

CHAPTER 1
LANGUAGE OF POETRY

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Poetry is always regarded more difficult than prose. It is because of the nature of language and conventions used in poetry. To bring out its nature one should distinguish poetry from prose.

What is poetry then?

There are any number of definitions of poetry. But it is enough to state a few of them here:

1) 'Poetry is a composition of words set to music' ..

- Ezra Pound

2) 'Poetry means words set in delightful proportion'

- Sidney

Many definitions can be cited to bring out the general idea of poetry.

Poetry Vs. Prose

Prose and poetry are two main forms of literature. Whatever else literature may be, its effects are achieved through the medium of language. But of these two, poetry is felt more difficult than prose.

What are the different features of language of prose and that of poetry?

Billows¹ in his article, 'The Teaching of Poetry' remarks,

Uneasiness in the presence of poetry may be due to the fact that poetry moves in a different dimension from that of prose. We can compare prose to walking, moving from one place to another on the surface of the earth getting the world's daily work done. Poetry may be compared, then, to dancing, rising above the surface of the earth, perceiving its relations, getting a fuller view of its reality.

Marjorie Boulton in her *The Anatomy of Prose* distinguishes prose from poetry as follows:

The rhythm of verse depends on patterns of repetitions though without counterpoint this repetition would become tedious. In studying a poem we can find a basic metrical pattern. There may also be patterns of rhyme, alliteration, refrains, symmetries of logic and even musical accompaniment. The rhyme of prose depends on variation. Indeed metrical lines and rhymes are considered a fault in prose style.

The function of words in prose is rather different. The words in poetry may be used more ambiguously than prose. The words in poetry may be used evocatively, onomatopoeically or for purpose connected with rhythm rather than meaning. In prose words are likely to be sharply defined

with one meaning at a time and their function is utilitarian. Clarity is a supreme virtue in prose for most purposes; in poetry it is usually a secondary value.

The use of words in poetry is much more figurative and metaphorical than prose. The possible emotional impact of poetry is greater than that of prose.

There is a difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry. The distinction between them is basic. Many other scholars have noted this distinction in different ways.

John Nist² points out that "the language of poetry is the language of formation and the language of prose is the language of information. The distinction is basic. It discriminates between the language of emotive power and the language of intellectual knowledge".

He is of the opinion that language of information is a clear window and the language of formation is stained glass. In the language of information the reader looks out upon the universe represented by the words or by their symbolic code equivalents; in the language of formation the reader looks at the words themselves for these words cohere in patterns that become their own converse. Putting it another way "in the language of information the outcome is more important than the way - the mode of knowledge and the moral relevance are more important than the form beauty. But in the language of formation form beauty is everything because only the way of form beauty

can lead to the truth that is life in art".

Thus in the language of formation the immediate how is more important than the ultimate what. Indeed the immediate how determines both the immediate and the ultimate what.

Traditional View of Poetry

"A poem to be good", declares Warren³ in his lecture on 'Pure and Impure Poetry' delivered in Princeton in 1942 and published in the Kenyon Review, must earn itself. Poetry does not inhere in any particular element but depends upon the set relationships, the structure which we call the poem".

According to him, "Poetry involves resistances at various levels. There is the tension between the rhythm of the poem and rhythm of speech, between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language, between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract, between the elements of even the simplest metaphor, between the beautiful and the ugly between ideas ... between the elements involved in irony ... between prosaisms and poeticisms".

He compares poets to saints. He says, "Poets have not only tried to say what they mean, they have tried to prove what they mean. The saint proves his vision by stepping cheerfully into the fire. The poet somewhat less spectacularly, proves his vision by submitting it to the fires of irony - to the drama of his structure - in the hope that the

fire will refine it. In other words the poet wishes to indicate that his vision has been earned, that it can survive references to the complexities and contradictions of experience. And irony is one such device of reference".

Here Warren's stress is on poetic structure. The good poem is so organized that the interplay between its elements set up a complex of meaning in which the poet wins through to his final utterance. Irony and Paradox are important devices. They are used to take an account of all attitudes which threaten the one assumed by the poet in the poem. The ironic tension can be found in the treatment of rhythms and imagery.

Cleanth Brooks'⁴ thoughts are noteworthy here. In his book The Well Wrought Urn he says,

... the language of poetry is the language of paradox. Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty, it is hardly the language of soul ... yet there is the sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.

According to him the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language. It is a language in which connotations play as great a part as the denotations. The poet does not use a notation at all - as scientist may properly be said to do so. The poet within limits

has to make up his language as he goes.

