Working With English
medieval and modern language, literature and drama

Sentenced to Destruction: a Stylistic Analysis of the Syntax of Two Post-apocalyptic Novels[1]

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Two novels from different points in the vast and varied post-apocalyptic canon[2] are the subject of this paper. Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* both depict a world following what can be presumed to be the devastation of a nuclear holocaust, and while the settings and circumstances of each novel are in many ways dissimilar, both project a fictional world characterized by bleakness, desolation, and, arguably, hopelessness. Hoban and McCarthy would appear to have little else in common beyond the fact that they are near contemporaries and both are American, yet these two novels are strikingly similar stylistically: despite the appearance of being radically different (Hoban's distinctive orthography bears little resemblance to McCarthy's standard English, for example), the syntax of the two novels is remarkably alike in fundamentally important ways. In particular, the use that each author makes of deviant or foregrounded sentence structures assists, as I will argue, in projecting the fictional world that forms the core of each novel.[3] In many ways the syntactic chaos that *appears* to be (but is not, in fact) at work both mirrors and contributes to projecting the chaos and destruction of the worlds of the novels, acting congruently with other stylistic features to depict an effective, but nonetheless depressing, representation of the post-holocaust landscape.

By comparing the conscious syntactic choices of Hoban and McCarthy, I will demonstrate not only how such choices enable the authors to project their desired fictional worlds (and in turn allow readers to construct these worlds[4]), but also how this form of close stylistic analysis has broader applications and benefits—from both a literary-linguistic and a pedagogical perspective—for the interpretation and explication of literary texts. Working within a traditional stylistics framework, I will illustrate the types of syntactic structures exploited by both authors and speculate on how these contribute to the interpretation of each novel as a whole. I begin with some background to each novel before proceeding to examine their syntactic features; I end with some of the broader implications of such an analysis, particularly as they have an impact upon making the linguistics–literature interface more transparent and its examination more practically useful.

The Novels: Context and Background

Russell Hoban completed *Riddley Walker* in 1979 after five years and several drafts. It soon became, and continues to be, both a critically acclaimed work of experimental fiction and a cult hit. It deals, in a distinctive form of eroded and then reconstructed English, with the coming-of-age of its central character and narrator, Riddley, in southeastern England ('Inland') around 2,500 years after a nuclear holocaust has, we

assume, devastated the world. As 12-year-old Riddley copes with the responsibilities he suddenly inherits as the 'connexion man' (a kind of priest or prophet) in his society, and as one of the few literate people in a largely illiterate world that is pre-industrial and relies on foraging for subsistence, he learns about his past (our near-present, since the holocaust appears to have happened in the late 1990s) and becomes aware that his own people seem destined to repeat the mistakes of that past in their quest for greater scientific and technological knowledge. Yet the *Bildungsroman* theme and even the story itself are secondary in many ways to the language: Hoban himself has called it the 'protagonist' of the novel (Maynor & Patteson 1984), and it has been the primary focus of many, although far from all, critical studies of the novel from the early 1980s to the present day.[5] The language seems more suited to oral recitation than to silent reading, a reflection no doubt of Riddley's attempts to write down what he hears, and is at once clearly English and clearly not quite, as we see in the opening lines:

> On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen. (1)

More than a dialect, but drawing on various dialects for inspiration, the language has few parallels in any other novel, and is certainly without comparison as a piece of sustained linguistic creativity (it retains its consistency, with few exceptions, for over 200 pages). 'Riddleyspeak', as it has come to be known, is most notable for its deviant orthography and idiosyncratic lexicosemantics, but closer analysis reveals similar creativity at the morphological and syntactic levels. The syntax, however, has received little serious attention in scholarly literature to date. The novel as a whole, while racy, funny, and touching—true to the spirit of other *Bildungsroman* works—is also rather disturbing in its portrayal of humans' ill-conceived but all-consuming desire for absolute knowledge.

The Road, published in 2006, is generically similar to *Riddley Walker* but quite different in setting and timeframe. While we are never told explicitly when the nuclear holocaust took place,[6] I infer that it is probably in the last five to ten years; one may also infer that the action, minimal as it is, takes place in the United States. Ostensibly unlike the first-person narrative of Hoban's novel, McCarthy's narrator is extradiegetic but far from omniscient; yet the narrator's point of view is almost equivalent to that of the central adult figure (referred to only as 'the man'), who is making his way along the eponymous road in search of the sea, accompanied by his young son ('the boy' or 'the child'). The striking lack of personal names and geographical references, and the obscure and uncertain references to time, make it clear that this novel, while probably set in or close to our own time, is in fact located in another kind of world altogether. Although tinged with poignancy and even humour in places, there is very little hope in this novel: even when the father and son find food or shelter, or at the end when the boy finds a new family after his father's death, our assumptions about the devastated world in which they now live—which are informed by the unsettling descriptions of charred ruins, ruthless savages, and the dearth of human and nonhuman life—tell us that the chances of long-term survival, or even of happiness and well-being, are slim.

The most obvious difference between *The Road* and *Riddley Walker* is that the former is written in completely standard English, at least from an orthographical perspective, while the latter is certainly not. That said, there are many syntactic similarities that present themselves upon closer inspection. Both Hoban and McCarthy

take liberties with the notion of the sentence and blend grammatically 'correct' or 'acceptable' sentences with deviant ones throughout the novel. Although unique in Hoban's oeuvre to *Riddley Walker*, such syntactic creativity is more characteristically McCarthy's style and by no means exclusive to *The Road*. Nor are the themes of *The Road* new to McCarthy; indeed, the depiction of geographic expansiveness and frequent desolation in his 'Border Trilogy' and of moral emptiness or sheer brutality in *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian* can also be attributed in part to the distinctive syntactic structures that McCarthy employs. The two authors' manipulation of standard sentence structure contributes both to throwing the reader off-stride and to projecting a distinctive fictional world that reflects the novels' themes and setting. I turn now, therefore, to presenting the range of these syntactic structures after briefly outlining the notion of foregrounding and deviance as these terms apply to sentences.

