

## Analyzing the Language of Poetry from a Perspective of Linguistics

Sardar Fayyaz ul Hassan

Lecturer in English, BCC, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

& PhD Scholar at Atlantic International University USA

### Abstract

*This article looks at the language of poetry from linguistic point of view. The language of poetry is different from ordinary language. Poets use language in their compositions according to the concept of foregrounding. The purpose of foregrounding is to attract the attention of the readers. So, they go across the domain of deviation and parallelism which is pattern breaking and pattern making respectively. In other words foregrounding is the action of emphasizing something by means of linguistic devices (<http://literarism.blogspot.com>). In this article, an endeavor has been made to analyze and discuss about some of these linguistic devices, used in poetic language*

**Key words:** *Poetic language, linguistics & Literature, foregrounding, Parallelism, Deviation*

### Introduction

This article aims to analyze the language of poetry from a perspective of linguistics. But first of all, let's define and discuss about language. Language is like a play ground where one plays the game of his own choice. Literature, linguistics and literary criticism are different fields of language. The objective of this article is to study the language of literature, particularly, poetry from linguistic point of view.

Scholars from different walks of life have always been interested in language and they have defined language according to their own subject of interest. Charles Barber (1993:25) calls it "a

system of vocal sounds". Richard and Platt (1985, p. 153) are of the same views as Barber does have in defining the language but with the following addition:

Language is the system of human communication by means of a structured arrangement of sounds to form larger unit, e.g. Morphemes, words, sentences.

According to E.Spair (1921:8), language is "non- instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntary produced symbols". David Crystal (1985) clearly thinks that language is the most highly developed form of human common action. Verma (2006, p.16) quotes Henry Sweet who calls language "the expression of ideas". But Bloom field calls language "the totality of utterance that can be made in a speech community is the language of speech community"(Ibid). Pyles and Algeo(1982, p.1), quote the remarks of a famous biologist, Lewis Thomas who says in *The Lives of a Cell* (1974,p.89):

The gift of language is the single human trait that marks us all genetically, setting us apart from the rest of life. Language is like nest-building or hive-making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We engage in it communally, compulsively, and automatically. We cannot be human without it; if we were to be separated from it our minds would die, as surely as bees lost from the hive.

## **1. Description**

### **1.1. Linguistics**

Language is one of the most important aspects of human identification and linguistics is a scientific study of the language. Linguistics is a very vast field and it is an interface between science and humanities. Linguistics is a battlefield for anthropologists, philosophers, philologists,

poets, theologians, psychologists and neurologists. All these people are interested to describe language and how it works from their own perspective.

According to Richard and Platt (1985, p. 167), linguistics is "the study of language as a system of human communication". The history of language study is very old but linguistics flourished as an independent discipline recently. The field of investigation for linguistics is very vast. It investigates the sound system of language under sub fields of phonetics and phonology. It discusses about the arrangement of words into sentences under the title of syntax and linguistics also discusses the meaning system of language under the topics of semantics and pragmatics etc. Anthropological linguistics, psychological linguistics, sociolinguistics, stylistics, and applied linguistics are newly developed branches of linguistics.

## **1.2. Literature**

Different scholars have defined literature differently. Samuel Johnson (d.1784) calls it an intellectual light, to J.Q Adams (d. 1829), it is a charm of life, and Samuel Rogers (d.1855) says it is a sole business of life, and Oscar Wilde (d.1900), states that literature always anticipates life. So, Terry Eagleton (2008, p. 1) says by answering the self raised question:

What is literature? There have been various attempts to define literature. You can define it, for example, as 'imaginative' writing in the sense of fiction - writing which is not literally true.

According to Bassnett and Gundy (1993, p. 7):

Literature is a high pint of language usage; arguable it makes the greatest skill a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language.

Traditionally, literature is regarded to be the prerogative of certain people who are endowed with certain faculty for understanding literature. Literature is beyond the reach of common people. It is something mystic and should not be corrupted by linguistic analysis.

