it is talking about uniquely and instantially; and in addition to this, each utterance has a function in the internal organization of the text: in combination with other utterances of the text it realizes the theme, structure and other aspects. . . .” (1967, pp. 109–10; 1971). Patterns of syntactic prominence may reflect thesis or theme or “other aspects” of the meaning of the work; every level is a potential source of motivation, a kind of semantic “situational norm”. And since the role of syntax in language is to weave into a single fabric the different threads of meaning that derive from the variety of linguistic functions, one and the same syntactic feature is very likely to have at once both a deeper and a more immediate significance, like the participial structures in Milton as Chatman has interpreted them (1968, pp. 1386–99).

Thus we cannot really discount “prominence due to subject-matter”, at least as far as syntactic prominence is concerned; especially where vision and subject-matter are themselves as closely interwoven as they are in *The Inheritors*. Rather, perhaps, we might think of the choice of subject-matter as being itself a stylistic choice, in the sense that the subject-matter may be more or less relevant to the underlying themes of the work. To the extent that the subject-matter is an integral element in the total meaning – in the artistic unity, if you will – to that extent, prominence that is felt to be partly or wholly “due to” the subject-matter, far from being irrelevant to the style, will turn out to be very clearly foregrounded.

To cite a small example that I have used elsewhere, the prominence of finite verbs in simple past tense in the well-known “Return of Excalibur” lines in Tennyson’s *Morte d’Arthur* relates immediately to the subject-matter: the passage is a direct narrative. But the choice of a story as subject-matter is itself related to the deeper preoccupations of the work – with heroism and, beyond that, with the *res gestae*, with deeds as the realization of the true spirit of a people, and with history and historicalism; the narrative register is an appropriate form of
expression, one that is congruent with the total meaning, and so the verb forms that are characteristically associated with it are motivated at every level. Similarly, it is not irrelevant to the style of an entomological monograph (although we may not be very interested in its style) that it contains a lot of words for insects, if in fact it does. In stylistics we are concerned with language in relation to all the various levels of meaning that a work may have.

But while a given instance of syntactic or lexical prominence may be said to be “motivated” either by the subject-matter or by some other level of the meaning, in the sense of deriving its relevance therefrom, it cannot really be said to be “due to” it. Neither thesis nor theme imposes linguistic patterns. They may set up local expectancies, but these are by no means always fulfilled; there might actually be very few insect words in the work on entomology – and there are very few in Kafka. There is always choice. In *The Inheritors*, Golding is offering a “particular way of looking at experience”, a vision of things which he ascribes to Neanderthal man; and he conveys this by syntactic prominence, by the frequency with which he selects certain key syntactic options. It is their frequency which establishes the clause types in question as prominent; but, as Ullmann has remarked, in stylistics we have both to count things and to look at them, one by one, and when we do this we find that the foregrounding effect is the product of two apparently opposed conditions of use. The foregrounded elements are certain clause types which display particular patterns of transitivity, as described in the next section; and in some instances the syntactic pattern is “expected” in that it is the typical form of expression for the subject-matter – for the process, participants, and circumstances that make up the thesis of the clause. Elsewhere, however, the same syntactic elements are found precisely where they would not be expected, there being other, more likely ways of “saying the same thing”.

Here we might be inclined to talk of semantic choice and syntactic choice: what the author chooses to say, and how he chooses to say it. But this is a misleading distinction; not only because it is unrealistic in application (most distinctions in language leave indeterminate instances, although here there would be suspiciously many) but more because the combined effect is cumulative: the one does not weaken or cut across the other but reinforces it. We have to do here with an interaction, not of meaning and form, but of two levels of meaning, both of which find expression in form, and through the same syntactic features. The immediate thesis and the underlying theme come together in the syntax; the choice of subject-matter is motivated by the deeper mean-
linguistic function and literary style: William Golding

ing, and the transitivity patterns realize both. This is the explanation of their powerful impact.

The foregrounding of certain patterns in syntax as the expression of an underlying theme is what we understand by “syntactic imagery”, and we assume that its effect will be striking. But in The Inheritors these same syntactic patterns also figure prominently in their “literal” sense, as the expression of subject-matter; and their prominence here is doubly relevant, since the literal use not only is motivated in itself but also provides a context for the metaphorical – we accept the syntactic vision of things more readily because we can see that it coincides with, and is an extension of, the reality. The Inheritors provides a remarkable illustration of how grammar can convey levels of meaning in literature; and this relates closely to the notion of linguistic functions which I discussed at the beginning. The foregrounded patterns, in this instance, are ideational ones, whose meaning resides in the representation of experience; as such they express not only the content of the narrative but also the abstract structure of the reality through which that content is interpreted. Sometimes the interpretation matches our own, and at other times, as in the drawing of the bow in Passage A below, it conflicts with it; these are the “opposed conditions of use” referred to earlier. Yet each tells a part of the story. Language, because of the multiplicity of its functions, has a fugue-like quality in which a number of themes unfold simultaneously; each of these themes is apprehended in various settings, or perspectives, and each melodic line in the syntactic sequence has more than one value in the whole.

