Literary devices and their use in poetry

Profession, Poet

The task set out in this essay is to examine the listed devices (accentuation, creation of hierarchies, shifts of accent, ambiguity, semanticisation and creation of relationship) of syntactic foregrounding, using examples from poems as illustration. The word ' foregrounding' when used in a literary context means to ' make strange'. In other words poets use various literary and poetic devices in order to highlight a particular unit within a poem, in order to give the reader ' clues' as she goes about interpreting and ascertaining meaning in a given work.

We will start at the top of the list with accentuation. As can be denoted from its meaning, accentuation is a form or type of foregrounding. It emphasises certain language structures in order to make them stand out and draw the reader's attention. There are five syntactic devices that a poet can use to create accentuation in her poem, namely displacement, deletion, selective deviation, repetition and typography. Displacement refers to a device whereby a poet takes conventional grammar and rearranges it.

For example, in the poem Mending Wall, by Robert Frost the first line reads " Something there is that does not love a wall. " (Moffet, Mphahlele 2006: 103) Had the poet used conventional language the sentence would read ' there is something that does not love a wall. " As can be seen from the given example although the syntactic structure is foregrounded the semantic essence has not changed. Another example of displacement comes in the poem The art of Edgar Degas by David Campbell. Line two in this poem states ' limning the gestures of defeat" (www. poemhunter. com)

I found it necessary to look up the definition of the word limning, so obviously it stood out for me immediately. Next we come to deletion. I believe that the term is self-explanatory, so I will just give an example from the poem Letter to My Aunt, by Dylan Thomas where line 44 to 45 read as follows: " Never omit such vital words, as belly, genitals and," (www. poemhunter. com) This is a very obvious instance of deletion, but is one nonetheless. We will now scrutinize the third literary device available to poets that brings about foregrounding or accentuation.

This is selective displacement. The study guide suggests that selective deviation occurs in a work where the majority of the language used is conventional, but the poet will select a word, phrase or sentence and rearrange the syntax so that the particular word, phrase or sentence is accentuated. Robert Frost's poem Cliff Dweller gives us an instance of this. The first line reads: ' There sandy seems the golden sky'. (www. poemhunter. com) The rest of the poem is written in conventional English, but he has altered the syntax just in the first line.

Were we to remake this line in regular English it would read ' There the golden sky seems sandy'. But it is clear that we would destroy the rhyming scheme of the poem and our line would not be nearly so poetic. My choice of a poem that uses repetition very successfully is The Charge of the Light Brigade by Lord Alfred Tennyson. (www. poemhunter. com) He uses repetition in numerous places throughout the poem but perhaps the most striking lines that are repeated three times in the poem are " Into the valley of Death/Rode the six hundred".

He then alters the words slightly in stanza four where it becomes " Then they rode back, but not/Not the six hundred. " In stanza five we read " All that was left of them, /Left of six hundred. " And the last lines in stanza six read " Honor the Light Brigade, /Noble six hundred. " (www. poemhunter. com) The pathos of these lines certainly accentuates them. Finally we come to typography which is defined in the Study Guide for Structuralism and Semiotics as ' the spatial and visual foregrounding of words.'

There are a number of instances that I could use as an example here, but I have chosen Constantly Risking Absurdity by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The essence of this poem can be said to be a comparison between trapeze artists in a circus and poets. The lines of the poem are spaced in such a way that they give you a visual image of the trapeze swinging to and fro. Most of E. E. Cummings poems are also presented in very unusual spatial patterns. In fact, one of his poems " Grasshopper" is so uncommonly spaced that I found it almost impossible to read the poem.

Having dealt with accentuation as a literary device used in poetry we now move onto creation of hierarchies. Initially I struggled to understand this particular device, and even now I am not certain that I understand it correctly. I believe however that the way I now understand it is that the hierarchy starts with a main clause and all the subsequent clauses are subordinate to that clause. If this is correct then I would use the poem Sonnet 138 by William Shakespeare as an example.

The main clause of the poem comes in the first two lines " When my love swears that she is made of truth/I do believe her, though I know she lies. "

(www. poemhunter. com) All the subsequent lines begin with a conjunction, denoting that they are subordinate clauses. The best example I could find of a poem that used shifting of accents is ironically also centred on the theme of death, just like the poem used in the Study Guide. The poem is A Thought on Death by W. H. Auden. This poem follows a similar path to A process in the weather of the heart by Dylan Thomas.

