

## Deviant word order in Swedish poetry

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## Abstract

It is generally assumed that recurrent deviations from ordinary language in poetry have a non-complex relationship to ordinary grammar. This assumption has been formulated by Fabb (2010) as the Development Hypothesis (DH). In this paper, DH is elaborated within a generative framework and tested upon deviant word order in a sample of 19th century Swedish poetry. The result is that the hypothesis is fairly well corroborated, although not totally. In closing, an alternative hypothesis by Thoms (2010), the Non-Uniformity Hypothesis, is tested. It claims that poetry has more of its own syntax. This hypothesis is shown to yield, on the whole, predictions just as good as DH. Neither of the hypotheses, however, lasts the entire course.

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## 1. Introduction

Following Youmans (1983:68), three explanations could be given as to why word order in poetry sometimes deviates from what is grammatical in ordinary language.

- (a) Deviance from prosaic word order creates a literary effect.
- (b) Through poetic word order, a better information structure can be achieved.
- (c) The sentence needs to fit the metre of the poem.

Let us illustrate (a) with poetry of a traditional kind. Such poetry has, in various languages, chiselled out a limited number of recurrent deviance types that remain stable over generations (cf. Fabb, 2010:1220). These deviances are so typical that readers attach a poetic flavour to them; sometimes they may even be necessary in order to constitute the genre as poetry. Avant-garde poetry, on the contrary, may create some of its effects through novel and unexpected word orders. Youmans himself gives popular slogans as an example of the literary effects of deviant word order.

For (b), a Swedish example could be given. In ordinary Swedish, word order is very much used for indicating syntactic structure and sentence-type, sometimes blocking a natural given-new order. As an instance of poetic remedy to this problem, consider a stanza in the poem *På alfvaren* (1881) by the Swedish poet Albert Teodor Gellerstedt:

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- (1) Fälten här för sommarvinden bölja ej med vågor gula  
 fields.DEF here for summer-wind. DEF billow.PRS not with waves yellow  
 och af ängens blomsterväfvor hittar du med nöd en smula.  
 and of meadow.DEF.POSS flower-webs find.PRS you with need a bit  
 'The fields do not billow here for the summer wind with yellow waves and you will barely find a trace of the webs of  
 flowers on the meadow.'

By putting three phrases in the first sentence before the verb (which is illicit in declarative sentences in prose), the poet can start with an indication of all three of the given referents.

To (c), it must of course be added that if there are rhymes, the rhyming words should be placed so as to occur at the ends of lines. Metrical constraints are arguably the most conspicuous reason for poetic word order, they have attracted the most interest from scholars, and they have repeatedly been shown to be involved in the majority of observed instances. However, as early as 1967, Fries demonstrated that in 18th century Swedish poetry, there are several instances of deviant word order that are not motivated by the need for good metre or rhyme. In a similar vein, Youmans (1983:75; cf. Fitzgerald, 2007:208) showed that almost a quarter of the instances of deviant word order in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (excluding those where rhyme is involved) do not improve the metre.

A given instance of deviant word order can of course fall under more than one of these explanations at a time (Youmans, 1983:68). Thus, the word order in (1) is a way of saving the metre and arguably also contributes to the poetic flavour.

What we will be concerned with in this paper is exactly a case of traditional poetry with a limited number of recurrent deviance types that have remained stable for a long time. This poetic sample is taken from 19th century Swedish literature. Here, a literary effect of the deviances, i.e. explanation (a) above, can generally be claimed, and the effect can be qualitatively different for different types of deviances.<sup>1</sup> It lies outside the scope of the paper to discuss the relative importance of (a) as compared to the other two explanations (b and c), whether for the material in general or for individual instances. However, it is obvious to us that in the majority of instances, the deviant word order helps to solve a metrical problem; thus, explanation (c) is at work.

The main aim of the paper is to discuss the relationship between poetic and ordinary language, with recurrent deviations from prose word order particularly in mind. More specifically, we will address the question of whether the structural properties of deviant word order in poetry indicate a direct link between poetic and ordinary syntax. This has been taken for granted for quite some time, as shown by Fabb (2010:1223–1224). There are, however, not many studies of stable patterns of recurrent deviances from ordinary word order, and it is not always clear what is meant by a direct link.<sup>2</sup> Thus, O'Neil (2001) manages to show that Icelandic Skaldic verse, known for its shattered syntax, obeys restrictions that can be formulated in grammatical terms, and Fabb (2010) interprets this as a link to ordinary syntax. Closer to ordinary syntax is Shakespeare's verse, which according to Fitzgerald (2007:208) allows for only three types of deviation from prose word order.<sup>3</sup> Two of them (leftward movement of verbal complements and leftward movement of adjuncts) can possibly be seen as generalisations of existing rules (2007:210). The third (adjective–noun inversion) may be due to influence from French; such a conclusion can be drawn from a contemporary instruction to poets quoted by Fitzgerald (2007:208).

The hypothesis of a direct link will be tested only for frequent cases with no specialised effects. Apart from these recurrent, central deviances, we will suppose that there may also occur marginal deviances which are infrequent and/or have special effects (such as archaic style). Such deviances may have a complicated relationship with prose grammar. As can be seen, both our hypothesis and our supposition are similar to the claims put forward by Youmans (1989) and Golston (1998), who argue that less frequent deviations violate more constraints, or more highly ranked constraints, than do recurrent deviations.

The alleged close connection between prose syntax and poetic syntax has recently been challenged by Thoms (2010), who instead proposes that poetic syntax is distinct from non-poetic syntax; in closing, we will relate our findings to his model. We will, however, start off by presenting the more common standpoint, as put into a broader frame by Fabb (2010), in more detail.

## 2. Relating poetic deviance to ordinary language

According to Fabb (2010), it is fairly common among literary linguists, especially those with a generative approach, to assume that the structure of poetic language is dependent on the structure of ordinary language. He formulates this widespread assumption as the **Development Hypothesis** (DH), quoted in (2):

<sup>1</sup> It does not, however, invalidate our findings if the central deviances are regarded as devoid of literary effect.

<sup>2</sup> Other scholars (e.g. Kiparsky, 1975; Youmans, 1983; Golston and Riad, 2000) have used deviant syntax as a means for discovering metrical constraints. There are significantly more linguistic studies of poetry that are concerned only with the relationship of phonology to metrics.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, subject–verb inversion occurs infrequently (Fitzgerald, 2007:209).

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