T.S. Eliot⁵ describes poetry as, "perpetual slight alternation of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations. It is perpetual, it cannot be kept out of the poem, it can only be directed and controlled".

The tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms to freeze them into strict denotations, the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other and thus violating their dictionary meaning."

The poet has to work by analogies. "All of the subtler states of emotion, as I.A. Richards has pointed out, "necessarily demand metaphor for their expression. The poet must work by analogies but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is continuous tilting of the planes, necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes by nature of his instrument. Therefore, to obtain precision and compression the poet consciously employs paradoxes. Such a method, like any other, carries with it its own perils. But the dangers are not predetermined to a shallow and glittering sophistry. The method is an extension of the normal language of poetry, not a perversion of it.

David Daiches⁶ remarks, "Science says things explicitly, directly, simply in notional language, poetry expresses itself paradoxically, ironically, indirectly, obliquely, in language which, far from

having a one-for-one correspondence with what it denotes, creates its own meanings as it moves. If on this view poetry becomes simply a special way of using language, it must also be remembered that language used in this way develops and presents attitudes which could not be developed and presented in any other form of discourse.

Modern View of Poetry

Geoffrey Leech⁷ points out the difference between non-literary discourse and poetry. His arguments are as follows:

- (i) Poetic language may violate or deviate from the generally observed rules of the language in many different ways, some obvious, some subtle.
- (ii) The creative writer, more particularly the poet, enjoys a unique freedom, amongst users of language to range overall its communicative resources without respect to the social or historical contexts to which they belong. This means that the poet can draw on the language of the past or can borrow features belonging to other non-literary uses.
- (iii) The literary language, nevertheless has its roots in everyday uses of language and can best be studied with some references to these uses.

To understand poetry, it is necessary to look into the

deviant language of poetry. In Legal English and Scientific English there is no liberty or freedom of use of language. But in poetry deviations are taken as an important evidence of more than common mastery of language. An error in an ordinary discourse is taken as evidence of deficient competence in the language and calls for correction.

H.G. Widdowson's⁸ views in this context are worthy of consideration. In his lecture at Wolfson College, Cambridge in February 1980, he expressed his views about "The Deviant Nature of Poetry".

His views are summarized here:

- (i) Poems represent unique language systems in which regularities of 'langue' and 'parole' converge.
- (ii) Poems represent systems which are linguistic paradoxes in that they are based on a denial of the primordial characteristics of arbitrariness and linearity and have no power to generate other messages.
- (iii) Poems express what no other use of language is capable of expressing.
- (iv) They express a kind of converse reality, a different existential order in another dimension of experience, a fugitive paradox held for a moment outside ordinary time and place. The effects are achieved through the medium of language. The term refers to the underlying system of common knowledge known

as *langue* and to a particular realization of this knowledge as instances of behaviour known as *parole*.

According to F.W. Bateson⁹ 'the literary artefact ... is parole'. Widdowson in his scholarly way does not approve of literary artefact as parole. According to him if a foreign learner ventures to use the language creatively with deliberate intent - 'The march' he might say, 'The march treads our ears'; others would have found fault with his creative use. But when these words occur in poetry these words become English. But the foreign learners may be considered non-English. 'The parole of the learner is the projection of an inter language which represents a different kind of *langue* from that of standard English. "Then it is surely the case", Widdowson says, "that the parole of the poem is also the realization of a different kind of *langue*."

Therefore, the literary artefact exists precisely because it is NOT parole in any straightforward sense. It is in a way. But again in another way, it is not because it does violence to accepted rule. Widdowson suggests here that in a poem we have two co-existing systems locking into each other so that terms take on two values simultaneously. Sometimes these values may be consistent one with the other, sometimes they may create a conflict which has to be reconciled. Conflict occurs because of different use of language in poetry from conventional code. For example in the poem 'The Kingfisher' by W.H. Davies:

*It was rainbow gave thee birth
And left thee all her lovely hues.*

In the conventional code the word 'rainbow' is inanimate but in the code of this language it is given the features of animacy. Rainbow gave birth and colours to Kingfisher. The word rainbow thus acquires a new value. There is similarity of colours between Kingfisher and the rainbow. The Kingfisher has various colours of rainbow. But the poet has used the words 'Rainbow giving birth' contradictorily. In ordinary world such contradictions are not possible, but these contradictions are found here in a fused and reconciled way. Therefore poetic language or literary artefact has a double structure of 'parole' which is also a 'langue' of 'langue' which is also a 'parole', neither one nor the other. Yet both. A paradox, an anomalous hybrid.

