Book review:
Playing the textual detectives

Iulia Veronica COCU, Isabela Merilă. *A Student's Guidebook to Textual Detective Work.* **Bucureşti: ProUniversitaria, 2025.**

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Recognizing that sometimes the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical analytical work can be difficult to bridge for students, Iulia V. Cocu and Isabela Merilă (2024) have designed a guidebook that resembles the clue–finding, mystery solving journey of a detective in training. The tasks are designed on a gradually increasing scale of complexity and they activate knowledge acquired by students during three years of an undergraduate programme in English. The effectiveness of the approach derives from some of the structural and methodological choices made:

- the emphasis on practice and active learner engagement: the tasks are interactive, dynamic, playful, allowing and encouraging multiple perspectives, adapted to varied learning styles;
- the development of analytical and logical reasoning;
- the integration of linguistic skills and creativity;
- the direct application of theoretical concepts to textual material;
- the systematic practice of professional and real–world communication.

The tasks target linguistic and literary analysis, identification and creation of stylistic devices, comparison of functional styles, etc. They start from figurative language, with simple identification, under the form of a matching exercise. This is then extended to contextualized identification, in examples which, when discussed in class, should prompt students to motivate their choices, thus resolving confusions, inviting a contrastive reading to differentiate concepts, as well as leading to discussions regarding the importance of context. Further exercises build on the above, requiring application and production under the form of creative construction (e.g. tasks 5, 10 or 12), lexical manipulation, semantic–pragmatic analysis, and so on.

Additionally, literary analysis combines the exploration of descriptive strategies, stylistic effects, vocabulary and register, syntax and punctuation in dramatic, narrative, or lyric texts, making use of comparative approaches across different literary periods and genres. For instance, there is a unifying

thread that moves from a classical satirical anchor, represented by Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, through black humour in 20th century novels – Heller's *Catch–22* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* –, to black comedy, with *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett.

Alongside (and sometimes by means of) literary texts, the guidebook directs a spotlight toward sensory language, functional styles, media and advertising, while promoting direct interaction with and reaction to the excerpts provided, whether individually, or in groups. In other words, the expression "bridging the gap" does not only refer to reconciling theory and practice, but also to fostering understanding, communication, and performative skills. The synergy is also visible at the level of authorship. Although both contributors are Associate Professors in the English Department of the Faculty of Letters, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, they bring together different research interests.

Iulia V. Cocu's PhD is in linguistic stylistics, the title of her doctoral thesis being *Black Humour: A Stylistic Approach*. She has authored three books, co–authored four volumes, and published over thirty articles. Her research covers stylistics, ESP, lexicology, and professional communication in English.

On the other hand, Isabela Merilă's PhD is in British and American literature. The title of the doctoral thesis was *Constructing Otherness in Salman Rushdie's Novels,* and she conducts research in the fields of literary and translation studies. She is author of three books, co–author of seven, and editor of one; she has published more than twenty articles.

The experience that informs their contributions to the writing of this text can be traced throughout, . the general impression being one of collaboration, of cross– and inter–disciplinarity.

The book includes a glossary of the terminology used throughout, with examples, where appropriate, as well as a list of references, most of which can serve as an invitation to extended reading. While the textbook can be used efficiently without a teacher's guide, we believe the latter would be a welcome addition, to be used by anyone wishing to integrate it into seminar work.

To end with, here is a selection of what we consider to be some of the volume's highlights:

- task 19, page 17, requires students to write a descriptive paragraph from the perspective of a blind person, forcing a shift away from the default visually oriented texts to be produced for such prompts, to the auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory imagery, while also facilitating a consideration of the world from a standpoint that a seeing person may not occupy too often.
- task 22, page 20, starts from proverbs and ends with a stage production in a surprising way, since each step is designed to challenge students in a different manner. First, they imagine a situation where the proverb

would be the conclusion, then they narrate the situation as a short–story, and afterwards, turn it into a dialogue. In this manner, every step is manageable and the fear of expressing themselves creatively, that some of the students may have, is overcome. Furthermore, without realizing it, they also experiment with different types of discourse, which is not a common practice in stylistics workbooks.

- task 29, page 22, allows students to become familiar with the concepts of *hard skills* and *soft skills* by means of writing two elevator pitches, one for each. This connects stylistics and discourse analysis to employability – one of the main recommendations for curriculum design nowadays. At the same time, students see how lexical choices change when you switch the skill you foreground – essential information for application letters and job interviews.

- task 30, page 22, introduces oral presentations in steps, by using before (prediction), during (structure and content), and after listening activities (extracting keywords, analysing delivery, etc.). This is a clear example of multimodal stylistics, grounded in 21st century material that focuses not only on what is said, but also on how it is staged, therefore, linking rhetoric, discourse structure, with analysis and performance.

- task 64, page 53, concludes the training of the junior detective by bringing together historical context, identity, style, and literary period. The game starts from brief bios of four soldier poets as clue–providing notes and four World War I poems as case files, asking students to find connections among them, with establishment of authorship as only the final step in the process.

These are just some glimpses into the architecture of the guidebook, but they demonstrate the innovative nature of the approach and the fact that the gap between literary and linguistic stylistics is only an illusion. In Widdowson's words "the purpose of stylistics is to link the two approaches by extending the linguist's literary intuitions and the critic's linguistic observations and making their relationship explicit". (1991: 4–5) The authors seem to agree and add to the list of ingredients a sense of fascination, of fun and an element of intellectual play, which are always welcome in didactic projects, even at academic levels.

References

Cocu, I.V. and Merilă, I. (2024) *A Student's Guidebook to Textual Detective Work*. București: ProUniversitaria, ISBN 978–606–26–1830–8.

Widdowson, H.G. (1991). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. London: Longman.