Lexical Patterning in Poetic Text:
Analyzing Literary Style

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Abstract

Since poetic text is completely detached from the external world, it creates a "context of situation" (Halliday, 1985) for itself through special patterning of its own lexis. This study investigates how the lexicalization strategies make the nature of poetic texts so distinctive from other modes of language. Among all linguistic elements illustrating special patterning in poetic texts, this study focuses on the way the field diversity leads the reader to negotiate a meaning which requires more processing time, effort and attention; consequently, rendering it more enjoyable in nature and hence of aesthetically higher value. The purpose is to investigate the relationship between "the higher degree of semantic field diversity compared with semantic field lexical density" in a poetic text and "the aesthetic effect" of that text. To achieve this goal, twenty poetic texts with an already-established literary and aesthetic value are analyzed in terms of lexical items and their relationships to one another based on "sense relations" model proposed by Hasan (1990); then they are organized into relevant semantic fields. The inferential statistics (Chi-square test) is employed to analyze the resulting data, and the result proves the existence of such a special patterning in a significant way.

Key Terms: Semantic Field/Lexical Field, Semantic Field Diversity, Semantic Field Lexical Density, Aesthetic Effect

Introduction

This paper attempts to unravel the lexical organization of the poetic texts and the way it creates the aesthetic effect. It first deals with the characterization of literary discourse in general and poetic discourse in particular. It then investigates the nature of lexical relations or cohesion in poetic texts and argues how the semantic space lying between the words and a lack of coherent connection in the arrangement of lexical items form verbal imaginary in poetry. Such semantic distance is defined then in terms of multiple semantic fields which lack enough density associated with the non-literary text. To support the existence of this special patterning in the end, a few poetic texts are examined semantically and the inferential statistics is used to validate the hypothesis.

1. Cline of literariness: Towards a new definition of literary competence

In making a distinction between literary and non-literary texts, two positions adopted by essentialists and conventionalists are rejected as being too extremists. While the former characterizes literature in terms of those inherent and exclusive features which make its language distinguished from other forms of communication and assigns to it a separate grammar, the latter regards literature as what one reads and interprets as literature. A discoursal approach toward literature considers a literary effect to be the result of special patterning of language patterns (Hasan, 1985). This mode of patterning and the degree of it differ from text to text. As a result, stylistic studies prefer to adopt a scale along which they will arrange different literary works rather than making a clear-cut dichotomy.

Widdowson (1983) distinguishes literary form non-literary discourse with refer to his classification of "systemic" and "schematic" knowledge. Systemic knowledge is introduced by Widdowson as a kind of knowledge which operates at the level of language system and is limited to rules of grammar. But the latter is defined as the knowledge of contextual meaning. He argues that in conventional discourse, we rely on schematic knowledge. It means that

when we receive the information, we develop a set of expectations with reference to our "schemata" or "frames of reference" to which we try to converge symbolic meaning. But since literary discourse is dislocated from an immediate social context, there exists no conventional schemata. Consequently we have to create our own literary schemata through a specific patterning of linguistic items. This linguistic organization is over and beyond the code structure; in other words, it is superimposed upon normal linguistic organization.

More specifically, Carter (1997) proposes some criteria which enables us to specify one text to be more or less literary than another. These criteria are defined at six levels: medium-dependence, re-registration, semantic density produced by interaction of linguistic levels, displaced interaction, polysemy and discourse processing. Among these, semantic density which tends to be closely connected with the purpose of the present study is introduced as having the utmost importance of defining criteria. Semantic density determines the degree of literariness based on the degree of interaction of language patterns at the levels of syntax, lexis, phonology and discourse. In this regard, carter also develops the notion of "contrast" as literary phenomena which occur whenever a predominant pattern makes contrast with an almost equally pre-established one. Multiple interaction of language levels, particularly in the form of contrast results in the representation of a meaning symbolically in a way that the reader will activate more than one meaning in making relations between linguistic forms and semantic functions.

The development of the concept of language as "social Semiotic System" by Halliday (1978) was a great achievement since it provided a systematic account of the way language reflects aspects of the situation in which it occurs. This means that particular situational aspects are reflected in the linguistic choices made by the participants in those situations. As such, context precedes text, i.e. the situation is prior to the discourse that relates to it. In this way our understanding of the meaning of a text depends on the predictions we make from those aspects of context, i.e. what is going on (field) and who are taking part in discourse (tenor) help us to understand the special meaning achieved by means of language. As language users we use the information provided by field and tenor of discourse in order to comprehend linguistic choices. Thus language competence can be defined as the ability to process language from event dimension to linguistic dimension.