Widdowson refutes the notion of double structure of poetry. Convergence of patterns necessarily depends on the denial of double structure as a primordial characteristic of the linguistic sign. Poetry operates on a fundamentally different and contrary principle from that which operates into conventional language use.

In linguistics double structure refers to the fact that the units at the phonological levels only function internally, within the language system itself to form higher level units. Sounds have no direct executive function in language use. Therefore they are not meaningful themselves but only provide the means to form higher units and these units are words.

In this way the substantial character of a word, which is

composed of sounds does not determine its reference or the sense relations it contracts with other words. Widdowson draws on de Saussure according to whom, the relationship of sound and meaning which is arbitrary, is one of the two 'Primordial characteristics' of the linguistic sign.

Does this principle operate in poetry?

This principle is not operative in poetry. Sounds are fashioned into designs which are meaningful in themselves. The patterns of language are significant beyond their function of realizing the rules of the conventional code and therefore there can be no transposing into different message form by paraphrase without radical alternation of meaning.

According to de Saussure 'the whole mechanism of language depends upon the 'linear nature' of the signifier'.

This principle also is not applicable to poetry. In fact the mechanism of poetry depends on the undermining of this principle. Poems are not simply linear. Rhyme schemes, rhythmic shape and the appearance of the poems on the page are devices used in order to avoid the limitations of linearity which are determined by syntax. Because of it there are series of pattern units finding their place in the arrangement. How does this happen? There is the principle of equivalence from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic axis of language. And when this transfer is made and equivalent items are realised within the message form, then

there will be a two-dimensional design which will surpass the linearity.

Therefore poetry can be called as a deviant kind of discourse. It exploits the resources of conventional language in order to frame contradictory quasi-systems of its own. These systems are formed of both *langue* and *parole*.

Poets make use of deviant language which differs from linguistic and socially accepted norms. It is known as 'foregrounding'.

Alex Rodger¹⁰ in his article 'Language for Literature' considers literature as a 'foregrounded discourse'. He is of the opinion that non-literary communication involves the use of conventionally appropriate kinds of language to convey practical everyday messages which are socially necessary. Literary messages like drama, poetry, etc. make use of the same basic language system. But literary messages differ from non-literary ones in function i.e., in their communicative purposes. Creative writers invent special conventions of poetic and dramatic communication which would not work in ordinary practical discourse, and thereby showing literariness of their messages. They use language system in ways which are unorthodox, thought provoking and striking.

If poetry is a foregrounded discourse and uses deviant language, then what are the deviations that poets make use of. According to G.N. Leech¹¹ the following are the different types of linguistic deviations:



- * (1) Phonological, (2) Lexical, (3) Grammatical, (4) Semantic, (5) Dialectal, (6) Deviation of Register, (7) Deviation of Historical period, (8) Stylistic Deviation, and (9) Graphological.

Let us discuss these deviations one by one:

(1) Phonological Deviation:

In phonology the patterns are on the surface. So phonological deviation in English poetry is of little importance. Phonological deviations take place when there are irregularities in pronunciation, special pronunciation for rhyming. Sometimes the poet uses elision, omits initial, middle and final syllables.

For example:

- 1) ne'er for never
- 2) 'Tis for It is.

(2) Lexical Deviation

Poets always invent new words. Sometimes they coin new words. It is called Neologism. For example, the pattern adverb + past participle implies repeated activity as in -

- (1) highly-praised woman,
- (2) much-considered poem.

But this is exploited in 'our much-married King', because there is a

devient use of the word 'much'.

Words are formed by various methods.

- (1) The most common of them is affixation.
- (2) The second is functional conversion or zero affixation.
Functional conversion means adapting an item to a new grammatical function without changing its form. For example:

1) The Kettle descants in a cosy drone.

[Hardy: At Tea]

2) And storms bugle his fame.

In poetry economy and compression are achieved by affixation and compounding.

(3) Grammatical Deviation

In non-literary discourse generally the grammatical rules are followed and even if the pattern of messages takes the form other than that dictated by syntactic rule it does not matter to its meaning. But in poetry it does matter and when it is changed the meaning changes also. No paraphrase is possible. This is because one is translating from a contextually determined code which has no generative power outside the message form of the particular poem.

There is a creative licence in poetry which is not largely accepted in prose. For example:

- 1) Two girls ago he was a father of a boy.
- 2) Five moons ago ...

Parallelism is also a characteristic feature of poetic language. Some items repeat in equivalent positions. Parallelism may contain two or more units and in each unit there may be some variation of an item or two. Parallelism relates the poetic language to music. For example:

See how the world its veterans rewards!
 A youth of frolics, an old age of cards;
 Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,
 Young without lovers, old without a friend ...