Sentences: Deviance and Foregrounding

Before any claim for deviance from a norm can be made, a 'standard' definition must be established. For the sentence, I use a fairly typical definition from the *Cambridge Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Carter & McCarthy 2006) as my benchmark:

> The sentence is principally a unit of written grammar and is normally easily identified by an initial capital letter on the first word and a full stop after the last word. [. . .] [It] must be grammatically complete (i.e. it must have at least one main clause). (§ 269-72)

Carter and McCarthy also note that in speech, 'the sentence as a grammatical unit is more problematic' (§ 269). This point will become more important when I discuss the role of speech and narration in sentence grammaticality; as we will see, pragmatics ends up contributing more than grammar alone to an assessment of deviance and its effects. Indeed, the unpredictable nature of many literary sentences might lead us to see 'deviant' sentences more as *deviations* from a grammatical standard than as *deviance* per se. For the purposes of my analysis, however, a sentence may be considered essentially deviant if it violates the criteria outlined in the definition above.

The notion of foregrounding has been well established in the stylistics literature.[7] First introduced by the Russian formalist school in the 1920s in terms of *ostranenie* or 'defamiliarisation', foregrounding refers to a deliberate move on the part of an author to introduce an unorthodox, or deviant, linguistic form or pattern with the express purpose of influencing themes, and particularly the reader's interpretation of such themes (see Simpson 2004). Foregrounding presupposes deviance, but deviance alone need not imply foregrounding: as Simpson succinctly states, 'if a particular textual pattern is not motivated for artistic purposes, then it is not foregrounding' (2004: 50). For example, we might note that Hemingway's prose is characterised by short, simple sentences. While this might deviate from the norms of sentence length across written English prose, it is not necessarily an example of foregrounding (although it may be in certain situations) but rather a particular stylistic trait. Applying this distinction to the novels by Hoban and McCarthy under discussion in this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn: in *Riddley Walker*, deviance from linguistic standards and from typical authorial style is unquestionable, and the deviant features are—or at least start out to be—foregrounded; in *The Road*, whose style is, as mentioned, more typically McCarthyan, the deviant features are nonetheless foregrounded in that they draw the reader's attention to the novel's

themes and aid, as I argue, in the reader's construction of the novel's fictional world. In short, since the effect of the deviant features of both novels is to 'defamiliarise', these features are certainly foregrounded.[8]

Now that I have established these notions, I will proceed to summarise the ways in which sentence-level deviance is manifested in each novel before analysing the various effects of each author's use of such deviance. In doing so, I will attempt to answer what Leech and Short (2007) call the 'implicit' question raised by every instance of foregrounding: 'what should have led the author to express himself in this exceptional way?' (111).

Syntactic deviance in Riddley Walker

It is not immediately easy to identify deviant sentences in this novel, mainly as a result of the presence of so many other, more obviously deviant features in orthography and lexicon. For example, it would take some experience with the language of the novel to ascertain that neither of the two sentences that follow, both of which I return to later, is syntactically deviant: 'This time doing it my self and with the Big 2 not jus regler Eusa show men it took me strange' (38); 'There we wer then in amongst the broakin stoans the grean rot and the number creaper with the rain all drenching down and peltering on them dead stoans stumps and stannings' (77). Of course a claim could be made that the lack of sentence-internal punctuation is sufficient to make these sentences deviant (or, as a purist or prescriptivist might say more bluntly, 'wrong'); however, while the lack of punctuation in *Riddley Walker* (and similarly in *The Road*)[9] does play a role, there is no deviance in these sentences at the clause level: each has a main clause with a finite verb ('took' and 'wer', respectively).

The novel does exhibit syntactic deviance in two broad senses: what I am labelling syntactic *under*development and syntactic *over*development. An underdeveloped sentence is deviant in that it has no verb (I call these 'verbless' in my analysis), uses a nonfinite ('participial') verb form instead of a finite form, or is an isolated subordinate clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction ('dependent'); in other words, these sentences lack main clauses. I will continue to call them sentences, however, since graphologically they begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop; this visual clue leads the reader to believe they are sentences, and the defamiliarisation begins to operate most effectively on this level once the reader comes to realise that the sentence does not in fact conform to normal patterns. Since isolated dependent clauses are quite rare, examples of the two more prevalent types of underdeveloped sentence follow:

verbless:	Sky all hevvy and grey. (63) The bloody meat and boan of it. (154)
participial:	Arnge flames upping in the dark and liting all the faces roun. (22) Heading for senter then. (106)

Overdeveloped sentences are similar to what would be marked in student writing as 'run-on': two or more main clauses blended without any conjunctions. The principal, if not sole, form of overdevelopment in *Riddley Walker* is the paratactic construction:

paratactic: Coming back with the boar on a poal we come a long by the rivver it wer hevvyer woodit in there. (1)

While Hoban does write in all types of complete sentence (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex), the prevalence[10] of the deviant sentences illustrated above is sufficient for us to consider them a form of foregrounding and to lead us to question why such foregrounding occurs, and with what effect.[11]

Syntactic deviance in The Road

McCarthy's novel has much in common syntactically with Hoban's. Not only do we see similar types of syntactic deviance, but the prevalence of such deviance is almost identical (see Appendix A). Like Hoban, McCarthy relies extensively on underdeveloped sentences:

verbless: At evening a dull sulphur light from the fires. (51)
The long dry crack of searing limbs. (96)

participial: Following a stone wall in the dark, wrapped in his blanket, kneeling in the ashes like a penitent. (54)
The dull bedlam dying in the distance. (97)

Overdeveloped sentences occur frequently as well, but unlike the non-conjoined paratactic constructions of *Riddley Walker*, overdevelopment in *The Road* can be found in excessively conjoined sentences displaying polysyndeton:

polysyndetic: Someone before him had not trusted them and in the end neither did he and he walked out with the blankets over his shoulder and they set off along the road again. (22)

Hoban, it should be noted, occasionally uses polysyndeton as well, although he has a greater predilection for parataxis. Despite the difference in the nature of the two authors' overdeveloped sentences, however, the effects are arguably the same. I now move to the heart of my discussion: the effects of the deviant syntactic features of the two novels.

