

Problems of Perception of Rhythm in English Poetry by Nigerian Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the problems of perception and description of rhythm in English poems by Nigerian undergraduate students. The examination scripts of 200 third-year undergraduate students of English language in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, were scrutinized and their responses to some questions pertaining to rhythm in the stylistics course analyzed. The problems identified in the study include: (a) lack of proper understanding of the concept of rhythm and its application, (b) communication distance between the poet and the analyst and (c) lack of knowledge of relevant poetic conventions, periodic styles and peculiarities and innovations of individual poets. The study concludes that for a proper mastery of the concept of rhythm and its application to take place, students have to learn and understand the essential categories, viz, stress, syllable, foot and metre and also be familiar with some conventional patterns pertaining to the periodic and individual styles in poetic discourse.

Introduction

If you were to ask a final year Nigerian undergraduate student of English language to analyze an English poem freely, the rhythm would most probably be the last feature he/she would describe. Barring inadvertent misconceptions and the tendency for superficial analysis, the average student would very likely attempt a description of the lexical meaning and then a little bit of syntax. An above-average student may venture to describe some apparent phonological features such as alliteration and rhyme scheme. Only the excellent students would be bold enough to attempt a description of such features as stress, syllable, foot and metre. Given a free hand, students would try to avoid any task that is set on the use of rhythm in the poem or, at best, wander off point.

Rhythm is that aspect of English language usage, which the Nigerian speaker has found most difficult to understand. Indeed, it is the crux of the matter when scholars (Banjo, 1979; Amayo, 1986) talk of the supra-segmentals being 'the final hurdle that majority of speakers of English as a second language never manage to cross.' Yet, not only is rhythm the feature that gives spoken English its characteristic accent (Amayo 1986:318), it is

also one of those features that are foregrounded in English literature and which cannot be neglected in any meaningful analysis of, especially, poetry.

This study aims to investigate the problems of perception and description of rhythm in English poems by some Nigerian university undergraduate students. It presents instances of wrong description of rhythm by students and suggests the areas that need to be focused by teachers in order to ensure that learners master and perceive rhythm effectively in the analysis of poetry.

Data Base of Study

The examination scripts of 200 third year undergraduate students of English language in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, were scrutinized and their responses to some questions in the stylistics course analyzed. The rhythm of English ought to have been taught in the phonology and stylistics courses on English language between the first and third sessions. Three of the questions asked on the topic in examinations over some years (1996-2003) are as follows:

- a. Using relevant categories from two levels of language study as tools, illustrate how the linguistic method can be applied to the analysis of the poem below. (A poem was presented for illustration.)
- b. As a student of linguistic stylistics, show how you can encourage a pupil in Senior Secondary 3 to understand the use of rhythm in English poetry. You may use a stanza from the poems presented below (poems were presented in the question paper) to illustrate your demonstration.
- c. Write brief notes (about 350 words) on any three of the following terms: (i) situation of text (ii) poetic rhythm (iii) syntactic parallelism and (iv) point of view.

Question 'a' above was compulsory in the examination paper. Since no specific mention of rhythm was made in the question (even though it was considered crucial to the analysis) candidates had a free choice to either include or exclude it in their description. However, students who included it were credited for doing so. Though questions 'b' and 'c' specifically mentioned rhythm as a topic, students were not obliged to answer them because the questions were optional in the context in which they occurred.

Studies on the Rhythm of English

Almost every available book on English phonology has at least a section on the phonological categories of stress and rhythm in English. Some scholars discuss the categories from a general linguistic or pedagogical perspective and with reference to English speech (Gimson, 1975 and 1980; Ladefoged, 1975 and Roach, 1983). Some other scholars describe stress, rhythm and intonation as stylistic features (Leech, 1969; Chapman, 1973 and Turner 1973). Oderinde (1979), Amayo (1986), Fatusin (2001) and Aremo (2001),

for example, describe these categories by taking into consideration the background of Nigerian learners. But the authors are concerned with stress and rhythm and intonation in spoken English. There is thus also the need to link these categories to the analysis of literature, specifically, in this instance, poetry. According to Chapman (1973), such an explication must take into consideration the category metre. This is because rhythm is deliberately used to create a regular and recurrent pattern in a literary composition, quite differently from ordinary speech. In this paper, there is the need to adopt a descriptive framework that presents rhythm in a straightforward manner, in categories that can easily be understood, so that students can apply them to literature confidently. It is also expedient at this juncture to exclude those minute details that may complicate the description and lead to confusion. The relevant categories for discussion of rhythm in this regard are the syllable, stress, foot and metre¹. We shall explain them briefly, **giving relevant information from existing literature.**

