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Stylistic Analysis of Gerard Nolst Trenité's Poem "The Chaos"

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Abstract

This research paper aims to scrutinize the masterful selection of over eight hundred words which are common for any foreigner to get stuck as they find it easy to follow the same pattern to pronounce those words, but instead get that there are exceptions, as in every language, that do not conform to the rules dictated by a discourse. Gerard Nolst Trenité's poem, "The Chaos", playfully lists these cases, picturing the reality of misunderstandings. On the other hand, it enriches the poem's content with an alternation of rhymes, rhythm, vocabulary, literary devices and multiple themes deriving from a general disorder. Using Geoffrey Leech's five levels of stylistic analysis-phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical and thematic- this study examines every linguistic feature and literary device integrated in the poem. The analysis reveals that Trenité's poem employs various rhyme schemes and types efficiently, as well as alliteration, combined rhythms, punctuation marks, syntactic inversion, enumeration, a range of vocabulary from colloquial to scientific, and several literary devices to expose the chaotic nature of English spelling and pronunciation. The study is conspicuously significant for linguists, students and new learners, to whom the issue of mispronunciation is still a universal challenge.

Keywords: *stylistic analysis, five levels, pronunciation, figurative language*

1. Introduction

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Stylistics refers to a branch of linguistics which explores the entirety of expressive resources within a language. Originally introduced by the French linguist Charles Bally, it concerns how a language enables the communication of thoughts and becomes a source of experiences that enrich the literary vocabulary and speech. Furthermore, stylistics also studies the delivery of emotions through language and the effect that language has on evoking emotions to their fullest extent or limiting their possibilities. Its primary goal is to pinpoint those components, within a literary or non-literary text, that manage to convey linguistic effects. The latter is achieved through a thorough analysis, considering syntactic, phonological, lexical, semantic and graphical patterns.

1.6. Research Objectives and Questions

The main objective of this study is to conduct a stylistic analysis of the poem “*The Chaos*” by Gerard Nolst Trenité, applying the framework of the five stylistic levels proposed by Geoffrey Leech. Through this analysis, this research aims to explore the poem’s linguistic complexity and its illustrative value in highlighting irregularities within the English language.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which stylistic features are most prominent in “*The Chaos*” when analyzed across Leech’s five levels of stylistic analysis?
2. To what extent does the stylistic analysis of “*The Chaos*” reveal systematic patterns of linguistic irregularity in English?

1.2 Levels of Stylistic Analysis

The process of making a complete stylistic analysis of literary works requires undergoing certain stages. In this article, only the five main levels proposed by Leech are listed in the upcoming sections.

- i. **Phonological level:** Refers to the study of sound patterns and devices used in language to set the meaning, tone and atmosphere, as well as rules of pronunciation.
- ii. **Graphological level:** The study of the visual aspects of the written language, including typography, punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

- iii. **Grammatical level:** The study of the structure and construction of sentences in a certain language.
- iv. **Lexical level:** The study of the words and vocabulary used in a literary extract, such as word choice, diction, connotative and denotative counterparts, as well as figurative language.
- v. **Thematic level:** The study of underlying ideas, themes and messages in a text through motifs or symbolism.

1.3 Introduction of the poet, Gerard Nolst Trenité (1870-1946)

Gerard Nolst Trenité was a writer and traveler from the Netherlands. He was born in 1870 and attended the University of Utrecht to study political science, law, and classics before receiving a degree (his doctorate was awarded in 1901). He began working as a private educator in California in 1894, and at the time taught the boys of the Consul-General of the Netherlands. In addition to publishing a study on the Dutch constitution and a number of English and French schoolbooks, he taught in Haarlem from 1901 to 1918. Employing the alias Charivarius, he worked on a linguistic column for a weekly newspaper in Amsterdam from 1909 until his death in 1946.