3 Some features of the grammar of The Inheritors

The Inheritors is prefaced by a quotation from H. G. Wells’ Outline of History:

We know very little of the appearance of the Neanderthal man, but this . . . seems to suggest an extreme hairiness, an ugliness, or a repulsive strangeness in his appearance over and above his low forehead, his beetle brows, his ape neck, and his inferior stature. . . . Says Sir Harry Johnston, in a survey of the rise of modern man in his Views and Reviews: “The dim racial remembrance of such gorilla-like monsters, with cunning brains, shambling gait, hairy bodies, strong teeth, and possibly cannibalistic tendencies, may be the germ of the ogre in folklore.”

The book is, in my opinion, a highly successful piece of imaginative prose writing; in the words of Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967), in
highly valued texts

their penetrating critical study, it is a “reaching out through the imagination into the unknown”. The persons of the story are a small band of Neanderthal people, initially eight strong, who refer to themselves as “the people”; their world is then invaded by a group of more advanced stock, a fragment of a tribe, whom they call at first “others” and later “the new people”. This casual impact — casual, that is, from the tribe’s point of view — proves to be the end of the people’s world, and of the people themselves. At first, and for more than nine-tenths of the book (pp. 1–216), we share the life of the people and their view of the world, and also their view of the tribe: for a long passage (pp. 137–80) the principal character, Lok, is hidden in a tree watching the tribe in their work, their ritual and their play, and the account of their doings is confined within the limits of Lok’s understanding, requiring at times a considerable effort of “interpretation”. At the very end (pp. 216–38) the stand point shifts to that of the tribe, the inheritors, and the world becomes recognizable as our own, or something very like it. I propose to examine an aspect of the linguistic resources as they are used first to characterize the people’s world and then to effect the shift of world-view.

For this purpose I shall look closely at three passages taken from different parts of the book; these are reproduced below (pp. 121–4). Passage A is representative of the first, and longest, section, the narrative of the people; it is taken from the long account of Lok’s vigil in the tree. Passage C is taken from the short final section, concerned with the tribe; while Passage B spans the transition, the shift of stand point occurring at the paragraph division within this passage. Linguistically, A and C differ in rather significant ways, while B is in certain respects transitional between them.

The clauses of Passage A [56] are mainly clauses of action [21], location (including possession) [14], or mental process [16]; the remainder [5] are attributive. Usually the process is expressed by a finite verb in simple past tense [46]. Almost all of the action clauses [19] describe simple movements (turn, rise, hold, reach, throw forward, etc.); and of these the majority [15] are intransitive; the exceptions are the man was holding the stick, as though someone had clapped a hand over her mouth, he threw himself forward, and the echo of Liku’s voice in his head sent him trembling at this perilous way of bushes towards the island. The typical pattern is exemplified by the first two clauses, the bushes twitched again and Lok steadied by the tree, and there is no clear line, here, between action and location: both types have some reference in space, and both have one participant only. The clauses of movement usually [16] also

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specify location, e.g. *the man turned sideways in the bushes*, *he rushed to the edge of the water*; and on the other hand, in addition to what is clearly movement, as in *a stick rose upright*, and what is clearly location, as in *there were hooks in the bone*, there is an intermediate type exemplified by *[the bushes] waded out*, where the verb is of the movement type but the subject is immobile.

The picture is one in which people act, but they do not act on things; they move, but they move only themselves, not other objects. Even such normally transitive verbs as *grab* occur intransitively: *he grabbed at the branches* is just another clause of movement (cf. *he smelled along the shaft of the twig*). Moreover a high proportion [exactly half] of the subjects are not people; they are either parts of the body [8] or inanimate objects [20], and of the human subjects half again [14] are found in clauses which are not clauses of action. Even among the four transitive action clauses, cited above, one has an inanimate subject and one is reflexive. There is a stress set up, a kind of syntactic counterpoint, between verbs of movement in their most active and dynamic form, that of finite verb in independent clause, in the simple past tense characteristic of the direct narrative of events in a time sequence, on the one hand, and on the other hand the preference for non-human subjects and the almost total absence of transitive clauses. It is particularly the lack of transitive clauses of action with human subjects (there are only two clauses in which a person acts on an external object) that creates an atmosphere of ineffectual activity: the scene is one of constant movement, but movement which is as much inanimate as human and in which only the mover is affected – nothing else changes. The syntactic tension expresses this combination of activity and helplessness.

No doubt this is a fair summary of the life of Neanderthal man. But Passage A is not a description of the people. The section from which it is taken is one in which Lok is observing and, to a certain extent, interacting with the tribe; they have captured one of the people, and it is for the most part their doings that are being described. And the tribe are not helpless. The transitivity patterns are not imposed by the subject-matter; they are the reflection of the underlying theme, or rather of one of the underlying themes – the inherent limitations of understanding, whether cultural or biological, of Lok and his people, and their consequent inability to survive when confronted with beings at a higher stage of development. In terms of the processes and events as we would interpret them, and encode them in our grammar, there is no immediate justification for the predominance of intransitives; this is the result of their being expressed through the medium of the
highly valued texts

semantic structure of Lok’s universe. In our interpretation, a goal-directed process (or, as I shall suggest below, an externally caused process) took place: someone held up a bow and drew it. In Lok’s interpretation, the process was undirected (or, again, self-caused): a stick rose upright and began to grow shorter at both ends. (I would differ slightly here from Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor, who suggest, I think, that the form of Lok’s vision is perception and no more. There may be very little processing, but there surely is some; Lok has a theory – as he must have, because he has language.)

