

The Grammar of Poetry: Analyzing the Language of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is a literary genre that uses a unique way of writing an expressive composition and manipulating language structure by applying various stylistic features to evoke readers' emotions and feelings. Archaic Words, Inverted Syntax, Colloquialism, Parallelism, and Tense Shift are the stylistic features added to poems to produce an emphatic effect. To further explore these features, this study utilizes an In-depth Textual approach, which analyzes not just the surface level of the selected poems but also delves deeper into the meanings. This method focuses on discussing how the aforementioned emergent themes are used in a poem and how some traditional poetic styles challenge readers' comprehension. This study is anchored in Foregrounding Theory, which explains how the standard language usage in poetry can either enhance or complicate meanings. While these styles are essential in creating an impactful tone, they may also lead to confusion, especially for modern readers who are not familiar with complex poetic structure. Thus, it is important for writers to balance creative expression and clarity in their literary pieces.

Keywords: Readers, Interpretation, Stylistic Features

INTRODUCTION

Poem is a form of literature that exemplifies various expressions, emotions, and even carries boundless meanings. It is composed of rhythmic qualities of language that will evoke the feelings of readers and create an imaginative scenery. According to Marulafau (2019), language is one of the most fundamental aspects in this literature—as the author utilizes figurative language to establish a strong rapport with readers. By writing this kind of literature, it carries the varying tones of the nation's creative heritage, demonstrating its artistic spirit. As supported by the book of Wainwright (2015), stated that literary works such as poetry contribute as a tool in education that nurture the student's interpretation and critical thinking through creative manipulation of phrases.

One of the universities in Indonesia conducted a study that investigated the role of poetry for the students, in which they found that writing and reading poems enhance an individual's learning of linguistic and critical thinking, however, because poetry relies more upon using figurative language, symbolism, and layered meanings, there might be misinterpretation. This shows the importance of writers' consideration to use the right tools and strategies to approach poetry with sensitivity and accuracy (Agustan et al., 2024).

In the study of Roma (2015), stated that poetry appears as a powerful tool in exploring identity, emotion, and memory as it is not merely an artistic written work but rather a mode of communication and expression. Several poems are cited, such as Asenjo's bilingual memory exploration entitled "Sa Gihapon, Palangga, Ang Uran," which emphasizes how poetry is deeply rooted in emotion and experiences. Roma highlights the importance of voice, context, and language use in creating a poem to shape meanings, whether using English, Filipino, or any dialect to be understood by readers.

Furthermore, in Saure et al.'s study (2024) in Davao de Oro, it appears that while using figurative language in their written poems enhances creativity, but teachers have different interpretations of it. These figurative elements or the manipulation of words were shown as helpful. However, with too much usage, it changes the meaning of the text, which means that teachers need more focused instructional strategies in creative writing, while also considering individuals' abilities, especially for students for whom English is their second language.

The current study focuses on analyzing the use of poetic features, which give an overall emphatic tone to a literary piece. It discusses how these contribute to the general meaning and alternative interpretation of the selected poem based on structural elements. Additionally, this gives an overview of the challenges poetry presents to modern readers and those for whom English is a second language, as dense figurative features and complex poetic forms often create barriers to comprehension.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the world of literature, the utilization of archaic words in poetry is well-regarded as it evokes emotions and establishes a strong connection with the readers. Poetic words and expressions impart an aesthetic appeal to the overall quality of the literature with the use of stylistic features. However, in the study of Mamaqulova (2023), archaic words are not commonly used in modern English, which became a challenge, potentially leading to confusion among contemporary readers who are unfamiliar with such language. It is supported by Tulyaganova (2023), who suggests that poets should consider using contemporary words to maintain the poem's relevance and accessibility. In relation to this, Garnier (2016), an outstanding American grammarian, emphasizes that archaic words such as "thine," "dost," "thee," and "art" can result in an unclear understanding that potentially hinders the reader's comprehension.

The syntactical inversion, also referred to as inverted syntax, is one of the stylistic elements in the realm of poetry that several poets frequently employ in their literary works. According to the study of Safitri and Rosa (2018), the usage of inverted syntax enhances the overall reading experience and provides a great reading journey to the readers by inverting sentence structures and cultivating a unique tone. However, inverted syntax adds to the complexity of the poem's sentence structure, as noted in the study by Conklin and Taylor (2023). This claim is further supported in the study of Cilibrasi et al. (2019), which proves that a complex sentence structure or a sentence having an atypical word order often brings confusion to readers, especially those with low reading comprehension skills.