## **2. Poetic Language**

### **2.1. Drawing a line of distinction between ordinary and poetic language**

Language is a very special tool of communication. Human beings express their feelings by using the tool of language. Language and literature cannot be looked apart. In this context Leech (1969), says that even the deep examination of literature is not possible if language and literature are studied separately (p.1). However, in spite of this strong connection between these two types, the language of literature is different from the ordinary language in many respects. Leech (1969, p. 8) quotes Thomas Gray who writes in a letter to Richard West in April 1742, "The language of the age is never the language of the poetry". But after a long period, i.e., in 1879, Gerard Manly Hopkins writes to Robert Bridges. "Poetic language should be the current language heightened and unlike itself, but not an obsolete one"(Ibid). These two scholars are absolutely disagreeing with each other on the issue of poetic language. But this difference reveals the fact that poetic and ordinary forms of language do have some differences that cannot be mapped out with the same scale. Although the basic structure of both types of language is same but their working domains are different.

Foregrounding is an essential aspect of poetic language. Ordinary language is rule governed but it is not necessary for poetic language to follow the set pattern of rules of a language. In this connection, it is right to summarize here, the observation of Leech (1969). According to him poetic language deviates from generally observed rules in many ways. He adds that creative writers, particularly, poets are enjoying the unique freedom about the use of language into

different social and historical contexts. He expresses that the use of tropes is a characteristic of literary language (p.5). After this observation Leech (1969, p. 6), reaches to the conclusion:

There is no firm dividing line between 'poetic' and 'ordinary' language, so it would be artificial to enforce a clear division between the language of poetry, considered as verse literature, and that is other literary kinds.

## **2.2. Observation of poetic language from linguistic point of view**

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. If we analyze the language of poetry from a perspective of linguistics then we have to say that the poetic language is foregrounded. According to Katie Wales (2001, p. 156), foregrounding is "a popular term in stylistics (especially in the analysis of poetry) introduced by Garvin (1964) to translate the PRAGUE SCHOOL term of the 1930s". Foregrounding makes something prominent. Painting and foregrounding do have many meeting grounds. In painting a painter uses different colors for making some parts of the pictures comparatively more prominent than the other ones. A poet does the same job by using the method of foregrounding.

Foregrounding is achieved by means of either pattern-making (extra regularities) or pattern breaking (irregularities).

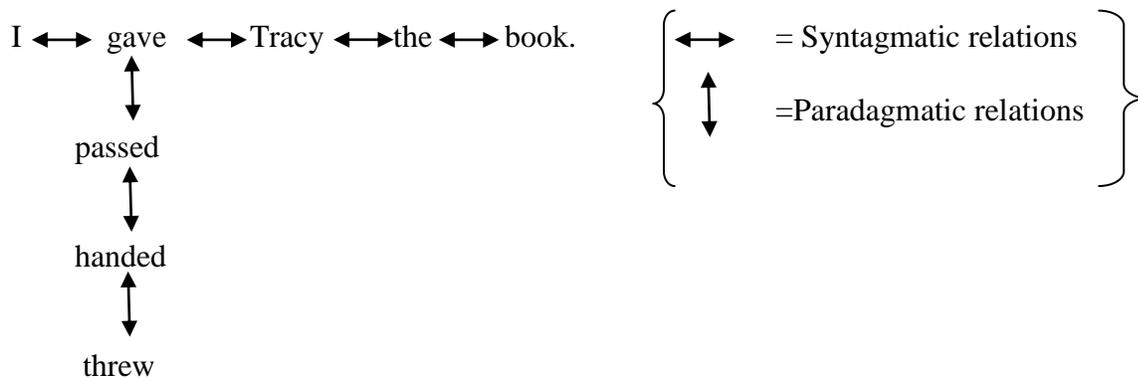
In this assignment, poetic language will be studied and analyzed in terms of pattern making and pattern breaking.

### **2.2.1. Parallelism (Pattern making or Extra-regularities)**

Pattern making is one of the striking features of poetic language. Pattern making in poetry can be called 'extra-regularities'. A poet goes beyond the regular patterns of language for the purpose of foregrounding. Poets repeat sounds by arranging them through the selection of vocabulary syntagmatically and paradigmatically. In sentence structure, syntagmatic and paradigmatic are

two types of relations of words. The first one shows the horizontal sequence or order of words while the second reveals the vertical sequence of words or phrases. The following diagram, adopted from Richard and Platt (1985, p. 285) shows this relation of words clearly.

Fig



Pattern making is also described in terms of parallelism which, according to Leech (1969, p. 62) is a 'foregrounding regularity', and Katie Wales (2001) considers it a device in rhetoric that depends on the 'Principle of equivalence', a term used by Jakobson in 1960. Parallelism is a "repetition of the same structural pattern: commonly between phrases or clauses"(p.283).