Projecting a Fictional World: the Role of Deviant Syntax

By definition, post-apocalyptic novels deal with the aftermath of nuclear holocaust (or in some cases another type of catastrophe), and while the plots of the two novels under discussion here are separated by well over two millennia, both depict a world that has been reduced to rubble and ruin. Granted, it appears that some kind of social, political, and possibly even religious order has been reconstructed in *Riddley Walker*, and a certain degree of 'civilisation' is apparent; by contrast, no such order exists in *The Road*, and the two main characters live in constant fear of death at the hands of cannibalistic bands of savages. Still, for all of the superficial social structures of *Riddley Walker*, the people in Riddley's world are still digging in the layers of ash and mud that obscure the remains of the human and nonhuman elements of the twentieth-century world that was destroyed in the nuclear attack. As Riddley states poignantly when he sees the magnificent iron machines in Fork Stoan (Folkestone) and feels their power, 'O what we ben! And what we come to!' (100). Later, he comments on the lack of progress his people have made in relation to those from 'time back way back', i.e., our present world: 'Dyou mean to tel me them befor us by the time they done 1997 years they had boats in the air [aircraft] and all them things and here we are

weve done 2347 years and mor and stil slogging in the mud?' (125). Some aspects of Riddley's world are certainly eerily reminiscent of the more obvious and more recent horrors of *The Road*. Therefore, despite the chronological distance between the novels' plots, and despite the relative lack of social order in *The Road*, the descriptions of the physical landscape (both worlds seem to be permanently grey, wet, and cold, true signs of a long nuclear winter) and the general outlook of the main characters would suggest similar settings.

One of the principal roles of stylistic analysis is to support more objectively a reader's initial subjective reaction to a text. To that end, I have done some fairly comprehensive analysis of *Riddley Walker*, and, among other findings, I discovered that 72 per cent of the words in a randomly selected 569-word passage were orthographically standard, while the others were in a variety of deviant forms; 82.6 per cent of the words were morphologically simple, i.e., composed of only one morpheme; a similar number were monosyllabic. While I have not analysed *The Road* to the same extent, a smaller-scale examination of a 292-word extract from the beginning of the novel showed remarkably similar patterns: orthographic deviance was not an issue, of course, but 74.7% of the words were morphologically simple, and 81.2% were monosyllabic. More detailed analysis of *The Road* is required, but these preliminary figures are sufficient to suggest at least that both novels are lexically simple.[12]

An analysis of syntax makes an important contribution to supporting such findings, and to prompting others. It is important to note, however, that just as syntax alone does not succeed in projecting every aspect of the fictional world (i.e., the overall effect—Simpson's notion of 'artistic purpose'—is achieved through other forms of deviance as well as through character development, narrative technique, and plot structure, among others—all beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in depth), individual sentences do not themselves do all the work. Three things are worth bearing in mind here. First, with an average level of syntactic deviance of close to 50% (see Appendix A), deviant and non-deviant sentences are in constant dynamic tension, both contributing equally to the overall effect. Second, although sentences may be considered syntactic units that are separate from one another, they are not isolated and do not exist in a stylistic vacuum. Readers may consider one sentence separately from another, assisted by the graphological cues mentioned earlier, but they quickly relate what they are reading to what they have already read, and then just as quickly relate that to what comes next. Context, therefore, is crucial, and it is through context that the overall effect of the syntactic choices is most keenly realised. Third, and directly stemming from the previous point, is the notion of sentences as *utterances* in addition to being units of written meaning. The orality of language, in fact, operates on at least two levels: as readers we can give voice to what we read, either overtly or silently (indeed, *Riddley Walker* almost requires to be read aloud); and both Riddley's first-person narration and the non-omniscient third-person voice representing the thoughts and point of view of the main character of *The Road* closely approximate spoken language. This very connection to oral tradition, with its admittedly stereotypical associations with primitive, non-literate culture, itself grounds the language of the novel firmly in a world stripped, in both cases violently, of any modern embellishments.

It is important, therefore, to illustrate the effects of syntax in both novels by illustrating how sections of text develop as coherent wholes, each sentence working within its larger context to create a certain effect. I will demonstrate this through three selections from each novel as a means of identifying the roles played by the various forms of syntactic deviance that we see in each selection.

Syntax and coherence in Riddley Walker

(a) Extract 1: p. 38, paragraph 1[13]

> (1) When Dad ben a live I all ways ben there when he done the wotcher. (2) This time doing it my self and with the Big 2 not jus regler Eusa show men it took me strange. (3) Dads things all roun the shelter. (4) His weapons and his anrack hanging on ther pegs. (5) His paper and ink and pens on the locker. (6) His doss bag. (7) Even his smel stil there. (8) His smoak and his sweat but no Dad. (9) The black and red spottit dog skin peggit on the wall with the 4 legs out stretcht and the candl flame shimmying in the wind.

Sentences (1) and (2) are complete:[14] the first is a complex sentence containing one main clause ('I all ways ben there') and two subordinate clauses; the second begins with a participial phrase coordinated with a prepositional phrase, and then the main clause ('it took me strange'). The presence of complete sentences in a first-person narrative of this kind serves to reinforce the fact that we do frequently speak in complete sentences; indeed, much of the work of scholars of spoken language has shown that oral language can be highly complex.[15] Furthermore, the interspersion of complete sentences with deviant ones helps to foreground the latter while also establishing a sense of grammatical order: large-scale deviance is not reader-friendly, and Hoban cannot afford more reader alienation than he is already risking with his orthographic deviance. More important, he needs to stress that this is still English, however eroded and re-formed it might be.