1.4 Introduction of the poem, “The Chaos”

“The Chaos” was first recorded in an appendix (Aanhangsel) to the fourth edition of the textbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: Engelscheuitspraakoefeningen*, written by Nolst Trenité. Prior to the 1947 revision, the book itself naturally utilized the Dutch spelling trend. In contrast to the 274 lines we currently provide (four more than in our 1986 version), the earliest edition of the poem, titled “De Chaos”, only included 146 lines and italicized words with incorrect spellings. The several versions of *Drop Your Foreign Accent*, from the first (without the poem) in 1909 to the posthumous eleventh revised edition in 1961, demonstrate the book's widespread significance. The poem was almost twofold in length by the time the 7th edition (1944) was published, the last version to be published during its writer's lifetime. Given the large number of publications and the poem's constant growth, it is not surprising that so many distinct versions have been published in various countries around the world.

A vast collection of about eight hundred of the most acknowledged anomalies within the conventional English spelling, “The Chaos” is an exceptional work. It is expertly versified (although with a few difficult lines) into 274 couplets with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes. Not every rhyme will "click" right away ("grits" for "groats"), and a number of the instances mentioned and pronunciations seem a little out of date. In fact, some of the words may even be unfamiliar to modern readers (how many will know what a "studding-sail" is, or that its nautical pronunciation is "stunsail"?). Nevertheless, the vast majority of the poem is as valid a condemnation of the confusion of English spelling as it ever was. Although a mimeographed recording of the poem in Harry Cohen's custody has been attributed to "Miss Susanne Delacruix, Paris," it is unclear who the "dearest creature in creation" mentioned in the opening line - who is also referred to as "Susy" in line 5 - might have been. She was perhaps a pupil of Nolst Trenité. Readers will observe that “The Chaos” is narrated regarding the perspective of an English language learner.

2. Literature Review

"The Chaos" by Gerard Nolst Trenité is a masterful poem that showcases the complexities and irregularities of the English language. Through its clever use of homophones, homographs, and other linguistic peculiarities, the poem highlights the challenges of English pronunciation and spelling for language learners and native speakers. Due to its status as one of the most complex poems, it has found a wide range of applications in different fields. Research has shown that "The Chaos" is a valuable resource for linguists and language learners alike. The poem's exploration of the English language's phonetic and orthographic inconsistencies provides insight into the language's complexities and nuances. For example, the poem's use of words like "bough" and "cough" illustrates the challenges of predicting pronunciation based on spelling (The Chaos - Gerard Nolst Trenité). Other studies have suggested that “The Chaos” can be a useful tool in language instruction, particularly improving the students’ pronunciation and speaking skills in English (Masykuri, 2023) and testing grade 9 students whose main issue stood in the irregular pronunciation of words referring to the poem (Pantano & Ponce, 2024).

Furthermore, it communicates a sort of reality encoded by the writer through some linguistic levels, which originates from the message at its semantic level, built

upon its syntactical devices to be graphologically expressed, so that the reader will be able to first decode the visual aspect of the text, then delve into analyzing possible meanings and themes (Leech & Short, 2007). In the fourth edition of “Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) highlight the prominence of Systemic Functional Linguistics being practically used to clarify how certain grammatical choices, affected by the state of affairs, contribute to constructing suggestive meanings. As much as it appears confusing for any foreigner when facing words resembling pronunciation or spelling, put one after another, the extensive use of conjunctions, for example, or similarly-pronounced words, conveys this sense of arising confusion and frustration effectively.

3. Research Methodology

This analysis is based upon the use of dictionary books (Wales, 2014), documents from websites (CORE), articles about stylistics (Zhukovska, 2010) and recent studies on the significance of the poem in enhancing the language, its practice and giving linguists and researchers the opportunity to conduct experiments and analyze its content from multiple points of view. The examination of the author's style and diction is achieved through an interpretive and measurable strategy. Concrete examples from the poem, such as referring to particular lines, stanzas or words, are used to best illustrate and structure the stylistic analysis in its five levels. Initially, the poem is analyzed in a phonological perspective, and the most representative examples are used to support the argument. The same procedure is followed for the upcoming levels with their distinctive characteristics. Additionally, to provide correct quantitative data, the entire poem is taken into consideration. The research paper’s structure and format are based on (Abro, 2023).