Foregrounding consists of both parallelism (regularities and extra-regularities) and deviation or irregularities. Poetic language chiefly exhibits these techniques. Let's start with the parallelism first.

Poets use the technique of parallelism while constructing the poetic diction (language) in a number of ways. Some of them are being given here.

### i). Rhyme

Rhyme scheme is one of the most outstanding features of poetic language. It is the repetition of the final sound of different lines of a piece of poetry. According to Katie Wales, (2001, P. 346),

"Rhyme is a kind of PHONETIC echo found in verse: more precisely, "PHONEMIC matching".

Mick Short (1996, p. 113) observes it more closely and writes:

Rhyme is usually reserved to refer to the final syllables of different lines of poetry when the vowel and syllable – final consonants (if any) of the words in question are identical. Thus *five* can rhyme with *live* and *alive*. Slightly looser connections than this (e.g. *five/fife*) are usually called half rhymes, and if the rhymes occur in positions other than at the end of a line, they are usually called internal rhyme.

**Example:**

Wake! For the sun, who scattered into flight  
The stars before him from the field of Night,  
Drives Night along with them from Heavn and Strikes  
The Sultans' Turret with a Shaft of Light  
(Edward Fitzgerald – The Rubaiyat of Omer Khayyam)

The ending words of lines 1, 2, and 4 of this stanza are *flight*, *Night* and *light*. These words end with the same final consonant sound /t/ that according to Katie (2001) creates an end rhyme. He further says, if words like *June/moon*; *rose/toes* occur within the lines they are called internal rhyme.

**ii). Alliteration**

The repetition of initial sound at stressed syllable in a line is called alliteration. For example the sentence 'Frank found four frogs laughing on the floor', has /f/ sound which is repeated in the beginning of content words. Katie (2001, p. 14) uses the term "initial rhyme" for it and says, "Alliteration is the REPEATION of the initial consonant in two or more words".

Short (1996, p. 10) shares the following lines of George Crabbe as an example of alliteration:

*A dreadful winter passed, each day severe*  
*Misty when mild, but cold when clear*

('Tale 17: Resentment', lines 351-2)

Here, /m/ and /k/ sounds are repeated initially in *Misty* and *mild, cold* and *clear* respectively.

Another example can be given from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo says:

*How silver-sweet sound lover's tongues by night,  
Like softest music to attending ears*

(Act II scene II)

In first line the consonant sound /s/ is repeated initially in words *silver-sweet* and *sound*, and hence it aligns alliteration. So, poets use this technique frequently in their lyrics for creating musical effect.

### iii). Pun

Pun is another pattern making technique. It creates humorous and ironic effects in poetry.

According to Leech (1969, p. 62), "A pun, for instance, a type of foregrounding", Katie Wales (2001, p. 327) writes:

Thus puns commonly occur in jokes, e.g.:

Q: How do you get down from elephant?

A: You don't, you get it from ducks.

### iv). Assonance

It is a type of half rhyme, used in poetic diction. Katie Wales (2001). In assonance same stressed vowel sound is repeated in different words in a line of verse. Katie (2001, p. 33) has also given an example of assonance from Tennyson which creates an expressive effect:

*Break, break, break  
On the cold gray stone, O sea!*

In the first line, in word 'break' the diphthong /eɪ/ has been repeated. This repetition is called 'assonance'.

**v). Consonance**

In Greek language it means to harmonize the sounds in a poetic line. A Dictionary of Stylistics (2001, p. 79), states consonance, a kind of 'half-rhyme' or 'end- alliteration'. Here final consonants are repeated, but with different preceding vowels (Ibid). The Dictionary further informs about the term 'consonance' that "Turner (1973) and Cuddon (1998) use the term for what other calls APOPHONY and Leech (1969) calls it PARARHYME" *Longman 2001, p. 79.*

In the sentence "Guilt gilds evil deeds better than gold", consonant sound /g/ is repeated in "guilt," "gild," and "gold" which creates consonance.

**vi). Anaphora**

In Greek language it means "carrying back" Katie (2001, p. 19). Parallelism is a technique that involves in repeating the same word at the start of successive clauses, sentences or verses (Ibid).

**Example:**

*How pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!*

*How pleasant it is to have money.*

(MARS 1985, p. 88)

In both the lines, the word 'how' is repeated in the beginning. This is an anaphoric repetition.

Mathematically, it can be shown like (a ...) (a ...). Here 'a ...' refers the repetition of words at initial position.