Sentence (3) begins a series of deviant sentences. Like sentences (5)-(8) it is a verbless sentence describing what Riddley sees around him; sentences (4) and (9) are similar, although they are participial rather than verbless (the participles being 'hanging' in [4] and 'peggit,' 'out stretcht,' and 'shimmying' in [9]). In context, this string of deviant sentences can be understood as a list, and a reader would soon catch on to this fact; there is no sentence-internal punctuation (none exists anywhere in the novel), but we might imagine a colon to be 'understood' between (2) and (3). Riddley, of course, would not know about punctuation, so his writing contains only the barest minimum required to enable readability (we might even consider it an authorial intervention if we extend the notion of the text being Riddley's, rather than Hoban's, to its natural end). When the passage is read aloud, of course, as we might imagine Riddley to have created it, the punctuation ceases to be as important, so at a *spoken* level the sense of the paragraph is retained just as our eyes are drawn to the obvious deviance at the *written* level. We are reminded that syntactic order, at least at the written level, has faltered, perhaps a reflection of the ways in which the modern world, represented metaphorically—or perhaps metonymically—by literacy, has also crumbled.

(b) Extract 2: from p. 77, paragraph 4

> (1) There we wer then in amongst the broakin stoans the grean rot and the number creaper with the rain all drenching down and peltering on them dead stoans stumps and stannings. (2) Spattering on crumbelt conkreat and bustit birk and durdling in the puddls gurgling down the runnels of the dead town. (3) A kynd of greanish lite to that day from the rain the grean rot and the number creaper and the dead town pong wer going up all grean smelling in that greanish lite. (4) Dog pong as wel a black smel in the grey rain.

Once again this paragraph begins with a complete, albeit lengthy, sentence, which establishes the place context. Sentence (2) is deviant, a participial construction that seems to depend on (1) for its meaning: the subject of the three present participles is 'rain' from sentence (1), and the participles of (2) are a continuation of the participles 'drenching' and 'peltering' of (1). The influence of the oral is clear in this pairing of sentences. The remaining two sentences are rather more difficult to analyse. In (3) we have a verbless clause ('A kynd of greanish lite to that day from the rain the grean rot and the number creaper') conjoined by 'and' to a standard main clause ('the dead town pong wer going up all grean smelling in that greanish lite'). The sentence is nonetheless deviant, although it would be easy to remove the deviance by inserting the elliptical phrase 'There was' at the beginning of the sentence. Both Leech and Svartvik (2002 [1975])—who note that in verbless clauses 'a form of the verb *to be* has been omitted' (214)—and Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002)—who call constructions such as this 'syntactic non-clausal units'—would trace this type of syntactic phenomenon to spoken language. In fact, Biber, Conrad and Leech go on to state that, '[l]ike other performance phenomena, non-clausal units reflect the simplicity of grammatical constructions resulting from real-time production in conversation. Syntactic non-clausal units can also be related to ellipsis' (2002: 440). Riddley's narration is, after all, a form of conversation with the reader, whom he addresses directly on a number of occasions. Verblessness, however, is also an important contributor to the depiction of the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, in addition to reflecting once again an apparent breakdown of syntactic order.

In fact, sentence (4) is entirely verbless and relies on the context established in previous sentences for its sense. The two elements of this deviant sentence ('Dog pong as wel' and 'a black smel in the grey rain') can be seen as being either in apposition or in a paratactic relationship (even though they are not clauses). The boundary or juncture between the two is where the conventions of written prose would require the insertion of punctuation, in this case a comma or a dash being the best choices. Cumulatively, sentence (4) serves to complete the list of elements that Riddley describes around him after first establishing the context in (1) ('There we wer then . . . '). Like the description of his father's hut in Extract 1, this description relies on a series of deviant sentences constructed on the model of spoken afterthoughts. The verbless and participial constructions reinforce the orality of the language, but they also, through their lack of tense, establish that time has ceased to be important, as if what Riddley sees is literally 'time-less'—but not in any particularly positive way; 'devoid of time' might be an even better description. I will elaborate on this crucial stylistic point below once I have established the existence of similar features in McCarthy's novel.

(c) Extract 3: from p.77, paragraph 1

> (1) The dead bloaks bow wer on the groun with a arrer near it and his spears a littl way off || he musve had a arrer on the string when they jumpt him. (2) He bint too big a man || I cud use his bow wel a nuff. (3) I took his knife as wel || I emtit his pockits too || I thot I myt as wel hang for a ram as a lam.

This final extract from *Riddley Walker* is important for illustrating paratactic structures, Hoban's principal form of overdevelopment among his deviant sentences. For ease of explanation, I have marked the paratactic junctures with a || symbol.

Parataxis, and the lack of punctuation associated with it in this novel, is yet another means for Hoban to convey the fact that Riddley is writing in a form of language heavily influenced by the oral. Each paratactic sentence thus becomes a unit of thought—what Chafe (1980) calls an 'idea unit' or a 'single focus of consciousness'—containing related ideas; it is notable that the word following each paratactic juncture is a pronoun that contributes to the overall coherence of the sentence. Once we as readers have become familiar (and it is here that initial defamiliarisation is subsequently backgrounded as a new level of reading comfort is established) with 'Riddley's' style, we are able to read the sentences aloud with little trouble, since our predictions about the normal patterns of English syntax inform us that punctuation or a conjunction is missing at each paratactic juncture. Nevertheless, we are sufficiently thrown off balance by the written form of the language (syntactically and otherwise) to sense that Riddley's world is different from our own.[16] The sentences seem arbitrarily constructed, but they are not: my analysis of Hoban's sentence structures throughout the novel suggests that he makes intentional syntactic choices; the extracts above corroborate that observation to a considerable extent. The fictional world suggested by the syntax of *Riddley Walker*, then, is anything but chaotic, yet the order it hints at is a far cry from what we expect in our modern, literate (and, by extension, post-industrial and technological) world. New syntactic order parallels new social order: the Whorfian notion of the reflection of culture in language and thought is surely at work here.

