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# POETIC SYNTAX: MEANING@STRUCTURE

**Armela PANAJOTI**[1]

***Abstract:*** *Poetry is recognizable to readers for its use of certain effects achieved through linguistic "manipulation." In most cases, especially in the case of contemporary poetry, these effects are obtained not through particular word choices or striking literary devices, but through specific syntactic constructions.*
*This paper will focus on poetic syntax by viewing it as the "bone" that holds meaning in poetry. It will not be simply an attempt to revisit poetic syntax, but a demonstration of the importance syntax, as representative of the grammatical structure of poetry, has on meaning. Most poetic effects are achieved through the use of certain syntactic structures. Examples of attempts to undo the original syntactic structures of some poems and adjust them to new syntactic structures will be brought here to suggest that a change of syntactic structure brings about a change of meaning.*

***Key words:*** *poetic syntax, syntactic structure, meaning, text, authorship.*

## 1. Introduction

Unlike other literary forms, poetry is immediately recognizable to readers for its organization and use of effects achieved through linguistic "manipulation." As such, it has been at the focus of literary studies for a long time since the very beginnings of literary theory with the Russian formalism. The formalists wanted to account for what Roman Jakobson (1981) called "literariness" (*literaturnost*). In dealing with it they focused particularly on poetry, exactly for the fact that poetry appeals more to the literary due to its form and language. This would later lead Jakobson to argue about the domination of the poetic function in poetry. In accounting for Jakobson's "poeticalness" or "poeticity", as some would translate it, most studies have focused on diction as the most important aspect which makes the language of poetry so special and gives way to literary devices and other poetic techniques. Nevertheless, in many cases, especially in the case of contemporary poetry, these effects are obtained not through particular word choices or striking literary devices, but through syntax[i].

Many have already recognized the importance grammar, more particularly syntax, has on poetry. But the focus has been rather broad and things have been put mainly generally or described in the

[1] University of Vlora, „Ismail Qemali", Albania.

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framework of poetic language. In "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry" Jakobson already argues in favour of grammar as contributing to what makes poetry different from other forms of discourse: "A difference in grammatical concepts does not necessarily represent a difference in the state of affairs referred to. […] Only *the way of presentation* differs." (1981: 88; emphasis added)

Other scholars (Austin 1984, Cureton 1997) have also attempted to build up a theory of poetic syntax. Still, none of these studies have exhausted the concern with poetic language and more particularly with poetic syntax. I tend to believe that the importance poetic syntax has for conveying meaning to the reader is far greater than what it has already been studied. Recent studies in this area also suggest new implications for poetic syntax by relating it with aspects of discourse. Thus Thoms (2008) and Fabb (2010) have added a new dimension to this discussion, the cognitive pragmatic, by viewing poetic syntax within the framework of relevance theory. According to them, poetic syntax, with its instances of deviation, deviance[ii] or "impossible grammar[iii]", as Thoms (2008) prefers to call it, offers new insights in this respect.

In this paper[iv], I focus on the syntax of poetry as a crucial element that sustains meaning and makes possible the negotiations between the reader, the author and the text. Shira Wolosky (2001: 28) compares poetic syntax to the bones, thus considering it an "understructure holding together the poem as its more enticing imagery or logic or composition or melodious language unfolds." I will depart from this last remark to make headway with my arguments which aim at pointing to the idea of syntax as a structure that sustains meaning. This view obviously does not dismiss the importance of other elements which make up a poem and therefore its meaning, but it is an attempt to reevaluate the importance of syntax in the study and appreciation of poetry, for as Cureton (in progress) puts it: "syntactic choices in poetry are thematized and therefore participate centrally in articulating a poem's defining metaphysical, psychological, and historical commitments."

Attempts to study poetic syntax have been hovering between two camps, the linguists' and the stylists'. As I mentioned before, many of them have come up with theories of poetic syntax. Austin (1984) speaks of a linguistic theory of syntax, which is basically an attempt to build up a stylistic theory of poetic syntax operating at three levels, the technical, the perceptual and the interpretative. Cureton (ibid.) speaks of a temporal theory by attempting to relate how poets use syntax with our experience of poetry. But the problem with these theories is as Cureton (ibid.) himself admits it:

> […] the major difficulty is the diversity, fragmentation, and relative isolation of these theories, both from one another and from the structure and effect of other aspects of poetic language. While each of these approaches does not necessarily exclude the other, their basic presuppositions often conflict and there has been no suggestion as to how these conflicts can be resolved.