**vii). Apistrophe**

It is a final repetition of words in different lines of a poetic piece. Mathematically, it can be shown like (...a) (... a). Leech (1969, p. 81) presents its example from T.S.Eliot:

*Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning Death*

*Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning Death*

**viii). Symploce**

It is a combination of anaphora and apostrophe. To Leech (1969, p. 81), "initial combined with final repetition" is called symploce. For this the formula can be derived as (a ... a) (a ... a), etc.

*According to K. Walse (2001, p. 380), symploce:*

involves the REPETITION of one set of words at the beginning of a series of sentences or verse lines, and of another set at the end: a combination of ANAPHORA and EPISTROPHE.

**Example:**

*I will recruit for myself and you as I go,  
I will scatter myself among men and women and when as I go*

Walt Whitman, Song of the open Road, quoted from Leech, 1969, p. 81

**ix). Anadiplosis**

In anadiplosis the final part of one unit is repeated. This repetition occurs at the beginning of the next, Leech (1969). Mathematically, this repetition appears in this formula: (... a) (a ...).

**Example**

*My words I know do well set forth my mind;  
My mind becomes his sense of inward smart;  
Such smart many pity claim of my heart;  
Her heart, sweet heart, is of no tiger's*

(Sidney: *Astrophel and Stella*, quoted from Katie, 2001, p. 18)

**x). Epanalepsis**

In *A Linguistic guide to English Poetry*, Leech quotes lines from Milton's Paradise Lost, II to observe epanalepsis in the language of poetry:

*With ruin upon ruin, rout on rout,  
Confusion worse confused (p.82)*

In these lines, the final part of each unit of the pattern repeats the initial part on this formula (a...

a) (b... b). This type of repetition is called epanalepsis.

**xi). Antistrophe**

The aim of parallelism in poetic language is pattern making through the repetition of sounds, words, phrases, and clauses etc. Antistrophe is method of repetition and it is a parallelism technique. Leech (1969) and Katie (2001) agree that antistrophe is the repetition of words in reverse order. Mathematical shape of this repetition is (...a... b...)(...b... a...).

Example:

Leech (1969, p. 82) presents the example of antistrophe from Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii:

*What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba  
That he should weep for her?*

**2.2.2. Deviation (Pattern breaking or irregularities)**

Foregrounding is a very famous concept in the domain of stylistics. It is an important feature of poetry. Katie (2001) has kept the historical record of the concept of foregrounding in his *Dictionary of Stylistics* which tells that Garvin (1964) introduced the term of foregrounding. Muĉarvosky (1932), Hávranek (1932) and before them many formalists scholars have of the views that the function of poetic language is to surprise the readers by providing them with a fresh and dynamic awareness of its linguistic medium. Foregrounding makes something prominent by going against the norms of language. Foregrounding in poetry is achieved through pattern making and pattern breaking. Pattern-making or parallelism has been discussed in (3.2.1) but here the focus will be laid on pattern-breaking or deviation. According to Katie (2001, p. 103), "deviation refers to divergence in frequency from a NORM..." In poetic language, deviation can occur at lexical, morphological, grammatical, semantic and phonological levels".

### i) Lexical deviation

Poets are interested in making new words. Usually, these words do not exist before. The process of making the words is called 'neologism' (short, 1996). Let's see the following example:

*"The boys are dreaming wicked or of the bucking reaches of the night and the jollyrodgered sea". (Dylan Thomas, under Milk Wood, p.1--- quoted from short, 1996, p.45)*

In this example, "the underlined word is 'Jilly Rodgered', "a name for the pirates' skull and crossbones flag"(Ibid). Here two words have joined together to make a compound noun *jollyrodger*. The addition of '-ed' converts it into adjective and it modifies the noun 'sea'. This type of invention of lexis exhibits the process of neologism and hence it is a lexical deviation.

