

On the Stylistic Study of Ancient Texts

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ABSTRACT

Judgements of style have long been part of scholarship, with examples going back to Origen in the 2nd century. Since the 19th century, some judgements of style have been made on a statistical basis, with results often at odds with the critical consensus. It would seem in principle desirable to be able to evaluate some countable aspect of style, thus reducing impressionism in this area, but history warns us that the first thing to do with a proposed statistical measure of style is to calibrate it on seemingly assured results, before applying it to less certain material.

Style is manifested in words, and all words have limitations as indicators of style. Content words are context related, and are thus liable to vary with message. Function words, which *articulate* message rather than *carry* it, may be affected by changes in authorial mood or literary genre, but these factors are relatively easy to allow for, and a test based on common function words may thus be useful in literary study. I here report on some results obtained with such a stylistic measure, called BIRD (the Brooks Index of Rhetorical Difference).

Examples are taken from classical Chinese texts (Mencius, *Mwòdž*, the *Shǐ Ji*), the New Testament (Revelation, Ephesians, Hebrews), and the Iliad (the exploit of Dolon, the embassy of Phoinix, the appeal of Odysseus), in part for their intrinsic interest, and in part to demonstrate that the BIRD test can give meaningful results with texts in any tradition. In addition to the inevitable authorship questions, I note that such a test may perhaps more fruitfully be employed in studying style within the work of a single author. Or, with the Iliad, in providing evidence that this work does not have the character to be expected of a consecutive improvisation by a single poet.

[300 words]