

PHONETICS AND THE STYLISTIC APPRECIATION OF A POETIC TEXT: FOCUS ON THE RHYTHM OF KISWAHILI VERSE

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This paper is based on two assumptions:

- 5 The rhythmic effect of a poetic text is inherent in the phonetic structure of the language in question.
- 6 An explicit understanding of the principles governing the speech rhythm of Kiswahili is necessary for an adequate stylistic appreciation of Kiswahili verse.

THE PROBLEM

There is a consensus that rhythm is a fundamental aesthetic property of poetry (see Abercrombie 1967; Lotman 1976; Grigson 1982). The available stylistic analyses of Kiswahili poetry generally fail to address the a question of rhythm. Where attempts are made, the description is both inaccurate and inadequate. There is therefore a need to reinterpret and redefine the notion of stylistic analysis in general, and poetic rhythm in particular, in so far as these refer to Kiswahili verse.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This discussion is founded on the assumption that stylistic features are basically properties of language. In this connection, style refers to the sum of linguistic features that seem to be characteristic of a discipline: especially a literary genre or register of a given historical period (see Wales 1989). Stylistic analysis seeks to establish the relationship between the artistic function and the more conventional use of language (see Leech 1981; Lefkowitz in Athikins and Morrow 1989). This treatment attempts to define the significance of formal linguistic features for the interpretation of texts.

The underlying assumption is that an adequate explanation of style requires a general knowledge of language structure and a specific understanding of the system in question. Stylistic analysis therefore draws on the models and terminology provided by the aspect of linguistic theory considered to be relevant. This discussion invokes the principles and assumptions of metrical phonology.

Metrical phonology (MP) is a syllable-based multi-linear theory of phonological description and analysis (see Anderson 1985; Hogg, McCully 1987; Goldsmith 1990). In metrical analysis, the utterance is broken into segments in a hierarchical order. Basic units of metrical organization are the syllable, stress foot, phonological word, and intonation phrase.

MP principally investigates the structure of stress and rhythm. The fact that these properties of speech are examined together implies that they are somehow interlined. Stress is essentially the relative prominence of syllables and higher level units. Rhythm refers to the temporal co-ordination of the intonation phrase and a minimal periodic unit such as the syllable or the stress foot. The minimal periodic unit is identified as the rhythmic metre of a given language.

APPLICATION TO PHONETICS

MP represents a polysystemic view of phonetics. The latter treats speech as a dynamic process in which phonological parameters are intricately co-ordinated in time. The chief effect of the dynamic view of speech is that it concentrates analytic attention on the time – varying parameters of the articulation. In this connection, modern phonetics recognizes the need to pay attention to the dynamics of speech such as rhythm.

Rhythm is an essential aesthetic property of speech (see Ladefoged 1982; Roach 1983; Lass 1984; Crystal 1987; Catford 1988). Underlying the notion of rhythm is the principle of a regular periodic beat. In phonetic literature the term isochronism (equal timing) is attached to the notion of a periodic recurrence.

Attributing the isochronic principle to speech presupposes that at some level of analysis the utterance in a language can be split into segments which are in a sense of equal duration. In some language such as Kiswahili, this segment is the syllable. In others such as English, it is the stress foot (see Roach 1983). The latter contains one stressed syllable and optionally one or two unstressed syllables.

Languages are therefore spoken with one of two rhythms: syllable – timed or stress-timed. In a syllable-timed rhythm, the stressed syllables occur unevenly but the syllables themselves tend to be of equal moraic duration. More refers to a unit of timing equivalent to the duration taken to articulate a V, Cv or VC unit (see Lehiste 1970).

In contrast, the syllables of a stress-timed rhythm continually vary in moraic duration on account of changing phonematic composition. The stressed syllables, on the other hand tend to be isochronous in succession. This means that these languages function on a stress dependent isochronism. A stress sensitive isochronism is illustrated by two authors: [1] Abercrombie (1967:98) and [2] Ladefoged (1982:109).

[1] (a) `which is/the `train/for` Crewe./` please`?

[2] (a) `Stresses/in `English/` tend to/re`cur at/` regular inter/vals/of `time.

The perceptual constancy of stressed syllables vis-à-vis variability of syllable structure in English, is more readily observed in the corresponding phonematic representations. In a phonematic representation (x) stands for stressed and </> for unstressed syllable.

1 (b)

X / / / x / / / x

Cvc vc/cv ccvc/cv ccv/ccvc

2(b)

x / / / x / / x / / / x / x / / / x / / / x / / / x

cccvcvc/vc vcccvc/cvcc cv/cvcv vc/cvcvcv/vccvcvcc/vc/cvc

The phonematic structure of English easily contrasts with the regularity of CV recurrence in Kiswahili, in view of the irregularity of word stress (see Polome 1967). The use of CV regularity is exemplified in the following verse of the poem 'Semani Wenye Kusema' by Abdilatif Abdalla (1973:26)

- (3) Muko wapi wenye ndimi, zenye makali ya wembe?
Mbona leo hamusemi, mu kimya kama mapumbe
Mwangoja yatimu kumi, halafu ndipo mulumbe?
Musijifanye migombe, semani wenye kusema.

Thus, Kiswahili and English can be considered representatives of syllable – and stress – timed rhythms, respectively. In one language, syllables occur at regular intervals whereas only stressed syllables are periodic in the other. In this sense, the two rhythms are mutually exclusive: when one unit is isochronous in succession the other will not be.