In literary discourse, there is no pre-established context of situation, and no frame of reference based on which we could understand situational meaning. In fact it is the linguistic choices which create their own context. So the processing of literary language moves in thedirection opposite to that of conventional discourse. Put it another way, literary competence can be defined as the ability to process language from text dimension to event dimension. Like others, to establish a criterion for making distinction between literature and non-literature, we can claim that the more we rely on text for making predictions on situated meaning, the more literary the text will be.

2. Poetry: A discoursal view

If we define poetry in terms of its specific phonological, syntactic and/or semantic relations, we have confined it to the boundary of a text. Such a view suggests that poetry is the end product of exploiting all these patterns by the poet. And the reader encounters this end product, reads it and may adopt a kind of cognitive or aesthetic effect. But since high attention is given to the function performed by poetic genre, it is necessary to go beyond text dimension and consider poetry as discourse.

Verdonk (1991) defines a poem's discourse as a contextual and interpersonal activity with the purpose of transmitting a literary message from the author to the reader. In other words, the poet's text becomes a meaningful discourse when the reader reads it and builds up interpersonal and sociocultural context around it. In the dynamic communicative process between the author and the reader, the linguistic structures act as impulses which fulfill or frustrate the reader's expectations so that the reader's emotions continuously change.

There is no unanimous description of the nature of poetry since it avoids any norms which confine it to a single interpretation. In other words, everybody preserves one's individuality in its interpretation by adopting one's own impressions and attitudes. While taking this unconventional character of poetic text into consideration, several stylisticians propose some features for poetry though they lay themselves open to more discussion and controversy.

2.1. Poetry as representational mode of meaning

This feature can be regarded as the most striking and determinant characteristic of poetry, since other features are subsequently extracted from it. Poetry is supposed to represent a separate reality from ordinary world, while in common communication language is used to refer to the external world and the context with which the reader has enough experience and familiarity; and based on it he develops his schematic knowledge. Hence, in ordinary communication, linguistic code acts as indices which direct one to extra linguistic contextual factors in order to get out relevant information (Widdowson, 1990).

The absence of a conventional world based on which the reader of a poetic text could make predictions for its understanding necessitates that the language of poetry replaces its referential and indexical role by a representational one in which it creates its own potential context. To construct such a context, the poet establishes a set of new conventions which violate the norms of standard language. Representation of meaning in this way lays the foundation for developing a local schematic knowledge.

2.2. Poetry and infinite interpretations

Poetry is open to endless interpretations. In fact, the meaning of a poem changes not only from reader to reader, but also from reading to reading, i.e. every time one reads the same poem, he/she perceives its message differently, consequently receives a new effect.

The multiplicity of interpretations of a poetic utterance can be traced back to the volatile nature of the relationship between form and meaning in poetry. Put it differently, by increasing the degree of indeterminacy, the conventionality decreases, and relativity of meaning will increase. By reducing the meaning of a poem into a precise interpretation, we assign it an indexical role in which some linguistic signs refer to a conventionalized pre-established meaning. Denying contextual interpretation, Widdowson (1992) regards the interpretation of poetry as being textual, contributing to representational meaning.

2.3. Poetry as deviated discourse

As mentioned earlier, the very existence of poetry depends on representing some aspects of reality in a new way and creating new images of reality which do not exist outside the language. In fact, the way an ordinary subject is represented in an unfamiliar way produces the aesthetic effect of poetry, not the subject matter itself. To this end, the poet enjoys freedom of pre-established norms of language, i.e. the conventional restrictions which exist at different levels of language including lexical, grammatical and semantic and even discourse (Widdowson, 1992).

To justify the discourse of the poetry to be deviated, it should be argued that since the communicative situation of a poem is completely detached from usual process of social interaction, those shared social conventions accepted by participants involved in normal communication are disobeyed in the context of poetry. Furthermore, the co-operative principles for effective communication are not observed (Widdowson, 1975). Such an apparent contradiction can be claimed to result in lack of clarity; however, destroying the existing order, the poem creates another one at the same time. This new order of patterning contributes to "maximum coherence" which is regarded to be as another feature of poetry.