Syntax and coherence in The Road

(a) Extract 1: p. 4, paragraph 3

> (1) When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. (2) Everything paling away into the murk. (3) The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. (4) He studied what he could see. (5) The segments of road down there among the dead trees. (6) Looking for anything of color. (7) Any movement. (8) Any trace of standing smoke. (9) He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again.

McCarthy starts this paragraph, as Hoban so often does with his, by establishing place or time using a complete sentence, here containing an adverbial clause of time followed by a main clause ('he glassed the valley below'). In (2) and (3) we have participial constructions that are seemingly dependent on the first sentence for their context; as in Hoban, what is missing from the verbal construction in each sentence is the finite auxiliary. Thus begins a pattern that will recur throughout the novel: a complete sentence using a verb denoting action, followed by a deviant sentence (verbless or participial) that is descriptive of the scene evoked by the governing

sentence. To illustrate further: sentence (4), a complete sentence, indicates what the man *did* ('He studied . . .'); sentence (5), a verbless construction, describes the scene. Sentence (6) is still dependent on (4) for its sense, while (7) and (8) build on that idea with verbless constructions describing possible (but in fact improbable) aspects of the scene being surveyed. The contrast between the activity of the complete sentences ('he glassed', 'He studied') and the inactivity or inanimacy of the deviant sentences ('soft ash blowing in loose swirls', 'segments of road down there among the dead trees', 'Any movement', 'Any trace') is striking, and here both the syntax and the lexicon combine to project a fictional world of desolation. The repetitive nature of the man's actions in doing what he must do several times each day, with similar results each time, is then shown by sentence (9), whose polysyndetic structure typifies repeated, consecutive actions ('He lowered . . . and pulled down . . and wiped . . . and then glassed . . .again').

The true horror of *The Road* is not only the realization of what has happened to the world, but also the sense of futility expressed by the characters (and shared by the readers) over ever finding an alternative—aside from death itself—to their current predicament, an end to the road. The syntax works in concert with the images shaped by McCarthy's lexical choices to reflect this terrifying situation. As in Hoban, different sentence types interact to create a coherent whole: standard sentences advance the plot, to the extent that the plot does advance, while deviant sentences bring home the stark realities of the fictional world; of these deviant sentences, verbless and participial structures help to project a world that is frozen in time (the 'timelessness' that we saw in the extracts from Hoban above), and polysyndetic structures depict with aching monotony the endless cycles of events required for the man and the boy simply to eke out their survival. The second extract below indicates this most strikingly.

(b) Extract 2: from p. 5, paragraph 2

> (1) When he got back the boy was still asleep. (2) He pulled the blue plastic tarp off of him and folded it and carried it out to the grocery cart and packed it and came back with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup.

This short extract again opens with a complete sentence placing the subsequent sentences in a time context. The second sentence, despite being a simple sentence and therefore grammatically 'correct' in a technical sense, is pragmatically problematic because of its excessive coordination between both verb and noun phrases. There is a childlike simplicity to the repeated use of 'and', the repetition of this same conjunction being reminiscent of the basic storytelling technique of young children narrating the events of their day or the plot of a film.[17] Yet there is more to the repetition of 'and' than narrative simplicity alone. At a deeper level, the lack of more complex conjunctions, particularly subordinating conjunctions, suggests that the relationship between various actions is at a most basic level. Absent is any indication of cause and effect, contrast, concession, or any of the other high-level relationships that can exist between parts of a sentence.[18] Life for these characters, it seems, has been reduced to hopeless monotony, stripped, like much of the syntax, of all complexity and embellishment.

(c) Extract 3: from p.8, paragraph 1

> (1) On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. (2) Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. (3) Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. (4) A burned house in a clearing and beyond that the reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned.

This final extract from *The Road* brings together some of the ideas already discussed while furthering the notion of the interaction of syntactic and lexical choice in enabling McCarthy to project his desired fictional world. Sentence (1) is a complete sentence establishing the place context for the paragraph. It is followed by two participial sentences that add to the description, the verbal participles 'stretching', 'moving', and 'whining' working closely with the adjectival participles 'charred', 'sagging', 'strung', and 'blackened' to depict a bleak, lifeless landscape. Sentence (4) perpetuates this impression, a largely verbless (the only finite verb, 'lay', occurs in a relative adverb clause near the end) and to some extent polysyndetic sentence that uses adjectives evoking desolation ('burned', 'stark', 'gray', 'raw red', and 'abandoned') to add to the bleakness projected by the first three sentences. Not only, therefore, do we see different syntactic constructions working together for the broader purpose of coherence; we also see the lexical level of language interacting with syntax to compound the effect. Indeed, the inanimacy alluded to in Extract 1 can be seen here too: there is no life in this passage, and what features of the landscape might have once been alive have long since died. The burn is 'stark' and 'black,' suggesting either that it has dried up or that it is devoid of any aquatic life; 'burn' itself is an evocative and apposite synonym here for 'stream'. The trees are 'charred and limbless'; the house is 'burned'; the meadowlands are 'stark and gray'; and the presumably once vibrant roadworks are now devoid of life. Even the lightpoles are 'blackened' and without their source of energy.

This combined effect of different levels of language emphasises the point that an author's style is an amalgam of features, some working more obviously and frequently than others but all helping to shape the fictional world that the author intends to project. The reader's attention is drawn to foregrounded elements on several levels at once[19]: just as in *Riddley Walker*, where orthography and lexicosemantics surely disconcert the reader first and the deeper level of deviant syntax makes its presence felt later, in *The Road* we see deviant syntax collaborating with foregrounded lexical collocations to great effect. For instance, in the final extract above we might not expect to see a burn being 'stark' and 'black', or meadowlands (usually a source of colour and fecundity) being 'stark and gray'; even the verbs collocate in unanticipated ways: 'the road *passed*', 'trees *stretching*', 'ash *moving*', 'lightpoles *whining*'.[20] This all suggests that examining language on these many stylistic levels (among others), both separately and in conjunction with each other, can expose a great deal about the way in which language can operate locally within phrases and globally across texts to shape an author's projection of a fictional world and the reader's construction of that world.