Moreover, in poetry, colloquial language is also part of the stylistic features that bring life to certain poems. According to Coupland (2017), colloquialism contributes to building a connection between readers and poets by incorporating colloquial expressions, as this affects the interpretation process of the readers. However, this feature also leads readers to confusion, especially when they are not used to informal linguistic style (Bell, 2019).

Furthermore, as noted by Enago Academy (2023), parallelism in poetry acts as a significant rhetorical and syntactical tool that enhances clarity, emphasis, and rhythm through the deliberate repetition of grammatical features. Parallel structure will greatly improve coherence and readability when used appropriately, as it offers various benefits in writing. However, errors in this can occur frequently and may impede the logical flow of a text. It is essential to address these issues, particularly in academic writing, where precision and clarity are most important.

Another element of grammar is Verb tense, which indicates the time at which an action occurs, typically categorized into past, present, and future. Using these is essential for communicating thoughts and information accurately, as supported by the study of Napratilora and Siagian (2019), that appropriately using tenses enables writers and speakers to deliver their message clearly and effectively without confusion or misinterpretation. In accordance with the study of Assadi (2021), tenses are utilized as a strategy that contributes to the emotional and social realities of readers. However, Bukit et al. (2020) assert that the use of tense shift in literary works may lead to ambiguity and communication breakdown. Therefore, writers should also consider readers when incorporating tenses, as it is fundamental to achieving coherence and precision of time, especially for learners of English as a foreign or second language.

Theoretical Basis

This study is anchored to the theory proposed by Leech in 1981, the Foregrounding Theory, which supported the use of poetic devices in literary works. According to a Russian literary scholar from the early twentieth century, to defamiliarize the familiar—also known as estrangement—is the objective of art and literature. It emphasizes

that incorporating poetic features by employing unusual forms of language in a literary work can make a linguistic utterance stand out.

This theory helps explain deviation where sentence structure Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVO) in Standard English is inverted, while the use of colloquialism and parallelism foregrounds the literary piece by repeating patterns to form rhythm, which is hard to comprehend. In addition, the shift in tenses and the use of archaic words grounded the readers to solely focus on the changes of time and using foreign words that contribute to the overall emotion of the poem. Thus, the use of these stylistic elements puts emphasis and creates an appealing effect in literature and focuses more on having a certain and meaningful interpretation, thereby foregrounding literary works.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis employed an In-depth Textual approach to analyze the selected English literary works composed by notable poets and a detailed examination of their texts. A qualitative method that goes beyond the surface level of poems by closely analyzing how stylistic features, structure, and content are utilized in most literature (Arya et al., 2020). The primary goal is to determine the meaningful message or insight from poems by recognizing that interpretation arises from interaction between the reader and the text.

The researchers systematically reviewed each poem and identified similarities based on the evident use of Archaic Words, Inverted Syntax, Colloquialism, Parallelism, and Tense Shift, and explored how these linguistic features hinder the reader's comprehension. Modern readers often experience confusion when encountering the abovementioned elements that suggest a challenge between the poetic text and the reader's interpretation (Girsang, 2023). This supports that poetic analysis is essential for discovering how language is used in different contexts.

DISCUSSION

Archaic Words

Example #1: Phrases from poem number 1 entitled **"Sonnet 18"** by William Shakespeare

"Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st" and *"Thou art more lovely and more temperate"* demonstrate the use of old forms like *"thou"* (you) and *"ow'st"* (own). Shakespeare's poetic style reflects the language of his time, contributing to the rhythm of his literature. The use of archaic words evokes a sense of intimacy between the speaker and the subject, as if the speaker is addressing the beloved with deep affection and personal connection. This supports the readers to feel the overall theme of the poem, which is an expression of admiration and love. However, if a contemporary reader were to read this phrase of his poem, they would likely find it challenging, especially if they do not know the meaning of these words.