Thus it is the syntax as such, rather than the syntactic reflection of the subject-matter, to which we are responding. This would not emerge if we had no account of the activities of the tribe, since elsewhere – in the description of the people’s own doings, or of natural phenomena – the intransitiveness of the syntax would have been no more than a feature of the events themselves, and of the people’s ineffectual manipulation of their environment. For this reason the vigil of Lok is a central element in the novel. We find, in its syntax, both levels of meaning side by side: Lok is now actor, now interpreter, and it is his potential in both these roles that is realized by the overall patterns of prominence that we have observed, the intransitives, the non-human subjects, and the like. This is the dominant mode of expression. At the same time, in Passage A, among the clauses that have human subjects, there are just two in which the subject is acting on something external to himself, and in both these the subject is a member of the tribe; it is not Lok. There is no instance in which Lok’s own actions extend beyond himself; but there is a brief hint that such extension is conceivable. The syntactic foregrounding, of which this passage provides a typical example, thus has a complex significance: the predominance of intransitives reflects, first, the limitations of the people’s own actions; second, the people’s world-view, which in general cannot transcend these limitations – but within which there may arise, thirdly, a dim apprehension of the superior powers of the “others”, represented by the rare intrusion of a transitive clause such as the man was holding the stick out to him. Here the syntax leads us into a third level of meaning, Golding’s concern with the nature of humanity; the intellectual and spiritual developments that contribute to the present human condition, and the conflicts that arise within it, are realized in the form of conflicts between the stages of that development – and, syntactically, between the types of transitivity.

Passage A is both text and sample. It is not only these particular sentences and their meanings that determine our response, but the fact
that they are part of a general syntactic and semantic scheme. That this passage is representative in its transitivity patterns can be seen from comparison with other extracts.\textsuperscript{21} It also exemplifies certain other relevant features of the language of this part of the book. We have seen that there is a strong preference for processes having only one participant: in general there is only one nominal element in the structure of the clause, which is therefore the Subject. But while there are very few Complements,\textsuperscript{22} there is an abundance of Adjuncts [44]; and most of these [40] have some spatial reference. Specifically, they are (a) static [25], of which most [21] are place adjuncts consisting of preposition plus noun, the noun being either an inanimate object of the immediate natural environment (e.g. bush) or a part of the body, the remainder [4] being localizers (at their farthest, at the end, etc.); and (b) dynamic [15], of which the majority [10] are of direction or non-terminal motion (sideways, [rose] upright, at the branches, towards the island, etc.) and the remainder [5] perception, or at least circumstantial to some process that is not a physical one (e.g. [looked at Lok] along his shoulder, [shouted] at the green drifts). Thus with the dynamic type, either the movement is purely perceptual or, if physical, it never reaches a goal: the nearest thing to terminal motion is he rushed to the edge of the water (which is followed by and came back!).

The restriction to a single participant also applies to mental process clauses [16]. This category includes perception, cognition, and reaction, as well as the rather distinct sub-category of verbalization; and such clauses in English typically contain a Phenomenon, that which is seen, understood, liked, etc. Here, however, the Phenomenon is often [8] either not expressed at all (e.g. [Lok] gazed) or expressed indirectly through a preposition, as in he smelled along the shaft of the twig; and sometimes [3] the subject is not a human being but a sense organ (his nose examined this stuff and did not like it). There is the same reluctance to envisage the “whole man” (as distinct from a part of his body) participating in a process in which other entities are involved.

There is very little modification of nouns [10, out of about 100]; and all modifiers are non-defining (e.g. green drifts, glittering water) except where [2] the Modifier is the only semantically significant element in the nominal, the Head noun being a mere carrier demanded by the rules of English grammar (white bone things, sticky brown stuff). In terms of the immediate situation, things have defining attributes only if these attributes are their sole properties; at the more abstract level, in Lok’s understanding the complex taxonomic ordering of natural phenomena that is implied by the use of defining modifiers is lacking, or is only rudimentary.

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We can now formulate a description of a typical clause of what we may call “Language A”, the language in which the major part of the book is written and of which Passage A is a sample, in terms of its process, participants and circumstances:

(1) There is one participant only, which is therefore subject; this is
   (a) actor in a non-directed action (action clauses are intransitive), or participant in a mental process (the one who perceives etc.), or simply the bearer of some attribute or some spatial property;
   (b) a person (Lok, the man, he, etc.), or a part of the body, or an inanimate object of the immediate and tangible natural environment (bush, water, twig, etc.);
   (c) unmodified, other than by a determiner which is either an anaphoric demonstrative (this, that) or, with parts of the body, a personal possessive (his etc.).

(2) The process is
   (a) action (which is always movement in space), or location-possession (including, e.g. the man had white bone things above his eyes = “above the man’s eyes there were . . .”), or mental process (thinking and talking as well as seeing and feeling – a “cunning brain”! – but often with a part of the body as subject);
   (b) active, non-modalized, finite, in simple past tense (one of a linear sequence of mutually independent processes).