A syllable is a group of phonemes uttered with one breath pulse. The English syllable has the structure (C₁) V (C₂), which indicates that it has a single obligatory vowel, an optional number of one to three consonants preceding the vowel and also an optional number of one to four consonants after the vowel. A syllable is either accented or unaccented. An accented syllable is more prominent than its neighbours, by means of any or all of four factors: stress (loud) pitch (high), quality (strong) and quantity (long), **while the unaccented syllable tends to have weak and obscure qualities.**

Stress is a suprasegmental feature of utterances, which applies not to individual vowels and consonants but to whole syllables. A stressed syllable is pronounced with a greater amount of energy than an unstressed syllable. Features of loudness, high pitch and strong breath pulse and time duration further characterize the former. English is called a stress-timed language, which implies that stressed syllables have the tendency to occur at relatively regular intervals with or without unstressed syllables coming within the intervals. In connected speech, stressed syllables occur in 'content' words or 'open class' items (nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives and adverbs) while 'form' words or 'close set' items (determiners, auxiliary verbs, prepositions and conjunctions) do not carry stressed syllables. In the example below, the vertical sign indicates stress, while the horizontal sign indicates lack of stress:

Ex. 1: | — — | | — — | | — | —
Mary and George specially want to go tomorrow.

The foot is referred to as the 'rhythmic group' because it carries the stress patterns of the language. It has a salient element that is located in the stressed syllable and the weak element that is located in the unstressed syllable(s). The salient element, i.e. a stressed syllable, is the essential element of the structure of the foot. This salient element is always at the beginning of the foot in linguistic terms, but may not be necessarily so in metrical terms (Berry 1977:79).² For example, in linguistic terms, the sentence in Ex. 1 above has six feet and the stress patterns in the feet (i.e.

rhythm), abstracted from the sentence, can be represented thus:

Ex. 2 / | — — | / | — — | — / | — / | —
 (i) (ii) (iii) (iv) (v) (vi)

In contrast, the description in metric terms may be different, provided each foot has a stressed syllable, for example:

| — / — | / | — — / | — / | — | — /
 (i) (ii) (iii) (iv) (v) (vi)

Notice the difference in the first and second feet from the previous example.

In poetry, rhythm is normally described in metrical patterns according to the pattern and number of feet in a line. First, there are four patterns that a foot may choose from: '- |' (unstressed + stressed) is an iamb; '| —' (stress'ed + unstressed) is a trochee; '— — |' (double unstressed + stressed) is an anapest and '| — —' (stressed + double unstressed) is a dactyl. Second, the number of feet in a line is described as follows: 1 foot — monometre; 2 feet — dimetre; 3 feet — trimetre; 4 feet — tetrametre; 5 feet — pentametre; and 6 feet — hexameter. The pattern in Ex. 3 can then be described as:

- a. a hexameter — the line has six feet
- b. dominated by a trochaic feet (see feet 'I', 'iv', 'v' and 'vi')
- c. having an iambic foot (foot ii) and a dactylic foot (foot iii).

The phrase 'iambic pentametre' describes a regular pattern of rhythm, a five-beat line used by major dramatists and poets for several centuries.

Problems of Perception and Description of Rhythm in English Poetry

The problems identified in this study are presented under four headings: (a) lack of proper conceptualization of the concept of rhythm and its constituent categories; (b) communication distance between the poet and reader/analyst and (c) lack of knowledge of relevant poetic conventions, periodic styles and peculiarities and innovations of individual poets.

Lack of Proper Conceptualization of Rhythm

Examples abound in multiples in the data of confusion of rhythm and its constituent categories with some other phonological features such as rhyme, intonation, alliteration, etc. A vivid way of presenting these is to quote some of the recurrent statements (Ex. 3) and analyses (Ex. 4) made by students on the topic of rhythm. They are as follows:

Ex.3

- a. *'Rhythm has to do with the rhyme scheme of a poem. Is it a couplet where you have the same sound at the end of a line? —'

- b. (Ex. 3'a-c' here demonstrates a misconception of rhythm as rhymes). *'Poetic rhythm can be seen in a poem, it has to do with the sounds heard when reading a poem. It could beat the end of each line' — end rhyme.
- c. *'The rhythm has to do with the way in which the words of the line are ending. This could be quatrain (sic) which will be ABAB, which means the words rhyme alternately.' *'Intonation has a lot to contribute to poetic rhythm, it is referred to as rises and falls in pitch voice.' (Intonation rather complements rhythm to achieve meaning in poetry.)
- e. *'Foot is when there are unstressed and stressed syllables in a poem and this has different types anapest, dactyl, trochee and iambic.' (The first part of the definition is loose and not specific enough.) *'Iamb means one stress syllable followed by an unstressed syllable ...' (The exact opposite is the case.)
- g. *'The syllable is the boundary that words can be segmented after they have been pronounced. A syllable is segmented before a stress can be realized, e.g. boundary — boun + dary.' (The description in the first sentence can also refer to a sound or, even, a morpheme. The second sentence is not comprehensible.)
- h. *'Alliteration can also be used to achieve poetic rhythm, it is the repetition of the same consonant sound in a sentence. Then there could be the repetition of vowel sounds' — assonance.
- i. *'Poetic rhythm: this has to do with the sounds in a text. That is, its musicality. Such poetic rhythm are (sic) refrain, assonance, alliteration, etc.'