2.4. Poetry as a maximally coherent mode of language

As discussed before, the contextual detachment of a poem results in the creation of an imaginary internal context which is peculiar to that poem. In representing such a context, everything violates common-place conventional order. Although these elements lose their referential stability in real world, they gain their value within the boundary of the poem through their close interrelationship. In other words, every single element, whether linguistic or not, contributes to its total meaning. According to Widdowson(1992:24), "In denying one kind of regularity, the poem asserts its own".

In this regard, linguistic patterns across all phonological, lexical, grammatical and graphological levels consistently realize semantic unity of the poem. Concerning phonological level, one can refer to meter and rhyme as two prosodic patterns which

contribute to this coherence. More strikingly, lexical items contribute to creating the context of the poem through their association with each other. Put it another way, the value of every lexical item cannot be specified without referring to its neighboring words. The patterning of syntactic structures in equivalent patterns can also suggest some common semantic features of the poem. As a graphological element, vertical arrangement of the poem makes it significantly coherent, since it develops equivalent structures in terms of meter and syntax. In sum, this kind of patterning of language patterns is so influential in the representation of meaning that if it changes, the meaning will be reflected differently.

The concept of maximum coherence as used here has been emphasized by many stylisticians, although they give it different titles such as: cohesion of foregrounding (Leech,1969); consistency of foregrounding (Hasan, 1971,1985); motivated foregrounding (Halliday, 1971); semantic drift (Butt, 1988b); independent coherence (Widdowson, 1992); and literary coherence (Lotfipour, 1992).

3. Lexical organization of poetry

Among all linguistic devices discussed earlier as contributing to "maximal coherence" of a poetic text, lexical patterns appear to play a considerably important role.

Every lexical item, according to Cummings and Simmons (1983), contributes to produce images in poetry, either directly or in an oblique manner. Once an image has been established in a poem, all lexical items in the poem may probably be applied to it by extending their meaning metaphorically. Even those lexical items which seems apparently unrelated to the established images can be attributed the role of creating more images for the purpose of making the experience of the poem more complex. In this regard, strings of related lexis in a poem can help the reader to understand how the poem creates and co-ordinates different levels of imagery, in order to convey the sense of an experience. In fact, to get the reader involved in the experiencing of the same emotional, intellectual and intuitional senses, the poet uses words for the purpose of suggesting various contexts in a way that the reader enters his experience:

Confused as to which is meant, knowing somehow that all are meant, but also that none are exactly meant, the reader can resolve his problem only by extending the writer's experience…By comprehending poet's many suggested contexts, we may enter his visions. In the interplay of these different contexts, we are able to recreate the poet's experience (Cummings and Simmons, 1983:172).

As such, any single lexical item or a group of related items may produce a context in poetry. Each context created in this way gets the reader involved in a momentary experience of poet's state. The nearly created context contrasts or combines with other contexts. This sort of shift of contexts creates an "aesthetic view" of poetry. This view sees poetry as an abstract experience of language in which rapid shifts of contexts, helped by the movement of sound and grammar, do not give the reader an impression, but a series of experiences (Cummings and Simmons, 1983). This ambivalence which is generated by either a single word or some lexical patterns spanning the whole poem, allows the reader to shift from an obvious reference to some kind of fact to a disguised reference to a state of feeling (Nash, 1993).

3.1. Lexical cohesion in poetic text

What is called a lexical pattern is equivalent to lexical cohesion as developed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Lexical cohesion can be found between content words or lexical items which may be in three sense relations to one another, generally recognized as synonymy, antonymy, meronymy and repetition. Added to grammatical cohesive devices, lexical relations make a text cohere or hang together intersententially. Exemplifying this issue, a brief text from a computer manual has been provided here:

Example1.

WordPerfect is a computer program, a set of instructions that tells your computer how to act. Like all programs, WordPerfect must be purchased separately and installed in your computer before you can use it.