Broader Implications: Stylistics in Action

Stylistics works, not in opposition to traditional literary analysis, but rather in harmony with it. Identifying linguistic features in a literary text is a useful exercise in itself, but doing so without considering the themes of the text goes only so far;

similarly, a textual analysis that pays little heed to language does an injustice to the writer's craft and to the very medium through which the artistry of the text is shaped. An analysis such as the one I have presented in this paper, therefore, seeks to marry the precision of stylistics with the well-established interpretative methodology of literary analysis to yield a doubly effective union. As I have shown, analysing literature at this level of linguistic detail need not—indeed, *cannot*—ignore the important contributions of analyses of character, theme, and plot, and further insight could be gained by introducing whatever other critical-theoretical approaches seem appropriate to the text in question.

A student of post-apocalyptic literature (or of twentieth-/twenty-first-century literature, experimental fiction, science fiction, etc.) would find much to say about *Riddley Walker* and *The Road* without even going near stylistics. However, it is hard to avoid a discussion of language when assessing the merits of Hoban's novel, and almost all linguistically oriented questions would involve considering language as a contributor to the overall success or impact of the novel: What role does the 'invented' orthography play? To what extent does the language of the novel reflect a possible post-holocaust scenario? Could this novel work in standard English? Similarly, but perhaps less immediately obviously, aspects of McCarthy's distinctive narrative style are likely to enter into an analysis of *The Road*: Why does he not use much punctuation? Why are there no chapter divisions? Why does he make few distinctions between narration and direct speech? Linguistic or paralinguistic features are hard to ignore in these (or any) novels, and syntax is but one of many features that can merit a close stylistic treatment.

In addition to a rigorous stylistic approach that would consider all aspects of the language of the text, however, other activities can be just as enlightening and in some respects more immediately accessible in classroom study of novels such as these. One commonly discussed approach for *Riddley Walker* is rewriting,[21] where a passage of the novel is 'translated' into standard English and the respective merits of the original and the rewrite can be examined and discussed. Not only is this a useful exercise in writing itself, but it can also help to determine the extent to which the deviant or foregrounded aspects of style are crucial to the novel's overall effect. Would the novel 'work' if it were written in standard English?[22] What would be gained or lost? How easy or difficult is it to rewrite with accuracy? A similar activity could be performed on *The Road*, and here the issues of punctuation and syntax would come into focus, since these would be the most obvious targets of a rewrite, in the absence of orthographic deviance. The benefits of rewriting, then, go beyond the usefulness of the task alone: rewriting can raise awareness of correct and incorrect structures, draw attention to linguistic features that might otherwise be overlooked, highlight the complexity of the writer's task, and lead to discussions of issues that rewriters themselves have discovered through active engagement with the text.

Other language-focused tasks that mirror the work of stylisticians could include quantitative analyses of linguistic features (e.g., types of nouns or verbs, sentence length, frequency of words or parts of speech), some of which could be done using computer-based corpus analysis, leading in turn to comparative work with other texts and corpora; lexical analysis to explore Anglo-Saxon or Latinate etymology, for instance; and semantic analysis, again with possible corpus assistance, to determine how word choice can influence our interpretation of literary themes. Indeed, both quantitative analysis and the use of electronic corpora can expose students of literature to the important connections between the 'traditional' notion of literature as a humanities discipline and the range of more scientific applications that are both

cutting-edge and highly informative. Another cross-disciplinary activity could involve a comparison between the text of a novel and its translation onto stage or screen. The concept is not new, of course, but to engage in a multimodal comparison specifically focusing on aspects of language that are noteworthy in the written text can be enlightening. *Riddley Walker* has not yet been filmed, but a DVD of the stage version (adapted by Hoban himself) is available.[23] Students might explore questions such as the following: What is lost in the transition from page to stage? What particular linguistic features are preserved? With Hoban as author of both versions, what does this tell us about what he considers important? How does the interpretation of the language by the actors reflect readers' developing understanding of the fictional world? What would they do differently? Similarly, the recent release of the film version of *The Road* provides an excellent opportunity for comparison between the way the original text and the adapted screenplay deal with language.[24] Studies of adaptations to stage and screen deal frequently with aspects of the cinematic and theatrical arts; a *linguistic* approach, however, would be concerned with the translation of the language of the text to the new medium, with all its inherent problems and challenges.

Beyond the traditional stylistics modelled in this paper, but in keeping with the focus on the concept of fictional worlds, both texts lend themselves well to cognitive-stylistic approaches.[25] The world of neither text is immediately familiar, so much could be made of how the language of the novels—both what is said and what is left unsaid—provides the building blocks of the worlds that we construct as readers. We are required, in doing so, to take imaginative leaps and to fill in gaps, drawing (unwittingly) on Ryan's (1980) notion of the 'principle of minimal departure', which states that gaps in our construction of a fictional world are filled by making reference to our own experience and understanding of real or similar worlds. As most fictional- and possible-worlds scholars assert, fictional worlds are by nature incomplete. In fact, the full extent of a fictional world is inherently unknowable, and much of it is arguably non-existent if it is not mentioned directly in the text; however, this does not prevent readers from seeking to make the world whole through a combination of the explicit and implicit clues (the 'texture' or the degree of 'saturation', in Doležel's words [1998: 169–84]) provided by the author. How readers vary in their individual construction of the fictional world can be an illuminating point of departure for a discussion of style and of literary interpretation more broadly.