(3) There are often other elements which are adjuncts, i.e. treated as circumstances attendant on the process, not as participants in it; these are
   (a) static expressions of place (in the form of prepositional phrases), or, if dynamic, expressions of direction (adverbs only) or of non-terminal motion, or of directionality of perception (e.g. peered at the stick);
   (b) often obligatory, occurring in clauses which are purely locational (e.g. there were hooks in the bone).
than simple past, a defining modifier, and a non-spatial adjunct. This is not to say that it could not occur. Each of these features is improbable, and their combination is very improbable; but they are not impossible. They are improbable in that they occur with significantly lower frequency than in other varieties of English (such as, for example, the final section of *The Inheritors*).

Before leaving this passage, let us briefly reconsider the transitivity features in the light of a somewhat different analysis of transitivity in English. I have suggested elsewhere that the most generalized pattern of transitivity in Modern English, extending beyond action clauses to clauses of all types, those of mental process and those expressing attributive and other relations, is one that is based not on the notions of actor and goal but on those of cause and effect. In any clause, there is one central and obligatory participant – let us call it the “affected” participant – which is inherently involved in the process. This corresponds to the actor in an intransitive clause of action, to the goal in a transitive clause of action, and to the one who perceives etc., in a clause of mental process; Lok has this function in all the following examples: Lok turned away, Fa drew Lok away, Lok looked up at Fa, Lok was frightened, curiosity overcame Lok. There may then be a second, optional participant, which is present only if the process is being regarded as brought about by some agency other than the participant affected by it; let us call this the “agent”. This is the actor in a transitive clause of action and the initiator in the various types of causative; the function of Tuami in Tuami waggled the paddle in the water and Tuami let the ivory drop from his hands. As far as action clauses are concerned, an intransitive clause is one in which the roles of “affected” and “agent” are combined in the one participant; a transitive clause is one in which they are separated, the process being treated as one having an external cause.

In these terms, the entire transitivity structure of Language A can be summed up by saying that there is no cause and effect. More specifically: in this language, processes are seldom represented as resulting from an external cause; in those instances where they are, the “agent” is seldom a human being; and where it is a human being, it is seldom one of the people. Whatever the type of process, there tends to be only one participant; any other entities are involved only indirectly, as circumstantial elements (syntactically, through the mediation of a preposition). It is as if doing was as passive as seeing and things no more affected by actions than by perceptions: their role is as in clauses of mental process, where the object of perception is not in any sense
“acted on” – it is in fact the perceiver that is the “affected” participant, not the thing perceived – and likewise tends to be expressed circumstantially (e.g. Lok peered at the stick). There is no effective relation between persons and objects: people do not bring about events in which anything other than they themselves, or parts of their bodies, are implicated.

There are, moreover, a great many, an excessive number, of these circumstantial elements; they are the objects in the natural environment, which as it were take the place of participants, and act as curbs and limitations on the process. People do not act on the things around them; they act within the limitations imposed by the things. The frustration of the struggle with the environment, of a life “poised . . . between the future and the past” (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 1967, p. 81), is embodied in the syntax: many of the intransitive clauses have potentially transitive verbs in them, but instead of a direct object there is a prepositional phrase. The feeling of frustration is perhaps further reinforced by the constant reference to complex mental activities of cognition and verbalization. Although there are very few abstract nouns, there are very many clauses of speaking, knowing and understanding (e.g. Lok understood that the man was holding the stick out to him); and a recurrent theme, an obsession almost, is the difficulty of communicating memories and images (I cannot see this picture) – of transmitting experience through language, the vital step towards that social learning which would be a precondition of their further advance.

Such are some of the characteristics of Language A, the language which tells the story of the people. There is no such thing as a “Language B”. Passage B is simply the point of transition between the two parts of the book. There is a “Language C”: this is the language of the last 16 pages of the novel, and it is exemplified by the extract shown as Passage C below. But Passage B is of interest because linguistically it is also to some extent transitional. There is no doubt that the first paragraph is basically in Language A and the second in Language C; moreover the switch is extremely sudden, being established in the first three words of B (i), when Lok, with whom we have become closely identified, suddenly becomes the red creature. Nevertheless B (i) does provide some hints of the change to come.

There are a few instances [4] of a human “agent” (actor in a transitive clause); not many, but one of them is Lok, in Lok . . . picked up Tanakil. Here is Lok acting on his environment, and the object “affected” is a human being, and one of the tribe! There are some non-spatial adjuncts, such as with an agonized squealing, like the legs of a
giant. There are abstract nominals: *demonic activity, its weight of branches*. And there are perhaps more modifiers and complex verb forms than usual. None of these features is occurring for the first time; we have had forward-looking flashes throughout, e.g. (p. 191) *He had a picture of Liku looking up with soft and adoring eyes at Tanakil, guessed how Ha had gone with a kind of eager fearfulness to meet his sudden death and* (pp. 212–13) “*Why did you not snatch the new one?*” and “*We will take Tanakil. Then they will give back the new one*”, both spoken by the more intelligent Fa (when transitive action clauses do occur in Language A, they are often in the dialogue). But there is a greater concentration of them in B (i), a linguistic complexity that is also in harmony with the increased complexity of the events, which has been being built up ever since the tribe first impinged on the people with the mysterious disappearance of Ha (p. 65). The syntax expresses the climax of the gradual overwhelming of Lok’s understanding by new things and events; and this coincides with the climax in the events themselves as, with the remainder of the people all killed or captured, Lok’s last companion, Fa, is carried over the edge of the waterfall. Lok is alone; there are no more people, and the last trace of his humanity, his membership of a society, has gone. In that moment he belongs to the past.