4. Stylistic Analysis

4.1 Phonological level

Rhyme

“The Chaos” is a humorous, satirical poem. Its rhyme scheme is varied and does not follow a consistent pattern.

- *Onomatopoeia* refers to the use of words that phonetically imitate or suggest the source of the sound they describe, such as the word 'hiccough'.

- *End rhyme* occurs when two units are matched by identical sequences of sounds stretching from the vowel to the end of the word. (E.g.: Rounded, wounded, grieve and **sieve**, / Friend and fiend, alive, and **live**.)
- *Internal rhyme* appears as a repetition of vowels and consonant sounds within the line. (E.g.: **Soul**, but **foul** and **gaunt** but aunt. / **Font**, **front**, **won't**, **grand**, and **grant**.)
- *Antistheconis* is the substitution of sounds to create deliberately imperfect rhymes. (E.g.: And your pronunciation's **O.K.** / When you say correctly: **croquet**.)
- *Perfect rhyme* appears among words that have identical sounds and stress patterns (E.g.: But be careful how you **speak**, / Say break, steak, but bleak and **streak**.) The second line has an internal rhyme also.
- *Full rhyme* presupposes identity of the lower sound and the following consonant sounds in a stressed syllable. (E.g.: "Wholly, holly...")
- *Slant rhyme* is the repetition of both initial and final consonants. (E.g.: **break-bleak**, **steak-streak**)
- *Initial rhyme or alliteration* refers to the repetition of the initial consonant of the word. (E.g.: **blossom**, **bossom**...)
- *In-eye rhyme* introduces a special circumstance of words' pronunciation in which their letters are identical but not sounds. (E.g.: tomb, bomb, comb...)

Rhythm

Rhythm is a regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Its main unit in poetic speech is foot, which consists of one stressed syllable (S) and one unstressed syllable (U) or two. Depending on the combination of these syllables there are also other types of feet. Some of them are to be found even in the poem:

- **Iamb**: U-S (Com-**pare**): Line 114
- **Trochee**: S-U (**Ca**-mel): Line 65
- **Dactyl**: S-U-U (**which** rimes with...?): Line 143
- **Anapests**: U-U-S (It's a **dark**...): Line 137

4.2 Graphological level

The final version of the poem is structured in rhyming couplets, which go up to 274 in total.

All 274 lines start with capital letters, each of them conveying a particular meaning, connected to one another and with other stanzas through rhythm, internal, external rhymes and the logical flow of thoughts.

Pronunciation-think of *Psyche*!-

Is a paling, stout and *spiky*.

Won't it make you lose your *wits*

Writing *groats* and saying "*grits*"?

Meanwhile, there do not appear to be many types of punctuation marks used within the poem besides commas, question marks, and full stops.

Full stop: The author has used 59 full stops in the poem, in the end of couplets or emphasized words.

Comma: Approximately, there are 331 commas. Their use is more extensive compared to other punctuation marks for several reasons:

- Highlighting contrast: "***Bough, cough, dough, though***"
- Create rhythm: "***Shoes, goes, does. Now first say: finger. / And then: singer, ginger, linger.***"
- Illustrate linguistic nuances: "***Will, collect, and inject.***"

Question mark: Seldom used, but they pose rhetorical questions about the in-eye rhyme cases, as well as emphasizing the confusion and suspicion that foreign learners face while being put in such tricky linguistic situations.

- "Won't it make you lose your wits, / Writing "groats" and saying "grits"?"
- "Don't you think so, reader, rather, / Saying lather, bather, father?"
- "Finally, which rhymes with "enough" / Though, through, plough, cough, hough, or tough?"

4.3 Grammatical level

In its entirety, the poem is constructed by simple and complex sentences. Some of them are incomplete for literary reasons and for creating humorous effects. What is distinctive about this poem is that most of it does not have actual sentences, but instead there are more parallel-construction types of phrases. Other syntactical expressive means are also present, but less used than the latter.