Stanza one refers to life as an opening bud and concludes with the words " Alas! How hard it is to die! In Stanza two we are adults and have a good life, strong relationships and duties that need to be attended to and we are still told " How awful then it is to die! " We reach old age in stanza three and consequently our relationships are torn (by death) and we are now left alone, the mood of the last line has changed substantially " Ah then, how easy ' tis to die! " In verse four the poet talks of spiritual issues and a clear conscience and believes "'Tis joy, ' tis triumph then to die."

Finally we get to the end of the journey and we are alone, going blind and have lost our mental faculties there is no doubt that "'Tis nature's precious boon to die. " (www. poemhunter. com) Because of the overdetermination of poetry through the use of a number of literary devices it is not surprising that the next device we are analyzing is ambiguity. Many poems when analyzed correctly have examples where a certain sentence of phrase could have multiple meanings. This is after all what ambiguity means. " My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke is a wonderful specimen of ambiguity.

The poem describes a young boy ' dancing' with his father. On a first perfunctory reading of the poem it appears to be very clear that ' dancing' is

a euphemism for something far more sinister happening between the father and son. " The whiskey on your breath/could make a small boy dizzy. " These are the opening lines of the poem and they have already caused our hearts to sink. It continues to get worse – please note that I am now quoting random lines that seem to fit in with my analysis " Such waltzing was not easy. " And then " we romped until the pans/slid from the kitchen shelf;" Romped?

What is next? " The hand that held my wrist/Was battered on one knuckle: At every step you missed/my right ear scraped a buckle". Only in the final four line stanza are we able to breathe a sigh of relief. " You beat time on my head/With a palm caked hard by dirt,/Then waltzed me off to bed/Still clinging to your shirt. " (Andersen, Kossick & Pereira 1993: 172) Many things in the poem seemed to be markers for an abusive father. He has been drinking; he got so rough with the little child that the pots and pans tumbled down, his hand was holding the child's wrist and showed signs of injury.

All is made clear when we realise that the father obviously had some type of heavy labour job, which would explain the battered knuckle and the palm engrained with dirt. Of a slightly more complex nature than ambiguity is the concept of establishing relationships. According to the Study Guide for Structuralism and Semiotics certain forms of repetition, namely coupling and parallelism are able to connect metaphorical creations across syntactic boundaries. In order to understand clearly we need to briefly discuss the terms syntagma and paradigm.

Syntagma is the term theorists chose to describe the formation of grammar on a horizontal level, whilst paradigm does the same for it on a vertical level. In other words, when using words that fall into the same category of one of the parts of speech, on the vertical or paradigmatic level, these words would be interchangeable in a sentence and they would not have changed to syntax of the sentence. Note however, that the semantic aspect of the sentence would change. To illustrate the concept of establishing relationships I have selected Do not go gentle into that good night by Dylan Thomas.

Whilst stanza two opens with the line " Though wise men…) stanzas three to five each begin with a similar pattern of adjective/noun " Good men" " Wild men" and finally " Wild men" (www. poemhunter. com) Clearly the pattern remained the same one of adjective/noun so the paradigmatic function was unaffected, but the semantic function is completely different in each of the quoted instances. The concept of semanticisation as explained in the Study Guide for Structuralism and Semiotics revolves around similar parts of speech being used in a deviated syntactic manner.

To put it simply there could be an instance where a poet wanted to use a noun as a verb, adverb et cetera. My selected poem blues for district six by Abdullah Ibrahim contains fascinating examples semanticisation such as " tenored a bawdy banjo" " bridged a host of guitars" and finally " tambourined through a dingy alley" (Andersen, Kossick & Pereira 1993: 136) All three of the underlined words are nouns, but in this poem Ibrahim has used them as verbs.

These instances of semanticisation clearly get the desired effect from the reader, who could not help being tantalized by these ' word'. The task set out in this essay is to examine the listed devices (accentuation, creation of hierarchies, shifts of accent, ambiguity, semanticisation and creation of relationship) of syntactic foregrounding, using examples from poems as illustration. The word ' foregrounding' when used in a literary context means to ' make strange'.

In other words poets use various literary and poetic devices in order to highlight a particular unit within a poem, in order to give the reader ' clues' as she goes about interpreting and ascertaining meaning in a given work. That brings us to the end of our analyses on these literary devices used by many poets, as can be seen from the presented examples. We have seen how these tools can be used to great effect in the listed poems.