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Poetry

The terms *poetry* and *poetics* have ranges of use beyond language. Poetry can express aesthetic pleasure in almost any sphere ("sheer poetry," "poetry in motion"). Poetics can apply the sense of "making" of the classical Greek verb *poein* to shaping in any or all aspects of cultural life. Here I will consider only shaping of language.

One kind of shaping of language has to do with "fashions of speaking." Characteristic ways of naming, predicating and interacting in one language may differ from those in another, and suggest differences in the ways users of the languages interpret aspects of their worlds. When users of Wasco encountered windows, someone coined a nominalized verb theme that is literally "they-two-see-each-other-through-it," a choice ratified by others.

Such a coinage fits other features of the language, including its system of tenses. The directional marker preceding transitive verb stems is not simply either "to" or "from," but "from this point to that" or "from that point to this." Recent elaboration of the tense system to distinguish near and distant in the future and remote past cannot be explained without recognizing analogy from this bipolar orientation.

Such "cognitive styles" can sometimes be traced not only within a language but also in its use. For speakers of Wasco-Wishram Chinook, unqualified use of the future tense has depended upon certainty that something will happen, and so do certain events of disclosure (of a guardian spirit experience, of a personal name, of myths).

Interest in such matters has focused on features of languages as determinants of perception, cognition, conduct and behavior. Their effect of course depends partly on situational factors. Still the existence of cognitive styles is itself evidence of a shaping relation between a language and its users. Users of the language have put them there.

Those skeptical of language as a constraint on thought and behavior still may accept it as a constraint on poetry. But what is poetry? A definition that fits its diversity is organization in terms of relations within and among

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lines. What can count as a line depends in part on the makeup of the language.

In many traditions lines are in some sense metrical, defined by internal count. What is counted may be syllables (haiku, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Daryush), or alliterating syllables (Old and some Middle English), or types of feet as short and long (classical Greek, Latin), or one type (six iambic feet make an alexandrine), or tone sequences of certain kinds (Classical Chinese). Of course relations among lines may play a part, through rhyme (sonnets, triolets) and changes of length (ballads, Ogden Nash).

Here languages differ as to material base. True, it is difficult to say what a language cannot be made to do. But if it has no tones, tone is out. Recurrence of a vowel is so common in Japanese as to be said to preclude rhyme. Still, there are forms in some languages in which every line rhymes, including a genre (*hitat baladi*) that is part of epic narratives in Egyptian Arabic.

Not all lines are metrical, of course. Recent decades have seen proliferation of free verse (sometimes called so only from failure to recognize its character), expressive use of space in placing lines and words on the page, varieties of prose poem, and new attention to forms combining verse and prose.

Spoken and written remain shibboleths, some valuing the oral as original, authentic, arising in performance, others drawn to meanings that external silence permits to emerge. (Some, of course, do not choose.) The work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord with Serbo-Croatian singers of epic is a reference point for this. They gave reason to believe that formulae in these epics and those of Homer ("rosy-fingered dawn") arose to make it possible to compose while performing. Stock formulae fitting metrical requirements at the ends of lines (dactylic hexameter in Homer) allowed a singer to improvise elsewhere with assurance of coming out right.

Some take formulae as defining all oral poetry. Others point out their limitations (not necessarily stock—epithets for Achilles may each have a point where they occur; not necessarily oral—consider Pope's command of phrases to fill thousands of heroic couplets). Still, oral epic has been central to societies across large stretches of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and its interpretation remains important.

For the most part, anthropologists have found poetry in songs. Obviously, songs have lines. Narratives presumably are prose, hence paragraphs. It now appears that oral narratives organize lines, are poetry as well. When heard, final sentence contours distinguish verses (a verse may have more than one line). Verses form stanzas; stanzas, scenes.

Many narratives transcribed by anthropologists exist now only on the page. Still, their form is recoverable. Time expressions, initial particles, turns at talk, and other features show relations, not within lines (meter), but among lines (measured verse)—what Roman Jakobson called "equivalence." Freed from arbitrary paragraphs, stories take on life. Lines, verses, and stanzas cohere in what Kenneth Burke called "arousal and satisfaction of expectation." Analysis as lines reveals imagination and power. This can serve those whose heritage the stories are, and be a kind of repatriation.

Probably there have always been anthropologists who wrote poetry. Today poetry has increasingly become a public way to convey ethnographic

experience. Do some aspects of experience find expression only or mainly in poetry? That would be a part of ethnography of ourselves, past and present—of our shaping and being shaped by language.

(See also *iconicity, ideophone, indexicality, literacy, meter, music, narrative, orality, oratory, particles, performativity, proverb, repetition, style, translation, voice*)

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