Lok does not speak again, because there is no one to speak to. But for a while we follow him, as the tribe might have followed him, although they did not – or rather we follow *it*; there can be no *him* where there is no *you* and *me*. The language is now Language C, and the story is that of *homo sapiens*; but for a few paragraphs, beginning at B (ii), as we remain with Lok, the syntax harks back to the world of the people, just as in B (i) it was beginning to look forward. The transition has taken place; *it was a strange creature, smallish, and bowed that we had come to know so well*. But it is still the final, darkening traces of this creature’s world that we are seeing, fleetingly as if in an escaping dream.

A brief sketch of B (ii): There are very few transitive clauses of action [4]; in only one of these is Lok the agent – and here the “affected” entity is a part of his own body: *it put up a hand*. The others have *the water* and *the river* as agent. Yet nearly half [22] the total number of clauses [47] have Lok as subject; here, apart from a few [4] mental process clauses, the verb is again one of simple movement or posture, and intransitive (*turn, move, crouch*, etc.; but including for the first time some with a connotation of attitude like *sidle* and *trot*; cf. *broke into a queer, loping run*). The remaining subjects are inanimate
objects [19] and parts of the body [6]. But there are differences in these subjects. The horizons have widened; in addition to water and river we now have sun and green sky – a reminder that the new people walk upright; cf. (p. 143) they did not look at the earth but straight ahead; and there are now also human evidences and artifacts: path, rollers, ropes. And the parts of the body no longer see or feel; they are subjects only of intransitive verbs of movement (e.g. its long arms swinging), and mainly in non–finite clauses, expressing the dependent nature of the processes in which they participate. A majority [32] of the finite verbs are still in simple past tense; but there is more variation in the remainder, as well as more non–finite verbs [8], reflecting a slightly increased proportion of dependent clauses that is also a characteristic of Language C. And while in many clauses [21] we still find spatial adjuncts, these tend to be more varied and more complex (e.g. down the rocks beyond the terrace from the melting ice in the mountains).

This is the world of the tribe; but it is still inhabited, for a brief moment of time, by Lok. Once again the theme is enunciated by the syntax. Nature is no longer totally impenetrable; yet Lok remains powerless, master of nothing but his own body. In Passages A and B taken together, there are more than 50 clauses in which the subject is Lok; but only one of these has Lok as an agent acting on something external to himself, one that has already been mentioned: Lok picked up Tanakil. There is a double irony here. Of all the positive actions on his environment that Lok might have taken, the one he does take is the utterly improbable one of capturing a girl of the tribe – improbable in the event, at the level of subject-matter (let us call this “level one”), and improbable also in the deeper context (“level two”), since Lok’s newly awakened power manifests itself as power over the one element in the environment that is “superior” to himself. It is at a still deeper “level three” that the meaning becomes clear. The action gets him nowhere; but it is a syntactic hint that his people have played their part in the long trek towards the human condition.

By the time we reach Passage C, the transition is complete. Here, for the first time, the majority of the clauses [48 out of 67] have a human subject; of these, more than half [25] are clauses of action, and most of these [19] are transitive. Leaving aside two in which the thing ‘affected’ is a part of the body, there is still a significant increase in the number of instances [17, contrasting with 5 in the whole of A and B together] in which a human agent is acting on an external object. The world of the inheritors is organized as ours is; or at least in a way that we can recognize. Among these are two clauses in which the subject is
they, referring to the people ("the devils": e.g. *they have given me back a changeling*); in the tribe’s scheme of things, the people are by no means powerless. There is a parallel here with the earlier part. In Passage A the actions of the tribe are encoded in terms of the world-view of the people, so that the predominance of intransitive clauses is interpreted at what we called “level two”, although there is a partial reflection of “level one” in the fact that they are marginally less predominant when the subject-matter concerns the tribe. Similarly, in Passage C references to the people are encoded in terms of the world-view of the tribe, and transitive structures predominate; yet the only member of the people who is present – the only one to survive – is the captured baby, whose infant behaviour is described in largely intransitive terms (pp. 230–31). And the references to the people, in the dialogue, include such formulations as “*They cannot follow us, I tell you. They cannot pass over water*”, which is a “level-one” reassurance that, in a “level-two” world of cause and effect whose causes are often unseen and unknown, there are at least limits to the devils’ power.