A related area of application of cognitive-stylistic approaches is schema theory. Schemata, as an aspect of the fictional world, help us to construct that world in terms of how our own experiences and understandings are preserved or challenged as we gradually build an increasingly more complex picture of the world we encounter as we read. As with Ryan's principle of minimal departure described above, we enter a fictional world with a set of expectations and preconceptions that are either confirmed or subverted by the new reality shaped by the author's words and images. In *Riddley Walker*, for example, our schemata concerning what 12-year-olds do are challenged by Riddley's narrative description of his life and activities; in addition, we are forced to re-examine how we view technology and religion, among other broad aspects of culture that are 'defamiliarised' through Hoban's use of vocabulary and syntax, for instance. Similarly in *The Road*, while we infer that the action is relatively contemporaneous with our own time, the description of how the man and the boy must cope differently in a devastated world quickly makes us reassess our taken-for-granted assumptions about the modern world. Schemata, too, can be highly idiosyncratic in addition to exhibiting a range of shared cultural and other

assumptions. Such differences lead naturally once again to discussions of how the language shapes the new realities of the fictional world as interpreted by different readers.

In all of these activities, linguistic observation, stylistic analysis, and literary interpretation are working hand-in-hand: as a discovery is made through one form of analysis, it leads to further insight or the opportunity to examine that hypothesis or speculation in another. As this analysis of post-apocalyptic novels has shown, feeling subjectively that these works are fundamentally dark or bleak or hopeless in their outlook can be demonstrated more scientifically through narrow stylistic analysis; this in turn motivates a search for the prevalence of salient features elsewhere in the text, or in the author's work more generally, or perhaps even throughout the genre. And in this way the symbiotic and fruitful constellation of linguistic and literary analysis truly flourishes—and, to state it more practically and far less poetically, readers gain another point of access, through language, to literary interpretation and a discussion of how texts work to make meaning.

Endnotes:

[1] A shorter version of this paper was presented at the International Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) conference in Middelburg, Netherlands, 30 July 2009. I appreciate the comments of various audience members who helped me to clarify certain points. I also acknowledge the assistance of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3908 Professional Development Fund at Trent University (Canada), and the Lancaster University (UK) Postgraduate Travel Fund, both of which provided financial assistance to attend the conference. I am appreciative of the helpful comments of the two anonymous reviewers who helped me to refine and elaborate upon my initial draft.

[2] For an excellent and comprehensive overview of post-apocalyptic literature, see Brians (2008).

[3] The concept of a 'fictional world' or 'text world' has been discussed at length in a range of works in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive stylistics. See in particular Doležel (1998), Gavins (2007), Martin (2004), Palmer (2004), Semino (1997), and Werth (1999). My use of the term 'fictional world' in this paper is in line with Doležel's view of fictional worlds as 'aesthetic artifacts constructed, preserved, and circulating in the medium of fictional texts' (16). Martin is also instructive in his synthesis of the work of various possible-worlds theorists:

> 'fictional worlds are autonomous in the sense that they display a modal structure parallel to that of the actual world, but ... are not necessarily completely autonomous because, despite a specific set of formal features that might identify them as "fiction," they share ... many shadow worlds of words. ... they not only appear in our literature, but are always present in our cognitive mapping and ordinary language, finding their way into our time-related discourse, ethical discourse, scientific discourse, and counterfactual discourse, to name a few'. (126)

[4] The notions of 'projecting' and 'constructing' fictional or text worlds are standard terms in cognitive stylistics. See, among others, Semino (1997).

[5] Interest in *Riddley Walker* has waxed and waned depending on how topical post-apocalyptic/nuclear issues are. The number of scholarly studies peaked in the early-mid 1980s and early 1990s, although occasional articles continue to appear. See, in particular, Cowart (1989), Dowling (1987, 1988), Lake (1984), Maclean (1988), Mullen (2000 [1991]), Porter (1990), and Studer (2000).

[6] In fact, in neither novel is it explicitly stated that there ever *was* a nuclear attack. Allusions to the '1 Big 1' in contrast to the '1 Littl 1' (gunpowder) and to Canterbury (Cambry) as the location of Ground Zero in *Riddley Walker* make it fairly certain that the destruction is nuclear in origin; however, the hints in *The Road* are much less clear, and the devastation could just as easily have been the result of a biological attack, environmental disaster, or meteor strike.

[7] See, in particular, the seminal work by van Peer (1986) and Douthwaite (2000) as well as, more generally, Leech and Short (2007) and Simpson (2004).

[8] Most authorities on foregrounding also note that ongoing use of initially foregrounded features reduces the defamiliarising effects of the deviant linguistic features (see, e.g., Simpson 2004: 51). This

is true, and it is a point that is brought home most strikingly when the reader of *Riddley Walker* encounters a section of standard English text (the 'Legend of St. Eustace') in chapter 14; the effect of this now-deviant (with respect to the newly established norms of the novel) language is to jolt the reader out of the relative comfort of Riddleyspeak and to 'make strange' what was once (and is normally) familiar.

[9] McCarthy has quite clear views on punctuation: 'If you write properly you shouldn't have to punctuate'; 'I believe in periods, capitals, and the occasional comma, that's it' ('Cormac McCarthy on James Joyce and Punctuation', 2008). I am nevertheless troubled by his arbitrary inclusion or omission of the apostrophe (e.g. 'cant' vs. 'he'd'). The need to cite McCarthy from such a popular rather than scholarly source here is due largely to his rather reclusive nature and to the fact that very little scholarly work has been written to date on *The Road*. The work that has been done does not, based on my research, deal with McCarthy's use of language. For interesting insights into *No Country for Old Men* as a departure from McCarthy's earlier narrative and syntactic styles, see Cooper (2009).

[10] See Appendix A for a quantitative overview of sentence types in both novels.

[11] It is arguable that a 50% rate of deviance would make deviant sentences less foregrounded and more standard across the text as a whole. However, since each deviant sentence is slightly different, and since the defamiliarising effect can be supposed to take place each time a deviant sentence is encountered, I argue that the deviant sentences are nonetheless foregrounded. Indeed, this might be a case of 'extended foregrounding' (Leech 2008 [1965]), which operates very much like an effectively extended metaphor. Still, as stated above (note 8), this effect does diminish as the novels progress, as is the case with all forms of foregrounding. I am grateful to Lesley Jeffries for her helpful question when I presented the paper at PALA (see note 1).