(4) Semantic Deviation

Poets use metaphors and the essence of metaphors is lexical or semantic deviations. For example:

The mountain stamped its foot.

The foot of a mountain is a metaphor and it is given life by using the word 'stamp'. Actually the word 'stamp' requires an animate subject. In fact metaphor is the most essential ornament of poetry. It is the only thing that matters much in poetry.

(5) Dialectal Deviation

The writers and poets want to write in a generally accepted and understood dialect. This is known as 'standard English'. But poets can deviate from it for a number of purposes. Sometimes poets use their regional dialect just to give their

poem the touch of rustic atmosphere.

(6) Deviation of Register

In modern poetry there is a poetic licence in regard to register. The modern poets use non-poetic register. For example:

Ah, were I courageous enough
 To start stuff your pension.
 But I know all too well that's the stuff
 That dreams are made on.

Sometimes registers are borrowed and later on they are mixed:

The nymphs are departed,
 departed, have left no addresses.

(7) Deviation of Historical Period

The poet is not restricted to the language of his period but he can use the language used in the past by some great poets. The Renaissance poets used words of Latin origin. For example:

Milton's: inspiring - breathing in.
 Bush with frizzl'd hair implicit entwined etc.

Archism is the use of language of the past which the poet may employ and thus deviate from his period. In poetry archaic words are used like thou, dost, damsels, watery store, nymph, slumbering etc. Archaism can occur elsewhere. The word 'hereinafter' is used in legal English and 'thou' is used in religious English. But literary archaism is different because it has its own dignity and solemnity, and this dignity and

solemnity come from noble literary achievements of past. Archaism also gives us a sense of cultural continuity. Archaism is a special role of the poetic language and might be a register peculiar to poetry.

(8) Stylistic Deviation

Sometimes poets use language of casual conversation:

*Sometimes you hear, fifth hand
As epitaph:
He chucked up everything
And just cleared off.
And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying
Elemental move.*

[Philip Larkin: Poetry of Departure]

(9) Graphological Deviation

Sometimes poets spell the words to represent pronunciation. This is strange. This strangeness of pronunciation is reflected in strangeness of written form. For example:

*my sweet old etcetera
aunt lucy during the recent
war could and what
is more did tell you just
what everybody was fighting.*

[e.e. Cummings]

Here Cummings ignored capitalizing initial letters and punctuation.

It is not permissible in prose.

Susan Ramsaran¹² in her article, 'Poetry in Language classroom' points out that phonological deviation is the most concrete, lexical, syntactic and semantic deviations are most abstract. Graphological deviation is of minor importance. Stylistic deviation may affect any of these deviations.

Deliberate literary deviation is taken as an evidence of more than common mastery. Then the question that persists is - Is the deviation from the rules of the linguistic system necessary or sufficient condition for poetic effect?

It must be stated that deviation from linguistic system is not a necessary or sufficient condition for poetic effect. Then for what are these literary deviations used by the poets? What is the purpose of deviation?

Alex Rodger answers this question by saying that the creative writers produce linguistic messages which, by their very nature, stand out prominently against the readers' background awareness of what is both communicatively conventional and linguistically normal non-literary discourse. The unusually effective writings of poets, novelists and playwrights are thus 'foregrounded' against the familiar banalities of everyday language use and so draw our attention first to themselves and thence to the unusual meanings they convey.

The peculiar convergent system of poetic expression functions

to realize speech acts which cannot occur in normal discourse.

A summons to someone who has no existence:- Come into the garden, Maud.

An identification which has nothing to identify:- That's my last Duchess painted on the wall. Words which carry with them their ordinary language meanings together with the association that surrounds them appear as a part of an unfamiliar pattern in poems, dissociated from the company they would normally keep; and thus strangeness of beauty is created. Thus dissociation of sensibility based on 'dissociation of sense' by displacement of context is what the poetic process wants to achieve. With this deliberate act of artistry poets can achieve a particular meaning.

Overall View of Poetry

In the foregoing sections we have discussed the traditional and modern views of poetry, separating the two for the sake of convenience. However, it is clear that there is no contradiction between the two. It may be useful now to sum up the views in a more realistic way. This may best be done by turning to scholars who have concerned themselves with the teaching of literature especially to second language learners.

Keith Jones¹³ in his article, 'On the Goals of a Reading Programme for Students of English as a Foreign Language' has noted what

he calls poetic conventions. They are as follows:

(1) The Musical Convention

In poetry signifiers may be chosen for their fugal value, for the way they echo and modulate the sound values of other signifiers.