Ex.4

—
 a(i) Who has seen a witch
 — |

 Neither you nor I
 — | |
 But when a child dies suddenly
 — —
 A witch is passing by

The analysis above does not properly identify the syllables and stress patterns. An analysis based on linguistic rules of stress placement will look like this:

(ii) — — | — |
 Who has seen a witch?
 | — — — —
 Neither you nor I
 — | — | | | — —
 But when a child dies suddenly

— | — | — —
A witch is passing by.

- b. (i) | — | — —
Our dear friend faced the firing squad yesterday.
The problem here is similar to the one in 'ai' above. The suggestion is:

(ii) — | — | — | — | — | — —
Our dear friend faced the firing squad yesterday

- c. (i) — | — — — |
The wicked have done their worst
It has iambic pattern. There is a stressed and an unstressed syllable.

Despite the wrong analysis above, the description does not match the analysis. The suggestion here is:

- (ii) — | — — | — |
The wicked have done their worst
There are three iambic feet 'iambic trimeter', in the line, but the unstressed third syllable is perhaps an intrusion.

OR

There are three feet with initial and final (syllables 1 and 2) (syllables 6 and 7) iambic metres and a medial (syllables 335) anapestic metre.

The problems illustrated in Examples 3 and 4 above can be attributed to several sources. On the part of students, these may be as a result of second language inhibition due to incompetence or mother tongue influence, inadequate exposure to the English language and/or analysis of prosodic features of the language and, probably, environment of elicitation of data (i.e. examination condition). On the part of the teachers, problems may range from avoidance of topic to poor teaching. Teachers may not attach much importance to this aspect of language description. Of course, if the problems above could come from students who are almost graduating and becoming teachers themselves, how can we be sure that some teachers will not avoid teaching the topic because they have not fully grasped it themselves?

Communication Distance Between Poet and Reader

The analysis of rhythm in poetry is further compounded by the problem of distance between the poet and the reader. Unlike in conversations where both the sender and receiver communicate in a shared context and benefit from paralinguistic and contextual cues, the analyst of a poem is sometimes faced with the dilemma of decoding and explicating a work that is written in a different period by a poet from a different linguistic and cultural background. Chapman (1973:89) has this to say about Gerard Manley Hopkins

If his poetry is read aloud with the confidence of consecutive but planned speech, it presents fewer difficulties than its appearance on the printed page may suggest. The same is true of many other late Victorian and more recent poets who did not expatiate so fully on their prosodic theories...

Another major problem that is envisaged here pertains to the concept of emphatic stress. Although closed set items are normally not supposed to be stressed in unemphatic speech, according to linguistic rules, it is common knowledge that emphatic stress is a common feature of everyday speech and writing. While contextual clues make it much easier for listeners to interpret utterances with emphatic stress in speech, there are severe constraints with respect to written texts, especially poetry. Poets may decide to emphasize form words in their poems for special effect. From the perspective of emphatic stress, the analysis suggested in Ex 4 'a' above is controversial. For example, the stress on 'who' may be disputed by some analysts because it is a relative pronoun. Similarly, some analysts may prefer to stress 'you' and 'I' in line 2 of the example, even though they are pronouns. A poet may also decide to emphasize the conjunction 'But' in line 3 or the preposition particle 'by' on the last line of the stanza. Any change in stress placement in respect of the above creates a change in the rhythmic pattern and, consequently the interpretation of the poem.

Chapman (1973:92-93) gives a few examples where emphatic stress is used by poets for metrical prominence to indicate strong negation, exclamatory appeal or contrast between a verb used successively in positive and negative form, which is commonly found in speech:

- Ex.5
a. No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist — (Keats *Ode to Melancholy*)
b. And I am black, but O, my soul is white (Blake, *The Little Black Boy*)
c. To be or not to be, that is the question. (*Hamlet*, III-I)

Lack of Adequate Background Knowledge on Poetry

It is observed that the knowledge of poetic traditions, language conventions and peculiar style of individual poets can enhance the ability of students to analyze poems more efficiently and the lack of this knowledge may sometimes prevent effective analysis. A lot of discussions about literary (or poetic) traditions can be found in existing literature (Crystal, 1969; Patridge, 1971) on the subject. Analysts might need to be familiar with information about the days of rigid classical prescriptivism and accentual metre of Old English poetry which had depended on a fixed number of stresses in each line, with considerable freedom in the number of unstressed syllables, the alliterative metre of the medieval period, the iambic pentametre (with rhyme or in blank verse) of the Elizabethan period, the variation in metrical patterns in

the Romantic period and the free verse (in loose and staccato rhythm) of the Modern period.

