

# The Linguistics of Surprise

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*This is an expanded version of the handout for the talk (not a fully thought-through article). For further discussion of these matters see Fabb (2009a, 2009b, 2009c).*

This talk is about poetry. It has some relevance for phonology, and the lexicon (including lexical access).

## 1. Surprise

Verse can be 'surprising' in basically two ways, relative to language.

First, given that poems are made from something already known (vocabulary, syntax), and available to all native speakers, (i) how is it possible to create a poem which is new and surprising (and not just in its content: also in its form), and why do people differ in their ability to do this, and (ii) what about poetry as a form enables 'inspiration' in the use of the already-known language?

Second – and this is more the focus of the present paper – how are the 'special meanings' of literature possible and how are they created: in particular, why does poetry give the impression of communicating meanings which cannot be paraphrased or put into words (ineffable) and why do those meanings seem to be important: that is, how does poetry produce profound ineffability? See examples (1,2,3) for evidence cross-linguistically for the idea that poetry communicates profound ineffability.

(1) *Wordsworth*

Then, reascending the bare common, saw  
 A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,  
 The beacon on the summit, and, more near,  
 A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head,  
 And seemed with difficult steps to force her way  
 Against the blowing wind. **It was, in truth,  
 An ordinary sight; but I should need  
 Colours and words that are unknown to man,  
 To paint the visionary dreariness  
 Which,** while I looked all round for my lost guide,  
 Invested moorland waste and naked pool,  
 The beacon crowning the lone eminence,  
 The female and her garments vexed and tossed  
 By the strong wind.

Wordsworth *Prelude* book 12, 1805

(2) *Lu Chi*

Or, summarizing Lu Chi's *Poetic Exposition on Literature* (Chinese, c.280 AD): "[M]eaning is an event that occurs beyond words and 'after the words have ended'. Without that sense of some significance, flavor, or whatever beyond the surface of the text, the literary work seems flat. The use of the *p'ien-yen*, the 'suggestive expression' or literally 'partial expression,' marks the incompleteness of the surface text; and it is such language, recognized as somehow incomplete, that is the 'riding crop,' giving the text energy and forward momentum." (Owen 1992:149).

(3) *Nāth ultābāmsī*

The practice associated with the Nath religion of Northern India, of composing vernacular poetry in an 'upside down language', an "obscure allusive style in which suggestive dualities and incongruities (*ultābāmsī*) asserted as paradoxical truths bear much of the meaning" (McGregor 1984: 22).

The particularly interesting issue for both of these questions is whether these 'surprising' characteristics of poetry are associated with the specific formal characteristics of verse (text divided into lines), and particularly the ways in which the language of verse differs from ordinary language (see Fabb 2009b for extensive discussion).

The three key differences are (i) a greater degree of repetition (eg., in parallelism, rhyme), (ii) superadded types of sectioning such as the division of the text into lines, and (iii) counting, for example the counting of metrical elements in a meter.

This paper explores some of the ways in which the surprising characteristics of poetry might be associated with the distinctive formal characteristics of the language of verse. (Many of the arguments here are rehearsed also in Fabb 2009a: 'why is verse poetry?' – that is, does the form of verse enable the qualitative characteristics of poetry?)

## 2. Meaning in literature

I assume (along loosely Fodorian lines; Fodor 1975) that thoughts are sentences, related to one another by logical rules (and governed by principles such as proposed in Relevance Theory: Sperber and Wilson 1995). For example, a meaning (i.e., a thought) might be conceived of as a set of propositional attitudes, derived pragmatically by a reader/listener on the basis of evidence provided by the text, in context, and attributed to an author. A propositional attitude is a proposition which is attributed to someone (by embedding it in a larger proposition which does precisely this): so, for example, when I have a thought "today is Friday", my actual thought is a propositional attitude, "I think [today is Friday]" which metarepresents the original representation (my thought is a representation of a representation = a metarepresentation). My thoughts must be metarepresented: if I have a thought (a

proposition) without attributing it to myself (metarepresenting it), then that thought is 'thought insertion' (I think it's coming from Mars, or God etc.).