- **Inversion** is a reversal of the normal or expected word order for literary purposes. (E.g.: “*Tear in eye your dress you’ll tear*” instead of “You’ll tear your dress in your eye’s tear”)
- **Parallel construction** consists of identical or similar structures in two or more parts of a sentence. (E.g.: “Just compare *heart, beard and heard, / Dies and diet, lord and word*”)
- **Enumeration:**
 - Of words with similar sounds: “*Sally with ally, yea, ye, / Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, key, quay*”
 - Highlighting pronunciation complexities by listing words: “*Previous, precious, fuchsia, via*”
 - Of words with unique pronunciations: “*Tortoise, turquoise, chamois-leather*”
- **Anticlimax** is a rhetorical device in which a statement or situation builds up to an expected climax, but instead resolves in a less intense or even humorous way. The poem’s final line is a great example of anticlimax “*My advice is-give it up!*” After an overwhelming attempt to grasp all of the hardest words to pronounce, the author suggests that it is nearly impossible to master them.
- **Asyndeton** is defined as the omission of conjunctions in a sentence or phrase. (E.g.: “*Pipe, snipe, recipe and choir*”)
- **Polysyndeton** is the term which clearly suggests the use of multiple conjunctions between words or clauses. (E.g.: “Lumber, plumber, bier, *but* brier doesn’t exactly fit, *but* / Viscous, Viscount, load, *and* broad. / Toward, to forward, to reward”)

4.4 Lexical level

One could rightfully consider this poem as a mix of encyclopedia, history, language, literature, everyday experiences because of the all-inclusive nature of the words. It is indeed a “vocabulary” which does not exclude:

- **Archaic words:** Words like “*Wholly*”, “*holly*”, and “*doth*” give the poem a nearly antiquated feel.
- **Literary allusions:** References to “*Terpsichore*” (the muse of dance) and “*Melpomene*” (the muse of tragedy)

- **Domain-specific vocabulary words:** Words like “*phlegmatic*”, “*anemone*”, and “*chamois-leather*” demonstrate a wide range of vocabulary.
- **Proper nouns:** Names of places like “*Thames*”, “*Islington*” and “*Isle of Wight*” add geographical nuances.
- **Terminology:** Words like “*phonetic labyrinth*” and “*rime*” highlight the poem’s primary focus on language and pronunciation.
- **Playful language:** The use of puns and clever turns of phrases add to the poem’s overall witty nature. For example: “*Tear* in eye your dress you’ll *tear*” The word “tear” has two meanings:
 - **A drop of liquid** (tear in the eye)
 - **To rip or pull apart** (tear the dress)

This diversity of expressions, almost unbeatable playfulness and exhausting complexity, all reflect the poet’s love towards language and its mazes with no exit points.

Keeping count of the most used parts of speech in the poem, nouns cover the most of it, with around 300 of them; then there are over 100 verbs and more than 30 adjectives, around 50 pronouns counting the times they are repeated and around 15 adverbs. It needs to be clarified that there are plenty of cases when a single word can function as a noun and verb at the same time. When its correct part of speech is ambiguous due to the lack of context, it can be considered as a part of both categories, or counted twice in terms of quantitative data. For example, in the 34th couplet, specifically the 68th line, the word *promise* in “Wait, surmise, plait, promise, pal.” does not determine whether it means the verbal act declaring that a human being will fulfill the expectations, or the term used instead of the assurance and belief over future plans.

On the contrary, when the author has used the word under a recognizable frame of reference, the classification is done accurately. Such is the case of the 40th couplet: “Pussy, hussy and *possess*, / Desert, but dessert, *address*.” Speaking of the correlation among these two lines, rhythmic patterns serve as valid guiders. If the stress of the first line falls in the second syllable of “possess”, it will automatically occur that the ending sequence of the next line will be stressed in the second syllable of “address”. In this way, rhythm not only fixes the coherent and cohesive connection for these specific lines, but

additionally determines the word class for “address”, that is not a noun, but belongs to verbs.