In this text lexical cohesion is achieved by "WordPerfect", "computer program", " set of instructions", "computer", " programs", 'WordPerfect', and "computer". One will notice that the lexical items in this text are closely related either through exact repetition or simple variation (computer program, set of instructions). Evidently, lexical relations appear to have some psychological validity because we expect a manual to be highly cohesive, that is, very much to the point. However, at the other end of the scale, this expectancy is completely violated in poetry. Here the reader is surprised by a wide variety of "loaded" lexical items suggesting a rich imagery (Verdonk, 1993). The overall effect will then be of a lack of coherent connection, a certain incongruity as words from different contexts of use sit alongside one another. This overall discontinuity and lack of clear pattern and harmony between words create a heterogeneous order. It is called order, since this generation allows different lexical layers to coexist and be exploited for creative purposes (Carter, 1993). To demonstrate the way in which lexical items associate in the context of a poem to realize a final, higher-order context, an example has been taken from Frost's poem. Both the poem and the elaboration on it have been cited from Widdowson (1975: 38-39).

Example 2.

"Dust of Snow"

The way a crow

Shook down on me

The dust of snow

From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart

A change of mood

And saved some part

Of a day I had rued.

It can be observed that at first sight, this poem represents different discrete contexts each developed by lexical items such as "dust", "snow", "crow" and "hemlock tree". In the context of the poem, however, the item "crow" links with the item "hemlock tree", because the crow is a black bird feeding on corpses and the hemlock tree is poisonous and these features are associated with death. In association with them, the value of dust is specified as it is employed in burial service "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust". The association of these lexical items in this context has the effect of activating those semantic features in their signification which have a common point of reference. Thus the value of each of these lexical items lies in its composite character which represents a reconciling of code and context relations (both the example and its analysis is from Widdowson, 1975).

From the above example, it becomes clear how the apparently unrelated contexts have been unified through the interplay existing among different layers of the poem's lexis. In order to overcome this kind of unpredictable divergence and convert it to a comprehensible convergence, the reader will become involved in a prolonged process of perception in order to unify denotatively disparate, but connotatively interwoven lexical items. And this will result in "aesthetic effect", a sense of enjoyment experienced by the reader.

Form all these discussions, it becomes evident that the existence of such a thing as "literary lexis" can be denied in poetic texts, but quite contrary the company a word keeps, i.e. lexical patterning is the main issue. As a matter of fact, it is often the semantic space that lies between words, rather than the properties that inhere in the words themselves, which forms the core of verbal imagery in poetry (Simpson, 1997). Such a semantic distance then will result in the representation of many fields of meaning in poetic texts. As have become clear from the example for "manual instruction", usually in technical writing the words refer to a specific context, i.e. they are highly clustered. As a result, the field of meaning will be highly defined. Confirming this concept, Cummings and Simmons (1983) believe that contrary to technical writing which represents high density of semantic fields, poetic texts refer to many fields simultaneously.

Then one can conclude that: more complexly and/or more elegantly organized than their non-poetic equivalents, poetic texts adopt special patterning of lexical patterns in order to function properly, i.e. producing aesthetic effect. The final remarks here revealed that this special

patterning appears in the arrangement of lexical items of poetic texts into different semantic fields.

The objective of the present study is, then, to consider the following question: "Is the higher degree of semantic field diversity compared with its lexical density" in a poetic text and "the aesthetic effect" of that text are related?

4. Methodology

4.1. Sampling method

Since the aim was to make generalizations about the nature of poetic texts in terms of their literary effect, it was imperative to avoid any bias in the selection of material used in empirical testing of the hypothesis, and to make it as representative as possible. On the other hand, it was practically beyond the scope of this research to measure the poetic effect of the texts in terms of reader responses. This limitation led to the decision to use poetry texts whose literary character has already been validated. To this end, it was decided to use poems by major poets in the English language.

Amongst various types of poem, lyrical poems were selected because of their average length and high poetic value. The decision to choose this type of poetry as subject of the study may be defended from a theoretical perspective. According to Carter (1993), long poems and especially narrative poems behave like prose, because they tend to belong to other marked genres and language varieties, and so represent a less pure game of lexical patterning. Another justification for this selection is concerned with the difficulty of working with very long poems because of the large amount of time needed for preparing their analyses.

Within the confines outlined, a random selection of poems was made with one guiding principle in mind, to provide as wide a variety of texts as possible. For this purpose, twenty major American and British poets of lyrical poems from 17th to 20th century were identified, and then twenty poems written by them were selected randomly.