Example #2: A phrase from poem number 4 entitled **"The Tyger"** by William Blake

"Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" again employing *"thee"* in place of "you." The author uses archaic words to evoke a timeless and prophetic tone. The usage of outdated poetic words contributed to solemnity and a connection to tradition. These add an emphasis to the spiritual belief and divine creation, which also acts as the central theme of this piece. While their use also strengthens the spiritual message by linking the language to religious texts and deepening the meaning of the question being asked, in modern English, archaic words must be modified because they might hinder the reader's reading process.

Example #3: A phrase from poem number 15 entitled **"Paradise Lost"** by John Milton

Similarly to the abovementioned, several archaic words like *"thee," "thy,"* and *"thou"* were also found in Milton's poem. Example phrase is *"What thou the field be lots?"* which means *"So what if we lost the battle?"* This line symbolizes a sense of resilience and unbroken spirit. The whole emotion of the poem revolves around a solemn, serious, and spiritual tone, which strengthens the reader's connection to the biblical echo of religious

traditions. Contrarily, the use of these poetic words is no longer used in contemporary English, as others are considered obsolete.

Thus, the use of archaic words in modern English is not recommended due to the fact that it can only make communication difficult and hinder comprehension—particularly in literary works. In the study of Haque (2020), it discusses how poets frequently use archaic words to achieve artistic impact. Nevertheless, he notes that it can only make poetry less accessible to modern readers, hindering comprehension and engagement, which makes it better not to use archaic words—especially in modern English.

Inverted Syntax

Example #1: A phrase from poem number 15 entitled "**Paradise Lost**" by John Milton

"Him the Almighty Power Hurl'd headlong naming from the ethereal sky"

It is disrupting typical syntax structure where *"Him"* as the object is placed at the front while the subject, *"the Almighty Power,"* is after the object, which leads to confusion in terms of identifying the subject and object of a sentence. The typical word order should be *"The Almighty Power hurld him headlong..."* However, this inverted phrase is not solely a subject for syntactical unusual order; it is also a motivating force for the reader's emotions to relate and feel the presence of the divine power of God.

Example #2: A phrase from poem number 16 entitled "**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**" by Robert Frost

"Whose woods these are I think I know"

The phrase is structured with an inverted syntax. The proper sentence following a normal order of words is *"I think I know whose woods these are,"* emphasizing a clear subject and object. This line with unusual syntax order summons an emotion in the readers, such as feeling the unclear and tangled mind of the speaker, which also grabs readers' attention. Utilizing inverted syntactical words gives depth to the general tone of the poem, where readers can embrace the quietness and peace, and they can associate it with the journey of life that is full of responsibilities. However, due to the atypical structure of words, this would confuse the readers. While in some of the sentences that follow the normal order of words, the subject can be identified easily, leading to proper comprehension for the readers.

Example #3: A phrase from poem number 18 entitled "**Still I Rise**" from Maya Angelou

"You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise."

The phrase *"But still, like dust, I'll rise"* is an example of a phrase that uses an inverted syntax. The proper sentence structure with a proper syntax that follows the English standard pattern is *"But I'll rise still, like dust,"* which clearly presents the subject and the object it is being compared to. Nevertheless, the use of this inverted word structure evokes people's emotions, reflecting on the strength, resilience, and hopeful personality of the speaker, which also serves as the main tone and emotion of the overall poem. A lot of readers may feel connected to the poem for its whole meaning, which can lead to progress from the oppression and challenges that the world brings.

In contemporary poetry, the use of inversion is still valued and utilized. It is considered a tool to enhance poems or literary works by giving emphatic rhythm, tone, and effects to pique readers' interest, feelings, and emotions. However, some may find it difficult to understand and interpret the meanings. According to Erniwati et al. (2018), analyzing literary devices, which also refers to having an unusual word order or inversion, is one of the challenges that readers face when reading literary works. As stated in their research, readers have trouble understanding a wide range of literature that incorporates complex poetic words.

Colloquialism

Example #1: A line from poem number 6 titled **"Theme for English B"** by Langston Hughes

"I guess being colored doesn't make me not like the same things other folks like who are other races."