We can now see the full complementarity between the two “languages”, but it is not easy to state. In Language A there is a level-two theme, that of powerlessness. The momentary hints of potency that we are given at level one represent an antithetic variation which, however, has a significance at level three: the power is ascribed to the tribe but signifies Lok’s own incipient awareness, the people’s nascent understanding of the human potential. This has become a level-two theme in Language C; and in like fashion the level-two theme of Language A becomes in Language C a level-one variation, but again with a level-three significance. The people may be powerless, but the tribe’s demand for explanations of things, born of their own more advanced state, leads them, while still fearfully insisting on the people’s weakness in action, to ascribe to them supernatural powers.

While there are still inanimate subjects in the clause [11], as there always are in English, there is no single instance in Passage C of an inanimate agent. In A and B we had *the echo of Liku’s voice in his head sent him trembling . . ., the branches took her, the water had scooped a bowl out of the rock*; in C we have only *the sail glowed, the sun was sitting in it, the hills grow less*. Likewise all clauses with parts of the body as subject [8] are now intransitive, and none of them is a clause of mental process. Parts of the body no longer feel or perceive; they have attributes ascribed to them (e.g. *his teeth were wolf’s teeth*) or they move (*the lips parted, the mouth was opening and shutting*). The limbs may move and posture, but only the whole man perceives and reacts to his
environment. Now, he also shapes his environment: his actions have become more varied – no longer simply movements; we find here save, obey, and kiss – and they produce results. Something, or someone, is affected by them.

Just as man’s relation to his environment has altered, so his perception of it has changed; the environment has become enlarged. The objects in it are no longer the twig, stick, bush, branch of Language A, nor even the larger but still tangible river, water, scars in the earth. In Passage B (ii) we already had air and sun and sky and wind; in C we have the mountain . . . full of golden light, the sun was blazing, the sand was swirling (the last metaphorically); and also human artifacts: the sail, the mast. Nature is not tamed: the features of the natural environment may no longer be agents in the transitivity patterns, but neither are they direct objects. What has happened is that the horizons have broadened. Where the people were bounded by tree and river and rock, the tribe are bounded by sky and sea and mountain. Although they are not yet conquered, the features that surround them no longer circumscribe all action and all contemplation. Whereas Lok rushed to the edge of the water and came back, the new people steer in towards the shore, and look across the water at the green hills.

4 Final remarks on stylistic “relevance”

The Inheritors has provided a perspective for a linguistic inquiry of a kind whose relevance and significance is notoriously difficult to assess: an inquiry into the language of a full-length prose work. In this situation syntactic analysis is unlikely to offer anything in the way of new interpretations of particular sentences in terms of their subject-matter; the language as a whole is not deviant, and the difficulties of understanding are at the level of interpretation – or rather perhaps, in the present instance, re-interpretation, as when we insist on translating the stick began to grow shorter at both ends as “the man drew the bow”. I have not, in this study, emphasized the use of linguistic analysis as a key; I doubt whether it has this function. What it can do is to establish certain regular patterns, on a comparative basis, in the form of differences which appear significant over a broad canvas. In The Inheritors these appear as differences within the text itself, between what we have called “Language A” and “Language C”. In terms of this novel, if either of these is to be regarded as a departure, it will be Language C, which appears only briefly at the very end; but in the context of Modern English as a whole it is Language A which constitutes the
departure and Language C the norm. There is thus a double shift of stand point in the move from global to local norm, but one which brings us back to more or less where we started.

The focus of attention has been on language in general, on the language system and its relation to the meanings of a literary work. In the study of the text, we have examined instances where particular syntactic options have been selected with a greater than expected frequency, a selection that is partly but not wholly explained by reference to the subject-matter; and have suggested that, by considering how the meaning of these options, taken in the context of the ideational function of language as a whole, relates to an interpretation of the meaning of the work, one can show that they are relevant both as subject-matter and as underlying theme. Each sentence in the passages that were observed in detail is thus potentially of interest both in itself and as an instance of a general trend; and we have been able to ignore other differences, such as that between dialogue and narrative, although a study of these as subvarieties would almost certainly yield further points of interest. Within the present context, the prominence that we have observed can be said to be “motivated”; it is reasonable to talk of foregrounding, here, as an explanation of stylistic impact.

The establishment of a syntactic norm (for this is what it is) is thus a way of expressing one of the levels of meaning of the work: the fact that a particular pattern constitutes a norm is the meaning. The linguistic function of the pattern is therefore of some importance. The features that we have seen to be foregrounded in The Inheritors derive from the ideational component in the language system; hence they represent, at the level at which they constitute a norm, a worldview, a structuring of experience that is significant because there is no a priori reason why the experience should have been structured in this way rather than in another. More particularly, the foregrounded features were selections in transitivity. Transitivity is the set of options whereby the speaker encodes his experience of the processes of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness, together with the participants in these processes and their attendant circumstances; and it embodies a very basic distinction of processes into two types, those that are regarded as due to an external cause, an agency other than the person or object involved, and those that are not. There are, in addition, many further categories and subtypes. Transitivity is really the cornerstone of the semantic organization of experience; and it is at one level what The Inheritors is about. The theme of the entire novel, in a sense, is transitivity: man’s interpretation
of his experience of the world, his understanding of its processes and of
his own participation in them. This is the motivation for Golding’s
syntactic originality; it is because of this that the syntax is effective as a
“mode of meaning”.25 The particular transitivity patterns that stand out
in the text contribute to the artistic whole through the functional
significance, in the language system, of the semantic options which
they express.