(2) The Animacy Convention

In poetry all signified are potentially carriers of consciousness, animate and articulate so that stones speak to us as easily as Truth and tin drums, dragons and hawks.

(3) The Significance Convention

In poetry all signs that denote physical entities may be read as cues
| connoting moral values.

(4) The Coherence Convention

In poetry the linear sequence is motivated, juxtapositions are meant, no sign is redundant and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

(5) The Plurality Convention

In poetry signs can be unpacked for the senses they connote and the associations they inspire. They offer journeys.

(6) The Literal Convention

In poetry all signifieds that may appear not to inhibit our everyday world may be read literally so that what changes in meaning is not words but the world. Poems make possible worlds.

(7) The Ellipsis Convention

In poetry what can be inferred may be omitted so that for wholes we may be given parts, for agents instruments, for the thing compared the comparison.

From these conventions certain rhetorical tropes draw their values. Synecdoche which is a part of a whole and metonymy which is an agent for instrument are resources enabling the practice of the convention of ellipsis, while phonological scheme, chiming, onomatopoea may realize the musical convention. Here alliteration, rhyme play an important role in creating music in poetry. Forexample: Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls [Tennyson: Come Into The Garden Maud].

Musicality is the essence of poetry not of prose. To enhance music in poetry poets use alliteration and they imitate natural sounds. This onomatopoeic use is the speciality of poetry. For example:

With a quack quack here and a quack quack there

Here a quack there a quack everywhere a quack quack.

[by Old MacDougall]

Marjorie Boulton remarks, "rhythm helps a great deal in supporting the meaning of the world of a poem. The rhyme scheme of a poem plays a part in its emotional effect not generally so great a part as the rhythm. The repetition of a verse form is the part of symmetry of a poem.

Poetry is a metrical composition in which music pervades. Metres play an important role in poetry. Rhythm is created in poetry

out of metrical composition.

Marjorie Boulton points out,

The function of basic metre is to provide a regular undercurrent, a kind of pulse-beat of the poem over which the interesting variations are heard. Unless we recognise the basic metre by ear at least, not necessarily by name, we cannot appreciate the variations. What happens when we hear a poem and like the rhythm is that we quickly (probably after the first line) learn to expect a repetition of this pattern, we keep receiving small shocks of different kinds which are pleasurable ... variations in poetry fulfil a function much like that of counterpoint in music.

She points out that the rhythms of poetry are not a matter of tapping mechanically on a desk or counting syllables on our finger. Certain ambiguity of rhythm is one of the beauties of a poem. Metaphor may realize the convention of animacy, significance and plurality as well.

Keith Jones remarks:

These conventions of music, animacy, significance, coherence, plurality, literal and ellipsis are crucial in that they constitute the ground rules of the actual language game of literary interpretation and the tropes are critical in that they constitute many of the moves in the special language game that is literary activity. But whereas conventions could be said jointly to delimit the game of reading poetry the tropes are probably prevalent or often recurring

in most discourse.

The difficulty in understanding poetry arises mainly because it has the troublesome ambiguity and some absurdities like 'paradox' and 'oxymoron'. For example:

The child is father of the man

[An example of an ambiguity: Wordsworth]

My male grandmother - Oxymoron

The lie is true - Paradox.

According to Leech, "Poetry is a variety of nonsense to the chronologically literal minded. The difference between gibberish and metaphorical truth may depend on the leap the imagination is prepared to take in order to render meaningful what is apparently absurd.

From the foregoing discussion of poetic discourse or language of poetry we can say that poetic language has the following features:

- (1) The language of poetic discourse or literary discourse is often deviant and thereby creates strangeness of ideas. It has a unique language system in which regularities of 'langue' and 'parole' come towards each other and meet at a point.
- (2) Linguistic paradoxes in poetry are not based on the primordial characteristics of arbitrariness and linearity.
- (3) No other use of language is capable of expressing what poetry expresses.

- (4) Foregrounded nature of poetry draws our attention first to familiar banalities of everyday language use and after it to the unusual meanings they convey.
- (5) There are certain conventions like Musicality, Animacy, Significance, Coherence, Plurality, Literal and Ellipsis conventions.
- (6) There are certain tropes like synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor which are very prevalent or often recurring in poetry.
- (7) Archaism has a special role in poetic language. Archaism is poetic language heightened.
- (8) Parallelism and repetition are aspects of poetic language which relate themselves to music.
- (9) Musicality is a basic ingredient of poetry. Patterns of rhyme, alliteration, refrains, symmetries of logic predominate poetry.
- (10) Poetry is more ambiguous and very often uses paradoxes. It is a figurative discourse.

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