Some major poets have also been identified with particular rhythmic patterns; thus the alexandrine (six-beat line), in different forms, is associated with Shelley, Spenser and Byron (Turner, 1970), Hopkins is noted for the use of the sprung rhythm (clustering of monosyllabic feet), and Eliot is associated with the syncopated rhythm. Even Chaucer had advocated that a poet could avoid dullness by using the rhythms of common speech (Chapman, 1973).

Lastly, changes in pronunciation and spellings over periods also warrant caution on the part of the analyst. For example, the word 'question' was trisyllabic in Shakespeare's time, but it now has two syllables. Also when Chaucer wrote: 'Un-to his faire fresshe lady May', 'e' in 'faire' and 'fresshe' made a syllable in his time.

A Sample Analysis of a Poem³

INDICTMENT AND SUMMONS (PART II) — DENNIS BRUTUS

The sounds begin again;	— — —
the siren in the night	— — —
the thunder at the door	— — — —
the shriek of nerves in pain.	— — —
Then the keening crescendo	— — — — — — —
of faces split by pain	— — —
the wordless, endless wail	— — —
only the unfree know.	— — —
Importunate as rain	— — — —
the wraiths exhale their wore	— — —
over the sirens, knuckles, boots,	— — — — —
my sounds begin again	— — —

The beat of the poem goes thus, according to the feet:

3-2-2-3;	2-3-3-3;	2-3-3-3
Stanza 1	Stanza 2	Stanza 3

Evidence is provided for the musicality of the poem by the regular occurrence of the iambic trimetre rhythm, occasionally inter-spersed with two feet organized in different ways stylistically. The occurrence of this pattern is visible, not withstanding other phonological and lexico-structural features that may contribute to this musicality.

Conclusion

This study has observed that, for various reasons, Nigerian undergraduate students have not been able to master and apply rhythm properly in the analysis of poetry. This is in spite of the fact that this feature is foregrounded in many poems. When faced with the task of describing rhythm, students either avoid it or confuse it with several other phonological features such as rhyme, alliteration, repetition and intonation, which may serve to support it in the analysis.

For proper mastery of the concept and its application to take place, students have to learn the essential categories, viz, stress, syllable, foot and metre, in a straightforward manner and also learn some conventional patterns pertaining to the periodic and individual styles in poetic discourse. Teachers also should not neglect the teaching of rhythm in the classroom and that, whenever possible, the teaching and/or analysis may be supported with carefully recorded cassettes for poems, which should be made available in the market.

Having thus mastered the concept and use of rhythm, a lot of lost ground has to be covered in respect of description of the rhythm of English poetry, especially, with focus on poems written by Africans. Just as it has been possible in previous studies to describe, on the one hand, the rhythmic patterns of British and American poets in English and, on the other hand, the idiolects of poets and the register or dialect of African poetry in lexicostuctural and sociolinguistic terms, it should also be possible to describe the rhythm of English poems written by Africans. Thus, it is hoped that in the nearest future, one should begin to hear of the patterns of rhythm in the poems of, for example, Wole Soyinka, Lenrie Peters and Dennis Brutus, and, indeed, of the poetic rhythm of African literature.

Notes

1. Some scholars may consider it essential to include intonation here as a feature of rhythm. But we have deliberately avoided it at this point, first, for the sake of simplicity of description, and also because intonation is a complex feature on its own. Secondly, intonation is marked in written poetry by some features of language, e.g. punctuations. Besides, regularity of stress patterns in poetry can be described separately from the use of rise and fall in pitch tunes to indicate grammatical and attitudinal meanings.
2. Caldwell and Herrings (1996) have observed that textbook, i.e. linguistic', rules would enable us to describe only a fraction of intonation choices made in language as a whole. This observation is equally true of the description of metric patterns in literature. Further background knowledge of stylistic choices in the relevant genres is essential.

3. Once again, we offer a neutral description here for illustrative purposes. A more **personal interpretation** may yield different patterns from the above, which may also require that elaborate explanations are made concerning the preferences. Leech (1969:118) recognizes the instability of the rhythmic structure of English that makes it difficult to have a 'yes-or-no' analysis. He further asserts thus:

We have to acknowledge that the ambivalence of division into single measures or double measures sometimes suggests conflicting accounts of the same line of verse.

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