It can be considered logical to assume that insight into the structure of speech rhythm leads to a deeper understanding of the principles of versification. Stylistic analysis, in so far as it lays claim to objectivity and adequacy, should define the connection between speech rhythm and versification.

RELEVANCE FOR KISWAHILI POETRY

The notion of poetry is conceived with reference to the aesthetic. It therefore refers to the deliberate rhythmic manipulation of conventional linguistic forms for aesthetic effect (see Lotman 19776; Grigson 1982). The innovations are meant to enhance overall aesthetic effect rather than thematic expression. As such, the aesthetic effect is inherent in the structure of language itself.

The concept of poetry can also be considered from a functional point of view. From this point of view, the poetic text is recognizable as a communicative utterance produced by the author and perceived by the reader (see Chapman 1973). In a graphological statements of rhythm are not indicated but are supplied by the reader intuitively. The perception and appreciation of the rhythmic effect depends on a phonetic empathy with the target language.

The available literature generally agrees that the rhythm of everyday speech is the foundation of poetic verse (see Abercrombie 1967). Thus the principles governing speech

rhythm can be invoked for an appreciation of the properties of versification in so far as this concerns the use of rhythm. It can further be assumed that the prosody of Kiswahili verse employs a syllable-timed rhythm.

In view of this assumption, it would be interesting to examine the treatment of rhythm in the stylistic analysis of Kiswahili verse. Most authors (e.g. Kaluta Amri Abed) clearly emphasize the need for the use of a regular syllabic metre. There is however little overt reference to the notion of rhythm. The notion of rhythm is addressed by three analysts: Abdulaziz (1979); Kahigi and Mulokozi (1979).

The salient aspects of the description by Kahigi and Mulokozi (1979:40-2) reads:

(4) *Ridhimu ni mapigo asilia ya lugha. Kila lugha ina mawimbi ya sauti yenye kupanda na kushuka na yanayofungama na'maana.*

Ridhimu ya ushairi na muziki hutokana na mlingano wa mapigo ya lugha. Ridhimu ya ushairi hubidi ilingane na maudhui ya shairi hilo, isaidie kuyadhihirisha maudhui hayo kihisia, kimtiririko na kimsisitizo. Kwa mfano, kama shairi lasimulia tukio la kusimua na la kasi, itabidi mwendo wa shairi hilo pia uwe wa kasi.

Translation

Rhythm represents the natural beats of language^{1/4}

Every language has sound waves which rise and fall depending on the meaning ... Poetic and musical rhythms correspond with the beats of a language or sound system.... It is imperative that poetic rhythm correlates with the theme of the poem concerned, enhancing thematic delivery in terms of emotive content, flow and emphasis. For example, if a poem narrates an exciting and fast moving event, it also needs to be a fast moving text.

This definition is vague and distorted on two accounts. On the one hand it lays undue emphasis on thematic content. Questions of phonetic meaning should draw on the semantic rather than the phonetic resources of a language. In this connection, it is important for literary critics to distinguish the two key aspects of a poetic text: the formal expression and the thematic content. Otherwise, the second half of this definition could also refer to a prose-text.

In relation to thematic delivery, this definition incorporates the notion of tempo. The concept of tempo refers to the pace of delivery: whether fast or slow (see Dogil in gibbon 1984). While tempo is an interesting part of the part of the literary function, it must not be confused with the notion of rhythm even where free verse is concerned.

Abdulaziz (1971:67) describes and illustrates poetic rhythm in relation to classical Kiswahili verse. The definition runs as follows:

(5) In listening to the way "mashairi" are read today by members of the older generation. Certain rhythmic patterns emerge. The line would seem to be divided into feet which are stress-timed, which each foot having one

stressed syllable occurring on the penultimate syllable of the foot. The feet may have an equal number of syllables, giving rise to feet of different lengths, depending on the sense and feeling the reader is:

/Dunia/mti mkavu/kiumbe/siulemele

/Ukaufanyia nguvu/kuudhibiti/kwa ndole/

/Mtiwe/ni mtakavu/mara/ulikwangushile/

/Usione kwenda mbele/kurudi nyuma si kazi/

The foregoing description indicates inadequate knowledge of language rhythm in general and the Kiswahili rhythm in particular. In a stress-time rhythm the intervals between accented syllables are isochronous in duration. It is therefore rather odd that the "feet" depicted above portray a discrepancy ranging from three to eight monomoraic syllables.

A stress-timed rhythm for Kiswahili is an unlikely feature. It can be observed that the syllables of this language are regularly mono-moraic units and therefore compatible with a syllable-timed rhythm. It is a viable conclusion that this author erroneously applies the English rhythm on Kiswahili verse.

CONCLUSION

The goal of stylistic analysis should not be simply to describe the formal features for their own sake but in order to relate literary effects to speech performance. The motivating question should not be so much what, but also how and why, the aesthetic effect is achieved. By referring to the specific aspect of the linguistic system involved, the literary critic can avoid vague and impressionistic judgements about the way formal features are manipulated in the course of linguistic creativity. Stylistic analysis, if systematically handled, not only enables the critic to present an adequate appreciation of artistic achievement but also enhances objectivity and insight into language use. Notable is the fact that insight and understanding are basic goals of the scientific enterprise. It is therefore logical to conclude that the understanding of language structure, and not just language in the literary context, leads to a meaningful appreciation of the writers artistic achievement.

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