In principle, there's a problem about ineffability: we should not be able to have ineffable thoughts if thoughts are always sentences (including sentences which contain sentences, as in the case of propositional attitudes). This is an interesting, but not insoluble, problem. Two important ways of solving it involve (a) the idea that it might be possible to identify a meaning as a 'set of thoughts' and the ineffability might arise from some characteristic of this set rather than the individually effable parts of it (the thoughts themselves); and (2) the fact that thoughts are metarepresentations, not bare representations.

The approach which I've outlined here says that when we know things, we entertain a set of thoughts, which are individually composed from discrete symbolic systems. There is an interesting, though to me entirely puzzling question, about stochastic knowledge (knowledge of percentages) – can this be understood also as a discrete symbolic kind of knowledge, or is it something else, perhaps something ineffable? I return to this at the end of the talk.

Now, meaning presents certain 'interpretive special effects' – aspects of meaning which while not fundamentally different from ordinary language (literature cannot have its own semantics or pragmatics), involve some change of emphasis. Here are some of them:

- (a) The textual evidence is characteristically less direct (i.e., less coded: more metaphor, etc).
- (b) The set of the meanings inferred is large relative to the size of the text which provides evidence for them.
- (c) Undecideability or indeterminacy is more tolerated, in various ways (d-g):
- (d) One can be less confident that the implications are implicatures (intended implications), as Constable and Aoyama (1999) argue. This is because the language of poetry is not necessarily subordinated to communicative ends, but might be determined by rules of composition (e.g., in iambic pentameter every tenth syllable must be word-final).
- (e) One can be less clear which propositions (thoughts) belong in the set of propositions (thoughts) which are communicated. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 236) suggest: "In general, the wider the range of potential implicatures and the greater the hearer's responsibility for constructing them, the more poetic the effect, the more creative the metaphor."
- (f) Incompatibilities (ambiguities) are permitted to co-exist in poetry in a way not tolerated in ordinary communication.
- (g) Sperber has argued that thoughts can contain gaps (particularly via the metarepresentational process, where the gap is in the embedded proposition, not the topmost proposition). This may be more tolerated in poetry. Sperber (1996: 71): "meta-representational abilities allow humans to process representations which

they do not fully understand" ... this "creates the possibility of conceptual mysteries, which no amount of processing could ever clarify, invading human minds"... and in turn these can achieve cultural success... "the winning mysteries... are more evocative, and, as a result, more memorable"

(h) Finally, literary form can itself be understood as a meaning of the text: that is, the text implies a self-description – the form of the text is the content of thoughts for which the text provides evidence. To be a sonnet is to license the thought ‘this text is a sonnet’. (This is fully theorized in a relevance theoretic framework in Fabb 2002.) If form is a kind of meaning, then form itself can also be a source of ineffability: this is a claim I come back to at the end of this talk, when I discuss metre.

How is ineffability possible if we assume the Language of Thought? There are four ways of getting it to arise, all of which work round the problem presented by language of thought, or exploit breakdowns in the system.

(i) Mechanical ineffability (e.g., tip of the tongue experience). In a rather trivial way, tip of the tongue (we know the meaning but not the form for a word) is a kind of ineffability. Though it is quickly resolved (by finding the word), it nevertheless points to one way of getting ineffability via a breakdown in the system.

(ii) Structural ineffability (e.g., gaps in propositional attitudes). Following Sperber we can say that though thoughts are sentences, those sentences might contain terms whose meaning is unclear, or possibly even just contain gaps where terms should be: the thinker might tolerate these on an expectation that they will be filled in later. In a strict sense this is the opposite of ineffability because we have the form but not the meaning, but it might appear to conscious introspection as a kind of ineffability, where it is assumed that there is a meaning but that the form is not quite right for it. This seems to be compatible with Sperber’s view of these gaps (and why they can be the basis of religious beliefs, where a belief is asserted which cannot be paraphrased).