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In this paper I do not wish to take the perspective of a linguist or of a stylist, but to view the matter in the framework of the reading experience by bringing to the focus of my arguments the three components, which in my view make syntax possible — text, author and reader. I suggest that the three of them can become shifting categories and that a change in one of them affects the whole structure and therefore meaning. Thus I will adopt a structuralist perspective in that I will view syntax as a structure made up of its elements, i.e. the text, the poet and the reader. The whole matter can be seen in terms of "how we read poetry."

The structuralists held that language is a system of signs with all the elements interrelated and interdependent. In this paper I see syntax as a structure, itself part of the larger structure of reading. I consider the process of poetry reading as a larger structure of which poetic syntax is but a part. As it will be shown here, a change of syntax due to a change in authorship will result in syntax (structure) and author (poet, student) as shifting categories. In this paper I do not attempt to provide a theory of poetic syntax but to show how meaning and structure, in this case syntax, are closely linked with each other and how the first owes much to the second to achieve the desired effect and intention. Obviously, in the case of poetry, this organization shows certain peculiarities:

> A poem, like any piece of language, must of course put its words into grammatical order. Yet a poem has particular freedom in the way it constructs its grammar, related to the fact that a poem can give to grammar, as to everything it handles, a special meaning in the patterns and design of the poem. (Wolosky 2001: 4-5)

Below I will attempt to demonstrate how important syntax is for poetry.

## 2. Approaching poetic syntax

To argue about the nature of the relationship between syntax and poetry and more particularly to see how readers respond to it, I will draw on my personal experience in a summer school organized in Maribor, Slovenia, in July 2011 in the framework of a Tempus project. This summer school aimed at addressing issues of teaching literature and cultural courses. I attempted an experiment with a class of international students mainly from Western Balkans countries. The class gave me the opportunity to see at work many concerns held by several approaches to poetic syntax. The international composition of this class was rewarding because I had the possibility to receive different reader responses.

I expect the results obtained to be far-reaching for several reasons:

- There were some 26 students participating in this summer school from 13 universities, three from EU countries (Italy, Germany and Slovenia) and 10 from partner countries from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia).
- The students had been selected from among the best in their courses of study, a fact which in a way ascertained the quality of students in this summer school.

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• Most of them were BA students.
• Most important, as I have already admitted in my report for the summer school (Panajoti 2011), the class was international, which guaranteed the variety of tastes, perceptions and perspectives.

The study was based mainly on observations and discussions. For its purposes, I gave students three tasks:

1) In the first one, I gave them several poems ranging from romantic to contemporary and asked them to identify the syntactic structure of each.
2) Next, I asked them to change the syntactic structure of some other five poems I had selected for them. My selection had been based on several criteria: literary period, syntactic structure of the poem, poet's genre.
3) In this last task I gave them several excerpts of prose texts, mainly newspaper items and fiction and asked them to change them into poetry.

Before carrying on with these tasks I explained to them that our focus would be poetic syntax, recapitulating a few things about syntax and poetic syntax to make sure that everything was clear to them and that they had understood what was required from them to do. I emphasized that the relation syntax bears with the poetic line is very important for the syntactic patterns commonly found in poetry. Thus I provided a list of syntactic patterns (enjambment, lineation, paratactic syntax, hypotactic syntax, "transgression" of syntax[v]) for them to identify in several poems. The poems used for this purpose were Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, a poem that has a lot of instances of enjambment, William Carlos Williams's *The Red Wheelbarrow*, an imagist poem utterly based on lineation for its meaning, William Blake's *The Tyger* to illustrate the use of paratactic syntax, Thomas Hardy's *Hap* for hypotactic syntax and Emily Dickinson's *The Soul Selects her Own Society*, a poem immediately recognizable for the use of sharp dashes, capitalization of nouns and other unusual syntactic patterns to illustrate cases of transgression of syntax.

After we examined the poems, discussed their syntax, tried to make out their meaning and saw how the syntax used reinforced one idea and not another, I asked them to proceed with the second task. For this task we used these poems: Thomas Hardy's *Hap*, Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*, William Carlos Williams's *Après le Bain* and Emily Dickinson's *The Soul Selects her Own Society*. Obviously, for teaching purposes the aim was to give students some language work so that they could develop comparative approach, creative writing and intelligent thinking. For research purposes, the aim was to see how meaning was affected by syntax and how a change in the syntactic structure of the poem would deviate its meaning. Students were asked to work in pairs for some minutes and afterwards to share their versions with the rest of the class. These were reproduced on the board so that we could easily compare the students' versions with the original ones. I must admit here that time could have been a constraint for producing better versions. Nevertheless, I should also add that students responded well and efficiently to the three tasks.