This is what we understand by “relevance” – the notion that a
linguistic feature “belongs” in some way as part of the whole. The
pursuit of prominence is not without significance for the understand-
ing and evaluation of a literary work; but neither is it sufficient to
be a rewarding activity in itself.26 It has been said of phonological
foregrounding that “there must be appropriateness to the nexus of
sound and meaning”;27 and this is no less true of the syntactic and
semantic levels, where, however, the relationship is not one of sound
and meaning but one of meaning and meaning. Here “relevance”
implies a congruence with our interpretation of what the work is
about, and hence the criteria of belonging are semantic ones. We
might be tempted to express the relevance of syntactic patterns, such
as we find in The Inheritors, as a “unity of form and meaning”, parallel
to the “sound and meaning” formulation above; but this would, I
think, be a false parallel. The syntactic categories are per se the reali-
izations of semantic options, and the relevance is the relevance of one
set of meanings to another – a relationship among the levels of
meaning of the work itself.

In The Inheritors, the syntax is part of the story. As readers, we are
reacting to the whole of the writer’s creative use of “meaning poten-
tial”; and the nature of language is such that he can convey, in a line
of print, a complex of simultaneous themes, reflecting the variety of
functions that language is required to serve. And because the elements
of the language, the words and phrases and syntactic structures, tend to
have multiple values, any one theme may have more than one
interpretation: in expressing some content, for example, the writer may
invite us at the same time to interpret it in quite a different functional
context – as a cry of despair, perhaps. It is the same property of
language that enables us to react to hints, to take offence and do all the
other things that display the rhetoric of everyday verbal interaction. A
theme that is strongly foregrounded is especially likely to be interpreted
at more than one level. In The Inheritors it is the linguistic representation
of experience, through the syntactic resources of transitivity, that is
especially brought into relief, although there may be other themes not
mentioned here that stand out in the same way. Every work achieves a unique balance among the types and components of meaning, and embodies the writer’s individual exploration of the functional diversity of language.

APPENDIX

Extracts from The Inheritors

A. (pp. 106–7)

The bushes twitched again. Lok steadied by the tree and gazed. A head and a chest faced him, half-hidden. There were white bone things behind the leaves and hair. The man had white bone things above his eyes and under the mouth so that his face was longer than a face should be. The man turned sideways in the bushes and looked at Lok along his shoulder. A stick rose upright and there was a lump of bone in the middle. Lok peered at the stick and the lump of bone and the small eyes in the bone things over the face. Suddenly Lok understood that the man was holding the stick out to him but neither he nor Lok could reach across the river. He would have laughed if it were not for the echo of the screaming in his head. The stick began to grow shorter at both ends. Then it shot out to full length again.

The dead tree by Lok’s ear acquired a voice.

“Clop!”

His ears twitched and he turned to the tree. By his face there had grown a twig: a twig that smelt of other, and of goose, and of the bitter berries that Lok’s stomach told him he must not eat. This twig had a white bone at the end. There were hooks in the bone and sticky brown stuff hung in the crooks. His nose examined this stuff and did not like it. He smelled along the shaft of the twig. The leaves on the twig were red feathers and reminded him of goose. He was lost in a generalized astonishment and excitement. He shouted at the green drifts across the glittering water and heard Liku crying out in answer but could not catch the words. They were cut off suddenly as though someone had clapped a hand over her mouth. He rushed to the edge of the water and came back. On either side of the open bank the bushes grew thickly in the flood; they waded out until at their farthest some of the leaves were opening under water; and these bushes leaned over.

The echo of Liku’s voice in his head sent him trembling at this perilous way of bushes towards the island. He dashed at them where
normally they would have been rooted on dry land and his feet splashed. He threw himself forward and grabbed at the branches with hands and feet. He shouted:

“I am coming!”

B.  *(pp. 215–17)*

(i) Lok staggered to his feet, picked up Tanakil and ran after Fa along the terrace. There came a screaming from the figures by the hollow log and a loud bang from the jam. The tree began to move forward and the logs were lumbering about like the legs of a giant. The crumplefaced woman was struggling with Tuami on the rock by the hollow log; she burst free and came running towards Lok. There was movement everywhere, screaming, demoniac activity; the old man was coming across the tumbling logs. He threw something at Fa. Hunters were holding the hollow log against the terrace and the head of the tree with all its weight of branches and wet leaves was drawing along them. The fat woman was lying in the log, the crumpled woman was in it with Tanakil, the old man was tumbling into the back. The boughs crashed and drew along the rock with an agonized squealing. Fa was sitting by the water holding her head. The branches took her. She was moving with them out into the water and the hollow log was free of the rock and drawing away. The tree swung into the current with Fa sitting limply among the branches. Lok began to gibber again. He ran up and down on the terrace. The tree would not be cajoled or persuaded. It moved to the edge of the fall, it swung until it was lying along the lip. The water reared up over the trunk, pushing, the roots were over. The tree hung for a while with the head facing upstream. Slowly the root end sank and the head rose. Then it slid forward soundlessly and dropped over the fall.