(iii) Set-based ineffability (e.g., unresolvable ambiguity, the wide array of weak implicatures). If what is communicated is a set of thoughts, rather than specific thoughts, then the set has non-symbolic characteristics (i.e., the set is not itself represented as a thought). So some of the ineffability might arise from characteristics of the set, including the impossibility of deciding between competing but incompatible thoughts, or deciding which thoughts are in the set.

(iv) Asymbolic ineffability - perception of differences below the level of symbolization in the computational model. This might be the way of understanding both set-based ineffability and the ‘stochastic’ effects relating to variation in meter which I discuss at the end of this talk. (There are analogies in the aesthetic theory of music, art; e.g. Scruton’s account of music – see DeClerq 2000).

Where does profundity come from? Sperber argues that thoughts with gaps or unclarities (i.e., ineffabilities) have an inherent interest. Perhaps profundity is attributed to what is not fully understood: i.e., profundity arises from the ineffability.

### 3. Parallelism and rhyme, and other types of repetition

This is the first of the three special characteristics of language in verse. Parallelism is widespread; in (6) and (7) are two examples.

- (6) From a Rotinese text (Indonesia) : Fox (1988: 167)
- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Lena-lena ngala lemin     | All you great ones,                                   |
| Lesi-lesi ngala lemin     | All you superior ones,                                |
| Sadi mafandendelek        | Do remember this,                                     |
| Sadi masanenedak          | Do bear this in mind:                                 |
| Fo ana-ma tua fude        | Save the froth of the cooking syrup for the orphans   |
| Ma falu-ina beba langa la | And the heads of the palm leaf-stalks for the widows. |
- (7) Pope *Essay on Man* 1733
- Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things  
 To low ambition, and the pride of kings.  
 Let us (since life can little more supply  
 Than just to look about us and to die)  
 Expatiate free o'er all this scene of man;  
 A mighty maze! but not without a plan;  
 A wild, where weeds and flow'rs promiscuous shoot;  
 Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit.  
 Together let us beat this ample field,  
 Try what the open, what the covert yield;  
 The latent tracts, the giddy heights explore  
 Of all who blindly creep, or sightless soar;  
 Eye Nature's walks, shoot folly as it flies,  
 And catch the manners living as they rise;  
 Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;  
 But vindicate the ways of God to man.

Jakobson's view: repetition and parallelism are the defining characteristic of verbal art because they draw attention to the language itself. (Reinterpreted in Fabb 2009c.)

There are somewhat different implications of the McGlone-Tofighbakhsh result that processing ease produces epistemic effects. (But, contra Jakobson, not if attention is drawn.) Aphorisms which rhyme. "rhyme, like repetition, affords statements an enhancement in processing fluency that can be misattributed to heightened conviction about their truthfulness" (McGlone and Tofighbakhsh 2000: 424). So the various kinds of repetition in poetry might produce 'epistemic illusions'.

A third possibility is that the various kinds of repetition bring distinct concepts together to produce not a simple addition of the two concepts, but rather to produce hybrid concepts (inbetween the two, or some merger of the two). The concept of hybrid concept from Blakemore (2008), and the idea that sound patterning produces semantic hybridity from MacMahon (2007). Examples of hybrid

concepts: the pairing of 'widows and orphans' in (7) which produces the general meaning of 'bereaved', and the boldface examples of hendiadys in (9):

- (9) Shakespeare *Hamlet* 1.3 (Laertes speaking)  
 Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,  
 And keep you in the rear of your affection,  
 Out of the **shot and danger** of desire.  
 The charest maid is prodigal enough,  
 If she unmask her beauty to the moon:  
 Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes:  
 The canker galls the infants of the spring,  
 Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,  
 And in the **morn and liquid dew** of youth  
 Contagious blastments are most imminent.

#### 4. Lineation

Why is verse poetry? That is, why does division into lines correlate with the qualitative characteristics of poetry? (This section very dependent on Fabb 2009a).

Lineation is itself non-linguistic: lines are not constituents (they have edges but no internal structure), do not have heads, etc. The language of verse must conform to what the lines require.