After coming up with several versions, students were asked to decide which one they liked best. To tell the truth, in most

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cases the original version won, with the exception of one poem by William Carlos William, *Après le Bain*, whose syntax students could not easily grasp and when they converted the original syntax into their own syntax, it made meaning more accessible to them.

I will discuss below what happened when the syntactic structure of the poems changed. For illustration, I will refer to examples from two versions produced by two students, one for each of the two poems, namely Thomas Hardy' *Hap* and William Carlos Williams's *Après le Bain*. The full versions produced by the students can be found alongside the original ones in Appendix A.

In Thomas Hardy's *Hap* the first two stanzas read like a conditional sentence, with the first one being the conditional clause and the second the main clause. The meaning of this poem is held by the condition posed in the first stanza. In dealing with this poem, students retained the conditional structure of the poem and dared change particular syntactic structures. Below I have presented some of these changes in one of the versions:

Table 1

| **The original version** | **The student's version** |
|---|---|
| IF but some vengeful god would call to me | If only thee, vengeful God<br>wouldst call me from up the sky, |
| From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,<br>Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,<br>That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!" | if only laugh and say:<br>"You suffering poor thing, do you know<br>that your sorrow is<br>my ecstasy? Do you know<br>that your love's loss is<br>My hate's profiting?" |
| But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,<br>And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?<br>--Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,<br>And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan.... | And yet ... How is it that joy arrives slain?<br>and how and why unblooms<br>the best hope ever sown?<br>Crass casualty should not obstruct<br>thy sun and rain,<br>the dicing time should not for gladness<br>cast a moan! |
| These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown<br>Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain. | So how had these purblind doomsters as<br>readily strown blisses about my pilgrimage<br>as pain?<br>And why? |

As it can be noted, besides some changes in some of the words and the preference for more lineation in the poem, the student has generally used a more inquisitive tone by making extensive use of question marks. This obviously changes the fatalistic and pessimistic tone of the poem, a key feature of Hardy's poetry and also changes the meaning of the poem. If Hardy resolves the condition stated in the opening stanza by concluding that it is not god who is to blame for his misfortunes but chance and finally resigns to his destiny, the

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student in his version keeps asking why it should be so.

The meaning of William Carlos Williams's *Après le Bain*, a poem peculiar not only for its syntax but also for its French title lies very much in the structure of the poem. The brackets in particular play a very important role in reading the poem. They are the bracketed thoughts of a husband who dares not speak out his desires, but remains silent and permissive of his wife's whims. This poem draws mainly on lineation, unusual punctuation and one instance of capitalization. These three elements hold the meaning of this poem. Students found it difficult to reconstruct the syntactic structure of this poem and retain the same meaning. They managed to situate the scene of the poem, identify the two characters, but it was difficult for them to represent who was saying what, at least in the manner intended by the poet. Below I have presented some of the changes that occurred in the syntactic structure of the poem in one of the versions.

Table 2

| **The original version** | **The student's version** |
|---|---|
| I gotta<br>buy me a new<br>girdle. | "You gotta<br>buy me a new<br>girdle." |
| (I'll buy<br>you one) O.K.<br>(I wish<br><br>you'd wig-<br>gle that way<br>for me,<br><br>I'd be<br>a happy man) | "OK. I'll buy<br>you one.<br>I wish you'd wiggle that way<br>for me,<br>I'd be a happy man." |
| I GOTTA<br><br>wig-<br>gle for this.<br>(You pig) | "I GOTTA wiggle for this.<br>You pig." |

Thus the syntactic structure has completely changed although the words on the page are almost the same with the exception of the opening pronoun "I", which in the student's version has become "you." The student has changed the structure into a real dialogue and has used inverted commas to represent it. The student has also avoided the sharp lineation used by the poet. The new structure, a reconstruction of the poem in the form of a dialogue between husband and wife, suggests a fair share between them. The wife expresses a wish to which the husband responds in exchange for the completion of his appetites. There is

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complicity between the two. This meaning is not held by the original. The woman proposes to buy the girdle herself and does not demand it from her husband. The husband here appears to be a powerless man/person and the cry "you pig" at the end of the poem is pronounced by him. The brackets and sharp lineation allude to the impotence and hesitation he has even when he is alone with his woman.