Literary Devices

- **Enjambment** is the prolongation of sentences or phrases into the next line without being interrupted by punctuation. (E.g.: “Dearest creature in creation / Studying English pronunciation”)
- **Metaphor** is a comparison between two unlike things, be those objects, qualities, ideas, phenomena or human beings, confronting one another and being interconnected to describe one’s trait or quality through the other’s specific characteristic. (E.g.: This phonetic labyrinth)
- **Personification** is a transference of human qualities by attributing them to non-human entities. (E.g.: “Pronunciation -- think of psyche--!”)
- **Satire** is a way of using humor to critique the English pronunciation: “My advice is -- give it up!”
- **Simile** is also a comparison between two unlike things, furthermore using “like” or “as”. (E.g.: “Strewn with stones, *like* rowlock, gunwale”)

4.5 Thematic level

After a highly detailed analysis, it is clearly expressed that the main theme of the poem is the chaos that comes along with encountering a new language, system, and cultural values. It stands in the complexity of English pronunciation, the challenges non-native speakers have to handle as they delve deeper into a second language and those characteristics that, unlike other languages, make English unique in its way. As much as it pokes fun, at the same time, it makes an individual wonder about their native language, the ways it can also become that tremendous and error-prone while trying to find its core.

5. Discussion

The opening couplet of the poem implies that the author is not writing about his inner reflections and concerns, but rather addressing the group of individuals who have

to deal with the most commonly mispronounced words of the English language. It then proceeds to put in the spotlight, by having them divided into groups or respective couplets, common words with a puzzling effect in the way they are arranged and enumerated. Some of them produce the homophonic effect, that is to say, words may have the same or equivalent pronunciation but have different meanings; or words that at first glance appear to be pronounced all alike, but result in incorrect application of rules, or, as widely recognized, in-eye rhyme examples. The use of graphological devices such as commas intensifies the overall mayhem, as the conjunctions or inverted structures do. Even the most unembellished words turn out to be as enigmatic as others, within the bounds of the poem's context. The poet has played masterfully with each word, speaking of their place in a sentence or line, their order, mistaken pronunciations, detecting errors, integrating multiple types of rhymes, as well as meaning and vocabulary, which is to be encountered abundantly in a 274-line-long poem. At this point, it is not a lexical choice anymore, but a lexical game of more than eight hundred words combined uniquely not to suggest solutions, but to perplex readers.

6. Conclusion

“The Chaos” by Gerard Nolst Trenité was written, as a name is mentioned in the poem, presumably to one of Trenité’s students. However, it exposes in a clever manner the intricacies of English pronunciation and spelling. Through its use of wordplay, rhyme, and plenty of other literary devices, it sheds light on the language’s complex patterns. Each of the devices suggested in the poem is to be found among the five perspectives of a thorough stylistic analysis, in which word count, every punctuation mark, their classification, and their correlation with graphological, syntactic and semantic complements visualize and construct the long-lasting effect of such a literary masterpiece. For such a complicated poem, to grasp the whole dimensions of turmoil is the result of being perfectly interconnected in terms of the logic among couplets which have a standalone meaning but still are supported by the next couplet, by presenting another scale of difficulty to the reader. By embracing the absurdities of English, the author is implementing in readers’ minds the fact that every language has its distinctive characteristics. It can be perceived as a satire towards language, it may also be considered as an adventurous experience, however the impact it has left is still to be found nowadays.

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Appendix

G. NolstTrenité, "Charivarius" The Chaos (1922)

Dearest creature in creation
Studying English pronunciation,
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse
I will keep you, Susy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy.
Tear in eye your dress you'll tear,
So shall I! Oh, hear my prayer,
Pray, console your loving poet,
Make my coat look new, dear, sew it!
Just compare heart, beard and heard,
Dies and diet, lord and word,
Sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it's written).
Made has not the sound of bade,
Say said, pay-paid, laid, but plaid.
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as vague and ague,
But be careful how you speak,
Say break, steak, but bleak and streak.
Previous, precious, fuchsia, via,
Pipe, snipe, recipe and choir,
Cloven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, shoe, poem, toe.
Hear me say, devoid of trickery:
Daughter, laughter and Terpsichore,
Typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles.
Exiles, similes, reviles.
Wholly, holly, signal, signing.
Thames, examining, combining
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,