4.2. Design of the study

To achieve the purpose of the study, twenty poetic texts were analyzed in terms of lexical items and their relationships to one another. From the investigation of these items interrelationships, different semantic fields were organized respectively. Two categories were then recognized based on lexical analysis of the text: the multiplicity of semantic fields known as Semantic Field Diversity (SFD_i), and the Lexical Density of the same semantic fields ($SFLD_e$). The aim was then to observe whether there is any relationship between these patterns and the literary effect of the poems.

To test whether a poem's SFD_i is higher than $SFLD_e$, first the diversity and lexical density of the semantic fields in every poem were computed, and then the frequency of such difference in all the texts was calculated. Since the variables of this study are nominal in nature, Chi-square test (Hatch and Farhady, 1981) was used later to measure the significance of the frequency of this difference in all poems. In order to make a vivid picture of the design, Figure 4.1 illustrates the relationship between the variables.
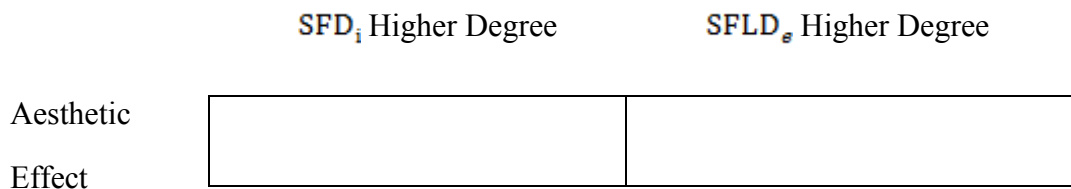
SFD_i Higher Degree $SFLD_e$ Higher Degree

Aesthetic

Effect

Figure 4.1. Design of the study

4.3. Data collection procedure

To conduct the study, first the randomly selected poems were read by the researcher, while the focus of attention was on lexical items. Amongst all lexical tokens belonging to a poem, just those units defined as "noun groups" were specified, since they usually constitute the founding stone of an image.

In the next step, without being involved in the interpretation of the poem, i.e. irrespective of the same theme of the text, the specified lexical items were classified and organized into

different lexical field or semantic fields. Different kinds of the relationship between the lexical members belonging to the same field of meaning were considered the same "sense relations", such as "synonymy", "antonymy" as well as "meronymy" and "mere repetition". In the same way all poems were analyzed according to their lexical interrelations which were consequently organized into relevant semantic fields.

4.4. Data analysis and results

The first step to test the hypothesis was to compute the diversity and lexical density of semantic fields in each poem. For lexical diversity the total number of semantic fields created out of either a single lexical item or lexical sets was calculated:

$$\text{SFD}_i = \text{Total number of semantic fields}$$

Concerning lexical density of each semantic field, the ratio of its constituent words to the total number of words in the text was counted and finally expressed as a percentage:

$$\text{SFLD}_e = \frac{\text{Lexical items belonging to each semantic field}}{\text{Total number of words}} \times 100$$

This procedure was applied to all semantic fields of the poem individually, and then their average was figured out:

$$\bar{x}\,\text{SFLD}_e = \frac{\sum \text{lexical density of semantic fields}}{\text{number of semantic fields}}$$

The same calculations were followed for all poems. Since the study was supposed to show the "higher degree of SFD_i compared with SFLD_e", all the poems were examined for this difference. The results are represented in table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Descriptive Results of Data Analysis

Text Number	SFD_i	$SFLD_e$
1	19	1.23
2	10	2.45
3	16	1.96
4	15	1.72
5	16	2.01
6	17	1.46
7	10	2.80
8	6	2.85
9	15	1.78
10	15	1.60
11	10	2.29
12	14	5.78
13	18	1.22
14	9	1.72
15	15	1.10
16	20	1.0
17	9	3.21
18	11	1.78
19	22	1.07
20	7	2.84

All twenty poems represented the higher degree of SFD_i compared with $SFLD_e$ as illustrated in table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Descriptive Results of the Study

	SFD$_i$ Higher Degree	SFLD$_e$ Higher Degree
Aesthetic effect	20	0

In order to test its statistical significance, the data were analyzed through one-way Chi-square test:

$$x^2{}_{obs} = \sum \frac{(f_0 - f_E)^2}{f_E}$$

Where:

$$x^2{}_{obs} = Chi - square$$

$$\sum = \text{Sum}$$

$$f_o = Observed\ frequency$$

f_E =Expected frequency (the frequencies that would be expected by chance)