Some of the characteristics of the language of verse, which make the language of verse itself 'non-linguistic'

- (i) Listing and, more generally, concatenation
- (ii) Bricolage (i.e., incorporation of various kinds of material, including 'found' material: words, phrases and syntactic fragments, quotes, oral formulae, foreign words, etc.)
- (iii) Crazy syntax: impossible orders (10), or gaps, or reorderings without the right interpretation (e.g., object-subject verb orders which would normally be interpreted as topicalization but in the verse do not have this interpretation).

- (10) Shelley, "Adonais" 1821, cited Austin,  
 ... Not all to that bright station dared to climb;  
 And happier they their happiness who knew,  
 Whose tapers yet burn through that night of time  
 In which suns perished.

Proposal: Lineation forces different compositional practices, hence different ways of using the language faculty, including non-linguistic ways of using language. More specifically: lines are formed by concatenation, not by (syntactic) merge - in effect, lines have no syntax. What is concatenated? Anything - words, drawn from the lexicon (but possibly chosen for their phonology, rather than their meaning), already-formed phrases built by the syntax and recycled as pieces into the bricolage, quotations, invented words, words from other dialects or archaisms.

(This proposal must be true for some verse – after all, nothing in principle prevents composition in this way – but is it generally true of verse? Note that if we follow Levelt (1989), then lexical access is different in the composition of verse than in ordinary speech.)

What this explains. The 'non-linguistic' characteristics of the language; the possibility of composing verse without going through an intermediate 'prose' phase; the adherence to various external constraints such as meter.

Two problems (is the cure worse than the cold?): why do lines look as if they have a syntax, and how are they interpreted (i.e., how are logical forms produced)? One solution: separately generate 'prose' and compare, while tolerating mismatches. Second solution (Thoms 2010): 'reconstruction' account.

How verse enables creativity: it increases the likelihood of random emergence, and raises the level of luck in the generation of language. Good poets are luckier than the rest of us.

## **5. Meter**

Metrical verse is text which is divided into lines, where there is counting of metrical elements projected from the line (usually counting of syllables). All theories of meter have a structure (a scansion, usually a tree or a grid), and conditions relating that structure to the line. In the Fabb-Halle theory, a bracketed grid is generated stepwise from the line, and conditions then hold of the relation between line and grid. The rules which generate the grid for any specific meter will only generate a well-formed grid from a line of a specific length.

One of the cross-linguistically interesting characteristics of meter is that lines in a specific meter almost always vary in how they manifest a characteristic which is supposedly controlled by the metrical rules. For example, though metrical rules always control the number of metrical elements, most meters allow ways of changing the numbers without changing the meter: in English iambic pentameter for example there are 10 metrical elements in each line, but there can be more than 10 syllables (one extra is allowed at the end, and some syllables are not counted for metrical purposes). Where syllable quantity is controlled, or stress, the rules nevertheless permit exceptions (e.g., anacrusis in quantitative meters – positions which can be occupied by heavy or light syllables, or displaced stresses in accentual meters such as the initial stressed syllable in the occasional iambic pentameter line where usually even-numbered syllables are stressed).

So, variation seems to be a characteristic of meters, perhaps a fundamental characteristic which requires explanation. How should a theory of meter deal with this? One option – taken by Fabb and Halle (and see also Fabb 2002 for a broader overview of this issue) is to say that the metrical rules underdetermine relevant aspects of the line, and have nothing to say about variation (other than that by underdetermining the line, they permit variation). An opposed position is taken in stochastic and holistic accounts such as that of Hayes (2009) where the whole range of variations is represented by statistics over the corpus, and the metrical rules incorporate the variations into them.

This seems relevant to the issue of ineffability. However we approach variation – whether we think it is known in the form of stochastic knowledge, or whether it falls outside the symbolic system (e.g., as Fabb and Halle suggest) – perhaps the variations in meter deliver a kind of ineffability (where we understand form to be a meaning – see above - which may be not fully specified).

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