(ii) The red creature stood on the edge of the terrace and did nothing. The hollow log was a dark spot on the water towards the place where the sun had gone down. The air in the gap was clear and blue and calm. There was no noise at all now except for the fall, for there was no wind and the green sky was clear. The red creature turned to the right and trotted slowly towards the far end of the terrace. Water was cascading down the rocks beyond the terrace from the melting ice in the mountains. The river was high and flat and drowned the edge of the terrace. There were long scars in the earth and rock where the branches of a tree had been dragged past by the water. The red creature
came trotting back to a dark hollow in the side of the cliff where there was evidence of occupation. It looked at the other figure, dark now, that grinned down at it from the back of the hollow. Then it turned away and ran through the little passage that joined the terrace to the slope. It halted, peering down at the scars, the abandoned rollers and broken ropes. It turned again, sidled round a shoulder of rock and stood on an almost imperceptible path that ran along the sheer rocks. It began to sidle along the path, crouch, its long arms swinging, touching, almost as firm a support as the legs. It was peering down into the thunderous waters but there was nothing to be seen but the columns of glimmering haze where the water had scooped a bowl out of the rock. It moved faster, broke into a queer loping run that made the head bob up and down and the forearms alternate like the legs of a horse. It stopped at the end of the path and looked down at the long streamers of weed that were moving backwards and forwards under the water. It put up a hand and scratched under its chinless mouth.

C. (pp. 228–9)

The sail glowed red-brown. Tuami glanced back at the gap through the mountain and saw that it was full of golden light and the sun was sitting in it. As if they were obeying some signal the people began to stir, to sit up and look across the water at the green hills. Twal bent over Tanakil and kissed her and murmured to her. Tanakil's lips parted. Her voice was harsh and came from far away in the night.

"Liku!"

Tuami heard Marlan whisper to him from by the mast.

"That is the devil's name. Only she may speak it."

Now Vivani was really waking. They heard her huge, luxurious yawn and the bear skin was thrown off. She sat up, shook back her loose hair and looked first at Marlan then at Tuami. At once he was filled again with lust and hate. If she had been what she was, if Marlan, if her man, if she had saved her baby in the storm on the salt water –

"My breasts are paining me."

If she had not wanted the child as a plaything, if I had not saved the other as a joke –

He began to talk high and fast.

"There are plains beyond those hills, Marlan, for they grow less; and there will be herds for hunting. Let us steer in towards the shore. Have we water – but of course we have water! Did the women bring the food? Did you bring the food, Twal?"
Twal lifted her face towards him and it was twisted with grief and hate.

“What have I to do with food, master? You and he gave my child to the devils and they have given me back a changeling who does not see or speak.”

The sand was swirling in Tuami’s brain. He thought in panic: they have given me back a changed Tuami; what shall I do? Only Marlan is the same – smaller, weaker but the same. He peered forward to find the changeless one as something he could hold on to. The sun was blazing on the red sail and Marlan was red. His arms and legs were contracted, his hair stood out and his beard, his teeth were wolf’s teeth and his eyes like blind stones. The mouth was opening and shutting.

“They cannot follow us, I tell you. They cannot pass over water.”

Notes

1. The results were presented in a paper read to the Conference of University Teachers of English, London (Bedford College), April 1965.
2. Paul Zumthor suggests (private communication) that a particular literary tradition may be characterized by the emphasis and value placed on one particular function, a shift in emphasis being associated with a major break in the tradition. Cf. Zumthor (1971).
3. Nor the other way round, at least in the typical instances. There are certain linguistic activities in which one or other function is prescribed and the speaker required to supply the remainder: “language exercises” such as “Now ask your neighbour a question” (in foreign language classes) and “Write a sonnet” (in school).
5. Including those which specify types of communication role, or illocutionary force, which Richard Ohmann proposes to use in a definition of literature. See Ohmann (1971).
10. As n. 7.
11. Angus McIntosh, “Saying”, Review of English Literature, 6 (April 1965), 19. It is worth quoting further from the same paragraph: “It is at least clear that any approach to this kind of problem which looks at anything less than the whole text as the ultimate unit has very little to contribute.
Whatever it may be in linguistic analysis, the sentence is not the proper unit here. If there are any possibilities of progress, they must, I think, be on the lines of the old recognition, e.g. by the rhetoricians, of elements or strands of something or other which permeate long stretches of text and produce a gradual build-up of effect.”

15. See the paper by Louis Milic (1971), in which he suggests that the diagnostic features of an author’s style are generally to be found among the “unconscious” elements.
16. “Metamorphosis” has, I believe, only two occurrences of an insect name, although crawl is frequent.
18. Figures in square brackets show numbers of occurrences. The most important of these are summarized in Table 2.
21. The other extracts examined for comparison were three passages of similar length: p. 61 from He remembered the old woman; pp. 102–3 from Then there was nothing more; p. 166 from At that the old man rushed forward.
22. By “complement” is understood all nominal elements other than the subject: direct object, indirect object, cognate object, and adjectival and nominal complement. “Adjuncts” are non-nominal elements (adverbs and prepositional phrases).
27. As n. 7 (p. 53).