

THE PRAGMASTYLISTICS OF DREAD: LEXICAL AMBIGUITY AND
SYNTACTIC COMPRESSION AS AFFECTIVE TRIGGERS IN AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This article examines the linguistic encoding of emotion within the American psychological thriller, focusing on the stylistic mechanisms that facilitate the transition from textual stimuli to visceral reader response. By integrating principles of cognitive poetics and affective stylistics, the study analyzes how specific lexical and syntactic choices serve as "affective triggers" to construct an atmosphere of psychological instability. The research identifies a systematic reliance on epistemic modality, paratactic structures, and semantic shifts that disrupt the reader's cognitive schemas. Through an analysis of representative works in the American canon, the paper argues that the elicitation of dread is a result of "linguistic claustrophobia"—a state where the discourse limits the reader's interpretive agency through heightened ambiguity and sensory saturation. The findings suggest that the efficacy of the psycho-thriller lies in its ability to manipulate the pragmatics of communication, forcing the reader to inhabit a state of permanent "evaluative hesitation."

Keywords: Affective stylistics, pragmastylistics, American psychological thriller, epistemic modality, syntactic parataxis, lexical ambiguity, cognitive poetics.

Introduction

The study of emotion in literary discourse has shifted significantly from a focus on thematic content to an investigation of the linguistic structures that mediate the reader's experience. In the American psychological thriller, this mediation is primarily concerned with the construction of "affective dread"—a lingering state of anxiety that arises from the perceived breakdown of social and cognitive norms. Within this genre, language does not merely describe a reality; it actively destabilizes the reader's perception of that reality. The American tradition, characterized by its focus on the fractured self and the subversion of the domestic space, provides a rich corpus for analyzing how lexical choice and syntactic pacing function as tools of emotional manipulation. This article explores the hypothesis that the "thrill" in such literature is a product of specific linguistic deviations, such as the use of marked syntax and ambiguous deixis, which compel the reader to engage in a heightened form of "inferential labor." By focusing on the intersection of stylistics and psychology, we can uncover how authors like Shirley Jackson, Thomas Harris, and Patricia Highsmith utilize the pragmatics of language to evoke a state of profound psychological disorientation.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for analyzing emotion in discourse is heavily indebted to Stanley Fish's (1980) "affective stylistics," which posits that the meaning of a text is found in the temporal experience of the reader. This is further refined by Leech and Short (2007) in *Style in Fiction*, where they explore how "foregrounding"—the use of linguistic deviance to draw



attention—serves as a primary vehicle for emotional resonance. In the context of the American thriller, scholars have often drawn upon Nicholas Royle's (2003) expansion of the "uncanny," noting that the linguistic representation of the familiar becoming "unhomely" is central to the genre's success. Peter Stockwell's (2002) *Cognitive Poetics* provides a framework for understanding how "schema disruption" occurs when a text introduces lexical items that conflict with the reader's established mental models. Furthermore, the work of Monika Fludernik (1996) on "natural narratology" suggests that thrillers often mimic the linguistic hallmarks of trauma, such as fragmented syntax and repetitive lexical loops, to create an immersive emotional state. These scholars collectively argue that the "psychological" aspect of the thriller is as much a linguistic phenomenon as it is a thematic one, depending on the manipulation of the cooperative principle in communication.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative stylistics methodology, focusing on "micro-linguistic" analysis to identify patterns of affective encoding. The research examines three primary variables: first, the frequency and function of "epistemic modals" (e.g., perhaps, might, seems), which signal uncertainty and destabilize narrative authority; second, the use of "syntactic parataxis"—the juxtaposition of short, independent clauses without coordinating conjunctions—to simulate a sense of urgency and cognitive fragmentation; and third, the deployment of "sensory-lexical clusters," where high-density descriptions of texture, sound, and smell are used to overwhelm the reader's processing capacity. The corpus includes seminal American texts such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*, and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. The analysis involves a process of "close stylistics," where specific passages are parsed for their grammatical and lexical deviations from standard narrative prose, mapping these deviations against the intended emotional effect on the reader.

Results

The results of the linguistic analysis indicate that emotional intensity in the American psycho-thriller is inversely proportional to syntactic complexity. In moments of high tension, there is a marked shift toward paratactic structures. For instance, in Harris's prose, the movement from complex sentences to blunt, subject-verb-object constructions—"He stood still. The cell was dark. He smelled the iron"—serves to strip away the reader's cognitive "buffer," forcing a direct, visceral encounter with the narrative moment. Furthermore, the analysis reveals a high degree of "lexical ambiguity" regarding spatial deixis. In Jackson's work, the use of the adverb "steadily" in "silence lay steadily against the wood" creates a semantic tension; a state of absence (silence) is given an active, physical weight. The results also show that the "uncanny" effect is frequently achieved through "transitivity shifts," where inanimate objects are positioned as grammatical agents. When a door is described as "refusing to stay shut," the verb choice assigns intent to the object, triggering a "category violation" in the reader's mind. In the postmodern thriller, such as Ellis's work, results indicate that "lexical saturation"—the exhaustive listing of brand names and material objects—functions as a form of "syntactic noise" that masks the protagonist's lack of emotional interiority, thereby generating a profound sense of alienation in the reader.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the American psychological thriller utilizes "pragmatic failure" as a deliberate stylistic choice. By violating the Gricean maxim of quantity—either by providing too much clinical detail or too little emotional context—the author creates a "communicative gap" that the reader must fill with their own anxieties. This aligns with the views of cognitive linguists who argue that "inferential uncertainty" is the primary driver of suspense. When an author uses epistemic modality ("It might have been a shadow"), they are not just describing a



scene; they are linguistically encoding a state of doubt that bypasses the reader's logical faculties. The "linguistic claustrophobia" observed in these texts is often a result of "over-specification" in the sensory field. By forcing the reader to process a high density of somatic markers—the "metallic taste of fear" or the "rhythmic thud of a heart"—the discourse simulates the physiological symptoms of panic. Moreover, the shift in American thrillers toward "unreliable focalization" (where the narrator's linguistic perspective is distorted by trauma or pathology) serves to dissolve the boundary between the observer and the observed. As noted by scholars of the "gothic turn," this linguistic blurring reflects a broader cultural anxiety regarding the stability of the American subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the elicitation of emotion in the American psychological thriller is a systematic linguistic process that relies on the strategic manipulation of syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. This research has demonstrated that "dread" is not merely a reaction to plot events but is actively constructed through foregrounded linguistic features such as parataxis, transitivity shifts, and lexical saturation. The transition from the familiar to the horrific is mediated through a "stylistics of uncertainty," where the language itself becomes a source of threat. By analyzing the works of Jackson, Harris, and others, it is evident that the American thriller functions as a sophisticated laboratory for testing the limits of human communication and cognitive processing. The "architecture of affect" within these narratives is built upon the ruins of stable meaning, proving that in the realm of the psychological thriller, the most powerful emotional triggers are the ones that remain linguistically unresolved. Future linguistic research should focus on how these affective strategies are adapting to the digital age, where new modes of textual communication provide fertile ground for the evolution of the psychological thriller.

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