### ii) Grammatical deviation

Breaking the rules in making the sentences is grammatical deviation. English grammar is a set of many rules that is why there are many possible ways of making foregrounding through grammatical deviation. For example, while discussing about word order, usually adjectives come before the noun or the pronoun one(s), (Jake Allsop, 1969), but in poetry, according to Short (1996:47), "the adjective can come after the noun". He also writes in this context:

The placing of Adjectives after the noun in poetry is often characterized as an archaic usage. However, it appears never actually to have been a feature of English. Rather, it was borrowed from French into English poetry after the Norman Conquest and can be found as a regular feature in English poetry (but not prose) from that time. (Ibid, p.78)

The following examples reflect the 'poetic flavor' short (1996), where adjectives appear after the nouns they modify:

[1] *O goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung  
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear ...* (John Keats, 'Ode to Psyche')

[2] *Little enough I sought;  
But a word compassionate ...* (Ernest Dowson, 'Exchanges')

In the above presented examples, 'remembrance' and 'a word compassionate' are grammatical deviations, and Short (1996) calls it an appropriate poetic flavor.

### iii). Morphological deviation

Morphology is the science of words, and it is a study of morphemes, the smallest grammatical units. Morphemes are the building blocks for words. Morphemes can be free and bound. Free morphemes are complete words and they give proper meaning but bound morphemes cannot give their proper meanings unless they are attached with other free morphemes as a prefix or suffix. For example the word 'incompletely' does have three morphemes, i.e., 'in-', 'complete', '-ly'. Here prefix 'in-' and suffix '-ly' are the bound morphemes but 'complete' is a free morpheme because it gives complete meaning. Deviation in morphology means to add such morphemes which cannot be added normally. Short (1996) quotes the following example in this regard:

#### Example:

*"Perhapless mastery of paradise"*

(e.e. cummings, 'from spiraling ecstatically this')

The suffix '-less' can be added to the words like *helpless*, *worthless*, *sunless* etc., but in the normal paradigm of English rules, it cannot be added as a suffix to the word 'perhaps'. But e.e. cummings does so and his doing this is a morphological deviation.

### iv). Semantic deviation

Semantics is the study of meaning. When a poet uses other than commonly used meaning of a word it is called semantic deviation. In semantic deviation surface level meanings are changed

with the meanings at deeper level. This type of deviation is achieved by using different figures of speech. Simile, metaphor, irony, and hyperbole etc., are used to achieve this goal.

Paradox is another figure of speech that creates semantic deviation. Paradox, according to Wales (2001) is a statement which has contradiction in its apparent meaning, or "a kind expanded OXYMORON" Ibid. p. 282. 'War is peace', 'freedom is slavery', and 'ignorance is strength' etc., are the examples of semantic deviation. Wales quotes Donne's lines from *Holy Sonnets, 14*, in this context:

*Except you enthrall me, never shall be free  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me* (Ibid)

#### v). **Phonological deviation**

Phonology is the study of sound patterns of a particular language and deviation is a departure from accepted norms of a language. Phonology deals with sounds and sounds belong to speech. Short (1996, p. 54), states that "most of our literature is written, there is relatively little scope for phonological deviation...", and Leech (1969, p. 46) looks that "phonological deviation in English poetry is of limited importance". However, phonological deviation occurs mostly in the end rhyme.

#### **Example:**

- [1] *The skylark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,*
- [2] *Till the little ones weary  
No more can be merry;*

These lines have been taken from William Black's (1757 -1827) --- *The Echoing Green*. In verses [1] and [2], the words *thrush*, *bush*, *weary* and *merry* are believed to maintain the rhyme scheme in these lines but these words do not have the same pronunciation.

Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (7<sup>th</sup> edition) gives the pronunciation of these words as /θrʌʃ/, /bʊʃ/, /weəri/ and /meri/ respectively. In words, *thrush* and *bush*, the most common word is *bush*, so *thrush* /θrʌʃ/ will be pronounced as /θrʊʃ/, in *weary* and *merry*, the most common word is *merry*. So the *weary* will be pronounced on the pattern of *merry*. By this way, /weəri/ becomes /veri/ which is not a standard pronunciation but it is a deviation at phonological level.

## Conclusion

In this article, an effort has been made to analyze the language of poetry from a perspective of linguistics. Linguistics is the scientific study of language. To study a poetic piece linguistically needs to concentrate on the language of poetry from a particular angle. In this assignment, the structure of poetic language has been analyzed in the light of foregrounding, which means to bring something into prominence. This paper discusses how a poet foregrounds the language of poetry. Foregrounding is achieved by parallelism and deviation---the most important techniques of foregrounding. This assignment further discusses how a poet plays his part in making and breaking the patterns of poetic language.

An endeavor has also been made to map out the language of poetry by using the scale of irregularity and extra-regularity. In short, linguistic analysis of poetic language reveals the fact that a poet has to do many deliberate attempts to compose a piece of poetry.

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