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## **The Music of Syntactic Space: Legato vs. Staccato of Contemporary American Poetry**

**Abstract:** The article focuses on two types of free verse organization of contemporary American poetry texts – legato and staccato – revealing specific cognitive mechanisms of their perception which are claimed to be dependent on the reader’s pre-conceptual, bodily experience grounded in the spatial image-schemas.

**Keywords:** contemporary American poetry, syntactic space, legato, staccato, image-schema.

Contemporary American poetry texts, written chiefly in free verse, are devoid of rhyme and meter, and yet they can’t be equated with prose texts due to special syntactic arrangement and graphical ordering of lines. In this paper we assume that free verse prosody, i.e. rhythm, stress and intonation, primarily depend on the syntactic organization of the poem and its graphic segmentation<sup>1</sup> which are reinforced by the expressive means and stylistic devices of the phonetic and lexical levels of the poetic text. The goal of this article is to trace specific ways of graphico-syntactic organization of contemporary American poetry texts and disclose cognitive mechanisms which account for perception of different types of free verse poems.

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<sup>1</sup> Urbańska, D. *Wiersz wolny. Próba charakterystyki systemowej* [Free Verse. An Attempt at Systematic Description]. – Warszawa: IBL, 1995.

The present study is conducted in the framework of cognitive linguistics (G.Lakoff<sup>1</sup>, M.Johnson<sup>2</sup>, M.Turner<sup>3</sup>) and cognitive poetics (R.Tsur<sup>4</sup>). While cognitive linguistics is mainly interested in underlying mechanisms of form-meaning interaction of language and speech units, cognitive poetics is mostly centred on the aesthetic effect produced by literary texts on the reader and the cognitive mechanisms involved in the process of their perception and interpretation. We proceed from the assumption that the perception of contemporary American poetry texts is also guided by specific cognitive mechanisms which regulate the reader's processing of the poetic meaning.

In cognitive terms the meaning of linguistic units is equated with conceptualization<sup>5</sup>, the process of forming concepts of objects and phenomena of the objective reality and the relations between them, with human cognition characterized as embodied and spatial. Following the assumption that our knowledge and experience come from the world through our bodies, the meaning of poetic syntactic constructions may be interpreted as embodied and understood due to particular spatial image-schemas enrooted in human cognition. We claim that the most common image-schemas guiding the comprehension of syntactic constructions and syntactic relations between their elements are OBJECT, LINEAR SCALE, PART-WHOLE, CONNECTION, REPETITION, BALANCE, CYCLE, LINK, SPLITTING, MERGING, BLOCKAGE, CONTACT, NEAR-FAR etc. From this standpoint a poetic syntactic construction is OBJECT whose structure is organized in terms of PART-WHOLE schema, with the construction being WHOLE and the word-groups or words constituting it treated as PARTS which can be ordered either on the LINEAR SCALE in CONNECTION or SPLIT without CONTACT<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Лакофф Дж. Женщины, огонь и опасные вещи: Что категории говорят нам о мышлении. – М.: Языки славянской культуры, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson M. The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason. – Chicago; L.: University of Chicago Press, 1987. – 227 p.

<sup>3</sup> Turner M. Figurative Language and Thought.– Available: <http://markturner.org/figure.WWW/fc.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Tsur R. Aspects of Cognitive Poetics. – Available: [http://www.tau.ac.il/%7Etsurxx/2Cognitive\\_Poetics.html](http://www.tau.ac.il/%7Etsurxx/2Cognitive_Poetics.html).

<sup>5</sup> Langacker R. W. Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Theoretical Prerequisites. – Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. – V.1

<sup>6</sup> Lakoff G. Metaphors We Live By / G. Lakoff, M. Johnson. – Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.

In our analysis of contemporary American poetry (4000 texts) we have traced two distinct modes of graphico-syntactic arrangement which can be defined as *legato* and *staccato syntax*. The terms “legato” and “staccato” were originally borrowed from music theory. This association of poetry with music is no innovation. In fact, 20-th century art was marked by the idea of music-poetry synthesis which postulates the proximity of these two arts. The musical term “legato” (It. “connect”) is chiefly used in music theory to denote fluent musical performance with musical notes played or sung smoothly, without abrupt turns and with no intervening silence. Legato music performance is opposed to staccato (It. “disrupt”) which is characterized by abrupt, disconnected sounds<sup>1</sup>. Using this analogy in reference to poetic texts we view legato type of syntactic organization as the one which is represented by full-fledged sentences which rarely demonstrate syntactic violations and varying length of poetic lines, staccato syntactic structure is associated with short, elliptical, abrupt sentences, grammatical distortions and various syntactic experiments often accompanied by violation of the graphic segmentation of the poetic text.