To be more conservative, the probability level was considered .01. Since the study was one-way and therefore the d.f. (degree of freedom) is 1, it was necessary to correct the estimate, so that it could fit the x^2 distributed for d.f.'s over 1. After all the data can be illustrated as follow (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3. Calculating x^2 for the results in table ghabli

	Observed f	Expected f	0- E	$(0-E)^2$	$(0-E)^{2/E}$
SFD_i Higher Degre	+19.5	10	+9.5	90.25	9.02
$SFLD_e$ Higher Degree	+0.5	10	-9.5	90.25	9.02
					18.04*
p<.01					

According to the table of critical value of x^2 (Hatch and Farhay, 1981: 278 − 279), the critical value of x^2 with 1 d.f. is 6.63 for the .01. So the observed value of x^2 in this study significantly exceeds.

4.5. Discussion

The hypothesis is stated that the higher degree of semantic field diversity compared with its lexical density in a poetic text is related to the aesthetic effect of that text. By the text analysis, frequency counting and statistical calculations, it was found that such a relationship exists. As stated in the sampling section of the chapter, selected poems had an already-established literary value, having been written by poets whose literary qualities are undeniable. As such, it can be claimed that validated poems in the sense of "aesthetic effect" have significantly represented such a lexical pattern in their texture. Put it another way, the higher degree of SFD_i compared with $SFLD_e$ is considerably related to the special lexical patterning of poetic texts and consequently their produced aesthetic effect. In fact, such a patterning suggests many contexts in poetic texts, while each context gets the reader involved in a momentary experience of poet's state. The rapid shifts of these contexts helped by the movement of sound and grammar do not give the reader an impression, but a series of experiences in a way in which he/she will be able to construct meaning, and consequently adopt an aesthetic view towards poetic texts (Cummings and Simmons, 1983).

5. Conclusion: end of the beginning

Poetry achieves its high value because of the very special and unique nature of strategies adopted by its authors. The most important strategy in poetry is the "representation" of a separate reality from the conventional world. It is this isolation from an external context that makes poetry the formal art of language. In this way the poem generates its own imaginary world not only by making original use of the established possibilities, but also through creating new communicative possibilities. Being completely detached from the external world, poetry possesses just one particular context which is provided by special patterning of its own lexis.

As image-creating elements, lexical patterns in a poem create a series of contexts or immediate situations which are conventional to the code. The poem makes both novel and wide use of lexical resources in order to enrich the imaginary potential of the text. As such, the poem brings words from disparate collocational ranges together and consequently distorts the accepted structure of language. Put it in simple words, the semantic distance existing among different lexical items in a poem contributes to the appearance of multiple referential contexts in terms of lexical fields. The sudden shift of these various contexts without being defined adequately violates the expectancy of the reader for receiving a single picture with sufficient elaborations on it, as it is the case with non-literary texts, thus keeping him/her in a state of suspension. To overcome this heterogeneity, the reader will be involved in a long and difficult process of perceiving these divergent images, trying to integrate them into a convergent whole, a higher-order context which is usually recognized as the "theme" of the poem. In fact, this type of "deviation" is not random, but discoursely motivated to enforce the reader to go beyond as mere perceiving of the text to the active processing of the discourse. Going through this long and difficult process of interpretation is in itself a part of the literary effect:

> The act of perception in art is an end in itself and must be prolonged. In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product (Shklovsky, 1965:80).

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Being affected by the unifying role of other poetic devices, the reader will be able to construct the represented meaning in a new way, which gives him lots of pleasure and enjoyment.

This study tried to illustrate how poetry produces an aesthetic effect by dispersing meaning and devouring ideas through special lexical choices. It did not aim at describing the literary effect produced by a poem, but just intended to identify precisely the cause in the text and explain how, why and where this effect comes from. As a last word, we claim that not more than a start has been made here on the enriching, inspiring and mysterious world of poetry. But we are already in a position to claim that "We cannot understand the aesthetic effect of poetry without recognizing what kind of discourse it is, and the nature of its deviance from normal language" (Widdowson, 1984:149).

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