For the third task students were given several prose extracts, newspaper items, ads, fiction and so on. They were asked to change their syntactic structure and convert these extracts into poems. In almost all cases they enjoyed the versions produced by them. In some cases they even proved to be entertaining especially when they converted boring news items into nice poems. Students noted that a change in the syntactic structure of the text changed not only the structure of the text but also provided the text with new nuances of meaning. In Appendix B I have provided two reconstructed versions of an extract from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" by two different students. Both versions demonstrate an awareness of poetic syntax on the part of the students. The first student seems to have resorted to lineation to convert the prose extract into poetry, whereas the second has made more use of enjambment.

What resulted from this experiment was that changing and challenging the syntactic structure of well-known poems proved a difficult task for two simple reasons: a) it was not easy to challenge the poet; b) meaning was often lost. Only in the case of William Carlos William's *Après le Bain* did they enjoy the student's version.

On the whole it can be said that students were made aware of the syntactic structure and its relation to meaning. They realized that they could "play" with syntax, in the same way an artist, let's say a painter, plays with colours and in this way creates new scenes and atmospheres. Similarly, they reconstructed the syntax of many well-known poems by making them in most cases easier to access. Each reconstruction of poem meant therefore a reconstruction of meaning. As Wolosky (2001: 17) puts it:

> In a poem, […], there is rather more freedom in word order, and even in word forms than in most other uses of language. This is tied to the fact that in poetry, even the bland, boring orders of syntax become charged with poetic meaning. It may no longer be a matter of subject/verb/object. A poet may reverse this order, in a desire to emphasize, say, the verb.

## 3. Concluding remarks

From the experiment above it can be said that changes of syntax affect meaning because one particular syntactic structure responds to a particular meaning. The analysis of William Carlos William's poem clearly demonstrates this. But how is this change of meaning made possible? As it could be noted, the experiment aimed at three elements, all of them very crucial for the reading experience — the text, the author and the reader. The three of them were not seen as fixed categories, but rather as shifting ones. To demonstrate the shifting quality of each of them, students were given three different tasks.

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In the first task, the students were the readers who had to make out the meaning of certain poems. They identified the syntactic structure of the given poems and argued why that particular structure was important for the poem and for its meaning.

In the second task these same readers were asked to change the syntax of some well-known poems. In the capacity of the poet, the students produced their own syntax, different from the original one and invested with new meaning. Changing the syntax of existing poems was a process of rewriting, of reconstructing. In changing these structures students relied on their own understanding of the poems and resorted to syntactic structures that made poems sound more accessible or direct as in the case of William Carlos Williams's *Après le bain*, which is a very peculiar poem for its syntax. This is a case at issue which reinforces the importance syntax has for a poem, not only for its meaning, but also for its beauty: "Artful syntax may contribute particular effects in a poem, or may serve as the very core of the poem's art" (Wolosky 2001: 20).

In the third task the text was subject to instability. By changing prose to poetry, students produced not only new structures, but also new meanings whose purpose was quite different from the original ones. A news item converted into a poem obviously no longer served as a piece of information, but as an act of cry, appeal or as any other speech act deemed worthy by the poet.

What can finally be said is that poetic syntax resembles a structure, which contains certain elements — the poet, the reader and the text. A change in any of these elements produces new constructions and reconstructions of syntax which give way to new structures, all of which belong to a larger system, that of reading. Thus a change in one of these elements marks a change in meaning. All these elements represent shifting categories and account for meaning making. Once one of them changes, meaning also changes. As Wolosky (2001: 28) puts it:

> Syntax is, finally, integral also to the experience of reading the poem. Syntactic forms not only direct the reader through the poem's word patterns. They underscore how the process of reading itself is part of the poetic experience. Piecing words together, working through patterns, suspending understanding and directing attention, are experiences mediated by the syntax.

Thus, the relation between meaning and structure is one of interdependency and because one particular meaning is framed by one particular structure, the relation between the two electronically reads meaning@structure. Meaning resides in structure. Structure is the domain which shelters meaning.

**Acknowledgement**

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## Notes

[i] By syntax I will simply mean the organization of words into phrases and sentences.

ii "While the effect is more important than the cause, most metaphor begins with some type of syntactic deviance, and because of the close relation between syntax and semantics, almost all creative uses of syntactic deviance have strong semantic effects (e.g., Cureton 1980b, Halliday 1985)." (Cureton, in progress).