A set of syntactic units and the linking devices exploited by the author in a particular poetic piece makes up the *syntactic space* of a poetic text which, in its turn, is claimed to have image-schematic structure. The author’s way of constructing syntactic space, i.e. the choice of graphic and syntactic means, predetermines the peculiarities of the perception and the general aesthetic effect the text produces on the reader – that of euphony, harmony (legato syntax), or cacophony, unbalance and discord (staccato syntax). This effect is achieved as certain image-schemas get activated in the reader’s pre-conceptual experience during the contact with the poetic text. A classic example of legato syntax is a fragment of the poetic text by a contemporary Indian American poet T.Doshi “The Immigrant’s Song”:

You might set your memory afloat  
like a paper boat down a river.

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<sup>1</sup> Ardley N. Music: An Illustrated Encyclopedia. – N.Y.; Oxford: Facts on File Publ., 1986.

You might pray that the paper  
whispers your story to the water,  
that the water sings it to the trees,  
that the trees howl and howl  
it to the leaves. If you keep still  
and do not speak, you might hear  
your whole life fill the world  
until the wind is the only word<sup>1</sup>.

The beginning of the poetic fragment is based on parallelism (*You might set your memory afloat ... You might pray that the paper*) which transforms into chain repetition (*that the paper whispers your story to the water, that the water sings it to the trees, that the trees howl and howl*) which activate the image-schema REPETITION. The predominance of complex sentences with conjunctions *that, if, until* activates the image-schema LINK. Demonstrating no syntactic violations, the poetic text is organized in terms of the image-schemas LINEAR ORDER, SEQUENCE which produce upon the reader the impression of an organized entity or legato syntax. This effect is further reinforced by the imagery of the text – simile, or comparison of *memory* to *a paper boat* which evokes the features of *slow movement, flow*. Sound-instrumenting means – alliteration, the repetition of consonants *m, p, w* at the beginning of words, and assonance, the repetition of similar vowels *e, i*, diphthongs *ai, ei* in stressed positions – create the effect of euphony, a sense of ease and comfort. The graphical form is traditional, there are no twists and turns or dead cuts. We believe that the creation of such a coherent structure is intentional as it accords with the title of the text – “The Immigrant’s Song” – and is used to create the image of a person’s recollections.

Cases of staccato syntax are much more numerous in contemporary American poetry which can be accounted for by the general tendency of modern art, and poetry in particular, to reflect the processes of instability and chaos

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<sup>1</sup> Doshi T. The Immigrant’s Song. – Available: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/247094>

prevalent in the modern world. The poetic fragment of “Aubade with burning city” by O.Vuong is a vivid example of staccato syntactic organization:

The song moving through the city like a widow.

*A white... A white... I'm dreaming of a curtain of snow*

falling from her shoulders.

Snow crackling against the window. Snow shredded

with gunfire. Red sky.

Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.

A helicopter lifting the living just out of reach.

The city so white it is ready for ink.

The radio saying run run run.

Milkflower petals on a black dog

like pieces of a girl's dress<sup>1</sup>.

The syntactic organization of the fragment is based on the deliberate omission of the auxiliary verb *to be* as part of compound verbal predicate (*The song moving through the city like a widow... a curtain of snow falling from her shoulders* etc). The usage of Participles I, or *-ing* forms, which denote progress, duration, unfolding in time, imitate the sounding of music (“*aubade*” – *a poem or piece of music appropriate to the dawn or early morning*). In the first line of the poem aposiopesis, or break of the narrative (*A white... A white...*) is used to present the fragments of the song echoing throughout the city. The nominative sentence *Red sky* adds to the description of the morning city. All these expressive means taken together activate the image-schema SPLITTING which accounts for the effect the text produces on the reader – that of a chaotic, disorganized entity,

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<sup>1</sup> Vuong O. Aubade with Burning City. – Available: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/search/?q=vuong>

created by staccato syntax. The syntactic constructions interact with graphical means – disperse, scattered arrangement of lines and stanzas, enjambment (the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza) and the usage of italics. The poem contains elements of intertext, another feature of postmodern American poetry, presented by fragments of a famous Christmas song the reference to which is clear once you have read the introduction to the text – *“South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon”*. Thus, the usage of staccato syntactic organization, the tangible visible design of the poem in particular, creates the general atmosphere of depression, unrest and chaos producing the effect of cacophony which conveys to the reader the feeling of the commotion of that tragic morning.

The above analysis shows that two types of syntactic organization and graphical ordering of poetic texts which may produce the impression of a linear, well-organized structure (*legato*), or a disrupted, jumpy piece (*staccato*) prove to be effective tools of creating fresh, striking imagery in contemporary American poetry texts by way of activating corresponding image-schemas which are an integral part of the reader’s pre-conceptual, bodily experience.

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