Solar, mica, war, and far.
From "desire": desirable--admirable from "admire."
Lumber, plumber, bier, but brier.
Chatham, brougham, renown, but known.
Knowledge, done, but gone and tone,
One, anemone. Balmoral.
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel,
Gertrude, German, wind, and mind.
Scene, Melpomene, mankind,
Tortoise, turquoise, chamois-leather,
Reading, reading, heathen, heather.
This phonetic labyrinth
Gives moss, gross, brook, brooch, ninth, plinth.
Billet does not end like ballet;
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet;
Blood and flood are not like food,
Nor is mould like should and would.
Banquet is not nearly parquet,
Which is said to rime with "darky."
Viscous, Viscount, load, and broad.
Toward, to forward, to reward.
And your pronunciation's O.K.,
When you say correctly: croquet.
Rounded, wounded, grieve, and sieve,
Friend and fiend, alive, and live,
Liberty, library, heave, and heaven,
Rachel, ache, moustache, eleven,
We say hallowed, but allowed,
People, leopard, towed, but vowed.
Mark the difference, moreover,
Between mover, plover, Dover,
Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,
Chalice, but police, and lice.
Camel, constable, unstable,

Principle, disciple, label,
Petal, penal, and canal,
Wait, surmise, plait, promise, pal.
Suit, suite, ruin, circuit, conduit,
Rime with "shirk it" and "beyond it."
But it is not hard to tell,
Why it's pall, mall, but Pall Mall.
Muscle, muscular, gaol, iron,
Timber, climber, bullion, lion,
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, and chair,
Senator, spectator, mayor,
Ivy, privy, famous, clamour
And enamour rime with hammer.
Pussy, hussy, and possess,
Desert, but dessert, address.
Golf, wolf, countenance, lieutenants.
Hoist, in lieu of flags, left pennants.
River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,
Doll and roll and some and home.
Stranger does not rime with anger.
Neither does devour with clangour.
Soul, but foul and gaunt but aunt.
Font, front, won't, want, grand, and grant.
Shoes, goes, does. Now first say: finger.
And then: singer, ginger, linger,
Real, zeal, mauve, gauze, and gauge,
Marriage, foliage, mirage, age.
Query does not rime with very,
Nor does fury sound like bury.
Dost, lost, post; and doth, cloth, loth;
Job, Job; blossom, bosom, oath.
Though the difference seems little,
We say actual, but victual.
Seat, sweat; chaste, caste.; Leigh, eight, height;

Put, nut; granite, and unite.
Reefer does not rime with deafer,
Feoffer does, and zephyr, heifer.
Dull, bull, Geoffrey, George, ate, late,
Hint, pint, Senate, but sedate.
Scenic, Arabic, Pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific,
Tour, but our and succour, four,
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.
Sea, idea, guinea, area,
Psalm, Maria, but malaria,
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean,
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.
Compare alien with Italian,
Dandelion with battalion.
Sally with ally, yea, ye,
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, key, quay.
Say aver, but ever, fever.
Neither, leisure, skein, receiver.
Never guess--it is not safe:
We say calves, valves, half, but Ralph.
Heron, granary, canary,
Crevice and device, and eyrie,
Face but preface, but efface,
Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Large, but target, gin, give, verging,
Ought, out, joust, and scour, but scourging,
Ear but earn, and wear and bear
Do not rime with here, but ere.
Seven is right, but so is even,
Hyphen, roughen, nephew, Stephen,
Monkey, donkey, clerk, and jerk,
Asp, grasp, wasp, and cork and work.
Pronunciation--think of psyche--!

Is a paling, stout and spikey,
Won't it make you lose your wits,
Writing "groats" and saying "grits"?
It's a dark abyss or tunnel,
Strewn with stones, like rowlock, gunwale,
Islington and Isle of Wight,
Housewife, verdict, and indict!
Don't you think so, reader, rather,
Saying lather, bather, father?
Finally: which rimes with "enough"
Though, through, plough, cough, hough, or tough?
Hiccough has the sound of "cup."
My advice is--give it up!