Using the sentence *"I guess"*, the double negative *"doesn't make me not like"*, and the word *"folks"* all approximate colloquial spoken language. The syntax is crude and colloquial, and this facilitates conveying a natural and personal voice. But for a contemporary academic English context, the line will perhaps sound too relaxed and syntactically slack. A more formal version would be *"Apparently, being black doesn't imply that I would dislike the things that individuals of other races like."* This rewritten sentence has the same meaning but in more accurate, formal terms that are appropriate for use in school or work environments. The author wrote this to expose and challenge the racial and social power structures embedded in American society. Through the use of colloquialism, it brings the readers to the genuine and relatable feeling that the entire poem creates. It makes the poem connected gravely to both personal aspects and social relevance.

Example #2: A line from poem number 3 titled **"To a Mouse"** by Robert Burns

"The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley."

This passage includes Scots dialect, which was informal to Burns's era and area. Phrases such as *"o' Mice an' Men"* (mice and humans) and *"Gang aft agley"* ("often go wrong") are the colloquial language of 18th-century Scotland. In that style, it made the poem sound authentic. The author's decision to use this style of writing adds a more matching feeling to the readers about the uncertain way of life, which is full of unexpected changes and challenges. By this, the poem casually expresses the concept of having a plan in one's life, but due to unseen circumstances, it may be difficult to pursue. A more comprehensible version can be *"Even the most careful plans tend to go awry."* This structure is better as it can support readers' interpretation of such phrase.

Example #3: A line from poem number 5 titled **"I carry your heart with me"** by E.E Cummings

"i carry your heart with me(i carry it in my heart)"

Although not technically a traditional colloquialism, Cummings' poem takes on an informal or personal tone. The use of lowercase letters, absence of punctuation, and free-form structure enhances the impression of an afterthought or a spoken emotion. The usage of this poetic line adds to the emotional meaning of the poem, which suggests embracing the concept of love because it is free from flaws and structures. Furthermore, this also marks the entire meaning of the poem, which presents that love can surpass everything to express feelings, even structural rules. However, a more formal rendition could be *"I hold your love within me, always in my heart."* This revised version maintains the feeling and the soft intimacy of the original conversational tone by Cummings.

Colloquialism not only brings warmth and authenticity to a work but also its careless and unformulated nature that makes it appear ambiguous in contemporary formal language. In poetry, it establishes a rapport between the reader and the speaker since it mirrors how individuals speak. Yet, Weatherall (2018) emphasizes that presenting these in clearer, more formal terms aids current readers to decode the message unambiguously.

Parallelism

Example #1: A phrase from poem number 12 entitled **"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"** by Dylan Thomas

"Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Thomas wrote this poem as a passionate plea to his dying father, urging him to resist death fiercely rather than passively accept it. The phrase above demonstrates parallelism through the repeated use of the imperative verb *"rage,"* which intensifies the emotions. These refrains act as emotional and thematic anchors as they follow a strict rhyme scheme: ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA. It may be considered dramatic for everyday use due to

its repetitiveness. Additionally, *"the dying of the light"* is a poetic way of referring to *"death,"* but this may not be immediately clear to modern readers. A simpler modern version could be *"Fight against death while you still can."* This version maintains the same meaning but is more direct. Moreover, the central theme is resistance to death, which suggests that a passionate, purposeful life deserves a passionate, purposeful end. Thomas urges that one should fight against the inevitable or the slow fading of life, as he repeatedly mentions phrases that emphasize passion, anger, and rebellion.

Example #2: A phrase from poem number 20 entitled **"Chicago"** by Carl Sandburg

"Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler."

A vivid tribute to the American city of Chicago, celebrating its energy, strength, and gritty realism during a time of rapid industrial growth and urbanization. This poem shows a modernism and social realism tradition, focusing on the life of the working class and the city's industrial identity. The rhythmic repetition and parallel phrasing mimic the constant, repetitive labor and noisy machinery that define the city. Meanwhile, parallelism is apparent in the phrase above due to adhering to a uniform grammatical structure, but the manner of writing may sound poetic or ambiguous due to the absence of verbs. A clearer modern version could be *"Chicago is a city that builds tools, stacks wheat, and manages trains and freight."* This way, a simplified structure helps contemporary readers, especially students, grasp the poem's message without getting lost in outdated expressions or unfamiliar rhythm.

