

The linguistics of surprise

Nigel Fabb

Language in poetry is different from language in general. For example: (i) the division into lines has no equivalent in ordinary language; (ii) where syllables are counted, actual syllables may not correspond to metrical (counted) syllables; (iii) multi-featured prosodic characteristics such as stress or weight are reduced to binary oppositions in meter; (iv) rhyme and alliteration are dependent on, but underdetermined by, phonological form.

Poetry also has 'aesthetic' characteristics, where the property of being 'aesthetic' can be understood in part in terms of other characteristics of the text, or of the author/reader/hearer's relation to the text. One such characteristic is 'being surprising': poetry is more surprising than ordinary uses of language. In this paper I treat surprise as a characteristic of the text (i.e., not just a temporal effect of reading/hearing it). I ask whether the 'surprise' of poetry can be understood relative to the differentness of literary language from ordinary language, either from some distinctive characteristic of literary language, or the relation between literary language and ordinary language.

As a central part of this investigation, I ask whether the different linguistic constraints on a poetic text influence word choice and syntax structure to produce results which deliver 'surprise' (a notion which has been discussed elsewhere, for example in Golston and Riad's proposal that 'prosody outranks syntax' in poetry). In particular, I ask why the division into lines is so characteristically associated with the aestheticization of language, as found in poetry.