[12] Two relevant sources for the notions of complexity and simplicity in fiction are Leech and Short (2007) and Hoover (1999). Hoover discusses lexical richness through standard procedures such as type-token ratios and hapax legomena counts (i.e., the extent to which words are repeated throughout a text), while Leech and Short compare texts by Conrad, Lawrence, and James using a range of quantitative criteria. Leech and Short also note that 'morphemic and syllabic complexity are in gross terms reasonably equivalent' (65), but they do not provide such figures for the three works. As a means of providing a rough comparison or control, I calculated the number of morphemes and syllables per word in the passage they analyse by Henry James (from *The Pupil*). In this 386-word passage, 72% of the words are morphologically simple and the same number are monosyllabic; the average number of morphemes per word is 1.29, while the average number of syllables is 1.3. As a further comparison, it is worth noting that Hoover reports a syllable count for *The Inheritors* of approximately 1.32 (1999: 81). I found an average of 1.24 morphemes and 1.2 syllables per word in three extracts from *Riddley Walker*, compared with an average of 1.3 morphemes and 1.37 syllables for passages by Hoban written in standard English. For the 292-word extract from *The Road* analysed in this paragraph, the per-word averages were 1.27 for morphemes and 1.22 for syllables. It is important to note that the often slight differences among these figures are more remarkable when one considers the large number of monosyllabic and morphologically simple function words that predominate in English; I would suggest that the differences would be more striking if such words were somehow removed from the analysis. Even so, both novels can be considered to score low on counts of lexical complexity. Such a conclusion derived from quantitative analysis reinforces the sense of simplicity that one derives from reading both authors' prose and is further supported by an analysis of some of the syntactic features such as underdeveloped sentences (by nature less complex) and polysyndetic constructions (with excessive use of the conjunction 'and'), as discussed below.

[13] In this and subsequent extracts, I have inserted sentence numbers for ease of reference.

[14] I will use the adjective 'complete' to describe a non-deviant sentence. This avoids the ambiguities of the more suitable antonym for deviant: 'standard'.

[15] See, for example, in addition to some of the seminal work by Tannen (1982, 1984), and rather contrary to Ong's (2002 [1982]) extensive categorisation of the characteristics of oral thought and expression, Beaman (1984), who finds that oral language is no less syntactically complex than written language, and Givón (1979), who indicates several ways in which (written) 'syntax' is a natural extension of (oral) 'discourse'.

[16] As Hoban says, the language 'works well with the story because it slows the reader down to Riddley's rate of comprehension' (Afterword to *Riddley Walker*, 225).

[17] It is worth noting that a lack of subordinating conjunctions and an abundance of coordinating conjunctions is not necessarily a sign of spoken language, nor of simplicity. As Beaman (1984) neatly concludes, '[t]he evaluation of syntactic complexity is simply more complex than that' (80).

[18] As with any of the claims made about isolated sections of any novel, such findings need to be supported through a more comprehensive analysis. Nevertheless, it is in localised speculation based on small extracts that stylistic analysis begins.
[19] This is what Leech (2008 [1965] and 2008 [1985]) calls 'congruence of foregrounding' as part of a broader notion of 'coherence of foregrounding'.
[20] It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an analysis of how words such as these typically collocate, but it would be possible to do so using a corpus-based software program or by examining a substantial corpus such as the British National Corpus.
[21] See, for example, Lake (1984), Freeborn (1996), and Pope (1995 and in general).
[22] Hoban started to write the novel in standard English, but 'early on the language began to slide towards Riddleyspeak' (Afterword to *Riddley Walker*, 225).
[23] The stage version was first performed in 1986. The DVD version by the Red Kettle Theatre Company in Ireland was produced in 2007. See <http://red-kettle.com/site/productions/riddley-walker>.
[24] While the film has received generally positive reviews, it is noteworthy that at least one reviewer commented on the inability of the film version to capture the essence of McCarthy's prose style: 'Despite the movie's many virtues, there's still something missing, the ingredient that gave the novel both its gravitas and, at the end, its near-unbearable poignancy. Which is? Simply the rhythm, the texture, the Biblical cadences of McCarthy's prose' (Groen 2009).
[25] For excellent recent work on cognitive stylistics, see Gavins and Steen (2003), McIntyre (2005), Semino (1997), Semino and Culpeper (2002), Stockwell (2002), and Tsur (2008).

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Appendix A: Quantitative Analysis of Sentence Types

In order to ascertain the extent of sentence-level deviance in the two novels, I tallied the number of sentences in two 150-sentence extracts from each novel that fall into the following categories: complete (grammatical) sentence; underdeveloped sentences (verbless, participial or dependent); and overdeveloped sentences (paratactic in *Riddley Walker* and polysyndetic in *The Road*).

Sample 1 in both cases represents the first 150 sentences of the novel; sample 2, as a random comparator, is taken from the approximate midpoint of each novel (beginning at p.106 in *Riddley Walker* and p.115 in *The Road*). Only narrative sentences were included (i.e., no direct speech, songs or embedded stories).

As can be seen, just under 50% of the sentences in each sample are deviant, and the percentages of over- and underdeveloped sentences are similar between samples within each novel; comparison between the two novels shows that McCarthy tends significantly more toward underdeveloped sentences, while Hoban writes in under- and overdeveloped sentences in approximately equal measure.

	Hoban, *Riddley Walker*			McCarthy, *The Road*		
	Complete	Over-developed	Under-developed	Complete	Over-developed	Under-developed
Sample 1 *n*=150	81 (54%)	29 (19.3%)	40 (26.7%)	71 (47.3%)	19 (12.7%)	60 (40%)
Sample 2 *n*=150	77 (51.3%)	36 (24%)	37 (24.7%)	85 (56.7%)	18 (12%)	47 (31.3%)
Average	79 (52.7%)	32.5 (21.7%)	38.5 (25.7%)	78 (52%)	18.5 (12.3%)	53.5 (35.7%)