Example #3: A phrase from poem number 15 entitled **"Paradise Lost"** by John Milton

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

It features parallelism through two matching infinitive phrases: *"to reign in Hell"* and *"to serve in Heaven."* It shows the contrast between reigning and serving across two actions and two places, Hell versus Heaven. Milton often mimics biblical syntax, which itself uses parallelism heavily, giving the poem a scriptural feel. It may sound too formal or "old-fashioned" particularly due to the vivid religious imagery. A modern version could be *"It's better to lead in a bad place than to follow in a good one."* As can be observed, it reveals a casual tone.

While parallelism is a useful way to add rhythm, clarity, and emphasis in writing, its poetic style might not fit modern language. Today, such expressions can seem too dramatic and might make the message harder to comprehend. In a related study, Nwankwo (2023) examined student essays and discovered that parallel structures are often incorrectly employed, frequently leading to misunderstanding. Students' writing skills can be significantly improved through the effective teaching of parallelism, as highlighted by the study. Changing these phrases into a more straightforward language helps ensure the message stays on point for today's readers.

Tenses Shift

Example #1: A phrase from poem number 2 entitled **"Because I Could Not Stop for Death"** by Emily Dickinson

The speaker recounts her journey with Death as if it happened in the past while using consistent past tense throughout much of the poem. However, there is a tense shift in the final stanza that may momentarily confuse the readers.

"Feels shorter than the Day"

This phrase switches from past tense to the present with the word *"feels."* This creates contrast with earlier past tense narration to blur the boundary between life and death. The shift reflects the timeless, eternal nature of the speaker's journey with Death, suggesting it transcends ordinary human experience. By using this style, the author emphasizes that death is not an end, but an ongoing state of existence. While this change is likely intentional by the author, it may still catch readers off guard. The sudden blend of past and present can interrupt the flow of the narrative and lead to uncertainty about when the speaker is "speaking" from, it might be the past, the present, or a timeless perspective beyond both.

Example #2: A phrase from poem number 14 entitled **“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”** by T.S. Eliot

“I have known the arms already, known them all–”

This choice of words may confuse readers because it sounds like he is talking about something ongoing or still affecting him now, rather than something fully in the past. Instead of simply saying *“I knew the arms,”* Eliot writes “have known” to suggest that Prufrock is emotionally stuck—his past social failures feel ever present and unresolved. This tense choice creates a timeless, paralyzed emotional state, showing how Prufrock’s inner turmoil has no clear beginning or end.

Example #3: A phrase from poem number 19 entitled **“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”** by William Wordsworth

“I wandered lonely as a cloud”

The poet begins in the past tense, remembering a walk. But later, he shifts to the present tense in the lines: *“They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude.”* This sudden change might confuse readers if the daffodils are still in front of him, or just in his memory. The author uses the present tense intentionally to show that the memory is still alive and continues to bring joy. So, through tense shift and vivid imagery, Wordsworth is not just describing a walk in the countryside, but he is also promoting a way of thinking that values personal feelings, solitude, and the beauty of the natural world as essential to human happiness and well-being.

Tenses are used in most literary works, especially in poetry, to evoke emotions from readers. According to Rosyidah and Meylinda (2023) that poetry is one of the literary works that is used as an effective and creative medium for teaching tenses in English, distinctly for English literature students, and written not just in conventional grammar but also in an artistic and refined way. Nonetheless, while this artistic use of tense enriches the poetic experience, it may also pose challenges for readers, particularly those who are non-native English speakers or learners of the language.

CONCLUSION

This study uncovered relevant research that shows the impact of utilizing stylistic elements in literary works, which are archaic words, inverted syntax, colloquialism, parallelism, and tense shift that affect readers’ interpretation of the poem. While these are essential in creating linguistic potential, which is the poetic text, it may also be a challenge to those who are unfamiliar with foreign language forms or literary devices being used in the poem. These claims are grounded in linguistic theory that analyzes the importance of having a balance of creative expression with clarity in written work, ensuring that the poetic meaning is clearly interpreted and understood by the readers.

Ultimately, based on these findings, educators should provide guided instructions for readers to better understand the stylistic elements of literature and how to navigate complex poetic texts. Thus, poets and writers are encouraged to utilize modern linguistic features and consider their audience’s linguistic background while keeping the artistic expression and comprehensibility.

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