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Sentence judgments and the grammar of poetry: Linking linguistic structure and poetic effect

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to show that the elicitation of intuitive literary-aesthetic sentence judgments taps into readers' poetry-specific linguistic register, and how such judgment methods can be used to support and constrain future theory formation in experimental poetics. In two experiments, we examined effects of deviant and parallelistic linguistic features on readers' grammatical and literary-aesthetic evaluation of single sentences.

In Experiment 1, participants rated carefully selected and modified lines of German poetry for either *acceptability* or *poeticity* ($n = 40$ each) on a 7-point scale; original lines featured grammatical deviations that were absent in modified versions. All investigated deviation types reduced the acceptability of the lines, but only routine licenses of German poetry increased their perceived poeticity and showed moderate to strong correlations between poeticity and deviance (i.e., low acceptability).

In Experiment 2, participants made forced *acceptability* ($n = 120$) or *poeticity* ($n = 120$) choices regarding two (out of four) syntactic variants of a single sentence; variants crossed syntactic canonicity (canonical/non-canonical) and sentence rhythm (alternating/non-alternating). Acceptability choices favored only canonical syntax; poeticity choices were sensitive to both variables, and favored non-canonical syntax and alternating sentence rhythms.

Our results indicate that poeticity judgments reflect categorical and gradient genre-specific well-formedness (Exp. 1), and that poeticity criteria are similar for traditional verse and for regular sentences without salient genre cues (Exp. 2). The observed prosodic and grammatical preferences suggest that perceptual fluency and conceptual challenge are prototypical characteristics of poetry reading. We conclude that sentence judgments can reveal whether and to which degree specific features of linguistic structure contribute to poetic effects.

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Who forced [the poet] to compose poetry that will not be stable except by the commission of mistake?

We have never seen or heard of a poet driven with a whip or a sword by a king or a person of authority to say that which is not permissible or allowed [...] in the speech of others.

Ibn Fāris: *Reproving Mistakes in Poetry* (10th ct. A.D.)

1. Introduction

Competent speakers of a language have consistent intuitions about the grammatical status of verbal utterances. Even when confronted with novel expressions, they have no difficulty to distinguish “that which is not permissible or allowed” from that which is well-formed. Such categorical grammaticality judgments are thought to reflect a speaker-hearer’s *linguistic competence*, i.e., his implicit knowledge of his language, which is distinguished from the application of this knowledge in actual linguistic performance (Chomsky, 1965:4). Extra-linguistic constraints on the performance system, e.g., memory and attention, give rise to degrees of *acceptability* that reflect how easily comprehensible and how natural-sounding certain grammatical structures are. Native speakers’ acceptability judgments reveal both categorical grammaticality differences and degrees of acceptability, and thus contribute to the empirical basis for theories of linguistic competence and performance (Coward, 1997; Schütze, 1996; Sprouse, 2013).

In this article, we will argue for the application of sentence judgment methods to the study of *poetic competence*¹ (Bierwisch, 1965; see also Culler, 1975), i.e., readers’ (implicit) knowledge of literature in general and of poetry in particular. Sentence judgments provide a simple and objective way of testing hypotheses about the systematic covariation of linguistic form and poetic effect; they may thus support and constrain future theory formation in experimental poetics and, more generally, in the aesthetics of language and literature.

To illustrate this approach, we will present and discuss two experiments in which we contrasted grammatical (= acceptability) and literary-aesthetic (= poeticity) evaluations of single sentences. This combined collection of readers’ grammatical and literary-aesthetic intuitions constitutes a methodological innovation that contributes to the inquiry into the relation between literary and non-literary language (e.g., Fabb, 2010; Fish, 1973; Mukarovsky, 1964). We expect that it can reveal which linguistic features are attended to in poetry reading, and how the evaluative criteria of this reading stance relate to the evaluative criteria of ‘ordinary’ grammar. Using this dual-judgment approach, we investigated readers’ responses to two central characteristics of poetic language – deviant grammar and parallelistic sentence rhythms.

1.1. Deviation and parallelism in poetry

Poetry is widely considered a class of utterances that differs from most registers of the written standard, not least since poets across centuries and literary traditions have taken the liberty of tinkering with grammar when writing metered poetry (e.g., Aristotle, 1911; Lerner, 1979; Sanni, 1993; Youmans, 1983). The genre is formally characterized by additional *parallelism* and licensed *deviation* from common language use (e.g., Fabb, 2010; Leech, 1969; Levin, 1962; Mukarovsky, 1964). The term ‘parallelism’ as used here denotes all types of systematic patterning of linguistic elements, including phonological parallelisms such as rhyme and meter (cf. Fabb, 1997; Hopkins, 1865; Leech, 1969; Menninghaus, Wagner, Wassiliwizky, Jacobsen, & Knoop, 2017). The stylistic term ‘deviation’, on the other hand, covers actual rule violations as well as deviations from the principles and conventions of non-literary language. Parallelism and deviation are systematically related during both the production and the reception of poetic texts. In both literary practices, their effects are directly opposed.

In poetry production, parallelistic schemata like meter and rhyme constitute self-imposed formal constraints on the selection and combination of linguistic elements (Bower & Bolton, 1969; Fabb, 2010; Idsardi & Raimy, 2005; Jakobson, 1960; Kintsch, 1998; Leech, 1969; Levin, 1962; Rice, 1997). These additional constraints make writing more challenging and difficult, but poetically licensed deviation, i.e., the optional “commission of mistake”, allows sidestepping some of these difficulties (e.g., Aristotle, 1911; Rice, 1997; Sanni, 1993; Youmans, 1983).

In poetry reception, parallelistic sound patterning is beneficial in the sense that it facilitates early processing of verbal stimuli (Chen et al., 2016; Hoorn, 1996; Menninghaus, Bohrn, Altmann, Lubrich, & Jacobs, 2014; Obermeier et al., 2016; Vaughan-Evans et al., 2016), assists their memorization and recall (e.g., Rubin, 1995; Rubin, Ciobanu, & Langston, 1997; Tillmann & Dowling, 2007; van Peer, 1990), and increases their aesthetic appeal and emotional impact (Kraxenberger & Menninghaus, 2016; Menninghaus et al., 2015; Menninghaus et al., 2017; Obermeier et al., 2013). Formal deviation, on the other hand, is linked to *deautomatization* in stylistic theory, i.e., to the impairment, extension and intensification of the reading process (e.g., Jacobs, 2015; Leech, 1969; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Mukarovsky, 1964; Šklovsky, 1965; van Peer, 1986; van Peer, 2007). This mechanism is hypothesized to be responsible for many stylistic effects, and there is empirical evidence to support this assumption (e.g., Chesnokova & van Peer, 2016; Hakemulder, 2004; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; van Peer, 1986). The degree of a text feature’s deviance is co-determined by a number of factors including the diachronically evolving linguistic standard from which the feature or text deviates (Mukarovsky, 1964), the linguistic norm of the text itself (Levin, 1965), and the linguistic and non-linguistic context (Enkvist, 1973; Riffaterre, 1960).

1.2. The present study

The present study constitutes an attempt to connect the study of deviant and parallelistic linguistic features and their poetic

¹ The term ‘competence’ is used in analogy to Chomsky’s notion; this analogy has clear limitations and the two notions are not identical (see Abraham & Braunnüller, 1973; Pilkington, 2000).

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