[iii] In accounting for certain grammatical forms that defy syntax, Thoms (2008) resolves to call them "impossible" and suggests that they be studied within the framework of relevance theory: "What makes these examples especially important for the study of literary language is that their study is not only deviant, but impossible […]. The fact that such impossible sentences still receive interpretation, and that they are in any way parsed or understood to be 'sentences', requires an explanation, but it should be obvious that any such explanation cannot be linguistic. These forms cannot be explained by poetic grammar."

[iv] For this paper I was actually inspired by Prof. David Crystal's argument in his recent paper, "Language BLANK Literature: from Conjunction to Preposition" presented at the BAS conference in Timisoara in May 2012. In this paper he argued in favour of an intricate relationship between language and literature. The word "blank" capitalized in the title of his presentation was indeed a question about the real nature of the relationship between language and literature. In his talk Prof. Crystal gave several examples of poetry and argued mainly via intonation how language finds itself in literature. Therefore, the questioning "blank" in the title of his paper was in the end replaced by the preposition "at." So, I decided to borrow Prof. Crystal's preposition and use the "@" symbol, so familiar to all of us nowadays, in order to examine the relationship between syntax and poetry and above all to see how readers respond to it.

[v] By transgression of syntax, I simply refer here to violation of those grammar rules commonly known to all of us.

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**Appendix A**

**Examples of students' assignments - Task 2**

Change the syntactic structure of the poem.

| **Hap**<br>*by Thomas Hardy* | **Happening?**<br>*by Tomislav Kiš, University of Maribor, Slovenia* |
|---|---|
| IF but some vengeful god would call to me<br>From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,<br>Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,<br>That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"<br><br>Then would I bear, and clench myself, and die,<br>Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;<br>Half-eased, too, that a Powerfuller than I<br>Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.<br><br>But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,<br>And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?<br>--Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,<br>And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan....<br>These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown<br>Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain. | If only thee, vengeful God<br>wouldst call me from up the sky,<br>if only laugh and say:<br>"You suffering poor thing, do you know<br>that your sorrow is<br>my ecstasy? Do you know<br>that your love's loss is<br>My hate's profiting."<br><br>Then should I bear and clench<br>myself and die, steeled<br>by the sense of shame unmerited.<br>And thus half-eased that a Powerfuller,<br>Mightier than I had willed it<br>and meted me my tears.<br>And yet ... How is it that joy arrives slain?<br>and how and why unblooms<br>the best hope ever sown?<br>Crass casualty should not obstruct<br>thy sun and rain,<br>the dicing time should not for gladness<br>cast a moan!<br><br>So how had these purblind doomsters as<br>readily strown blisses about my pilgrimage<br>as pain?<br>And why? |

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| **Après le Bain**<br>*By William Carlos Williams* | **After the bath**<br>*by Saimir Hyskaj,*<br>*University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Albania* |
|---|---|
| I gotta<br>buy me a new<br>girdle.<br>(I'll buy<br>you one) O.K.<br>(I wish<br><br>you'd wig-<br>gle that way<br>for me,<br><br>I'd be<br>a happy man)<br>I GOTTA<br><br>wig-<br>gle for this.<br>(You pig) | " You gotta<br>buy me a new<br>girdle."<br>"OK. I'll buy<br>you one.<br>I wish you'd wiggle that way<br>for me,<br>I'd be a happy man."<br>"I GOTTA wiggle for this.<br>You pig." |

**Appendix B**

**Examples of students' assignments - Task 3**

Change prose to poetry

*Extract from "The Purloined Letter" by Edgar Allan Poe*

We gave him a hearty welcome, for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as of the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years. We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp; but sat down again, without doing so, upon G`s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble.

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**Students' Versions**

| *Version 1* | *Version 2* |
|---|---|
| **HEARTY Welcome**<br>*by Fatima Topcagic, University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina*<br><br>A HEARTY welcome was given,<br>To him,<br>The man entertaining and forbidden<br>To see,<br>As the distance made us so<br>To be.<br><br>In dark, without any light,<br>We were just sitting and nobody moved,<br>Like we were doomed…<br><br>And THEN…<br><br>A friend of mine<br>Asked us, in just one line,<br>To help him deal with what`s on his mind. | **The end**<br>*by Daniela Angjelkovska, SEEU, Macedonia*<br><br>Sudden knock on the door<br>And there he was,<br>The man to determine our destiny,<br>The man to change our life.<br>He stepped and darkness entered,<br>Dupin tried to break it with the lamp,<br>But 'No', said I, 'Sit still',<br>'Don't you want to just hear?'<br>A whisper and our life was over,<br>There was nothing more to do,<br>We tried, we argued, we struggled and lost,<br>We laid dead and then the lights went on. |

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