Sound patterning: An index for generating meaning in poetry

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Abstract
The paper examines the functions of sound elements in poetry. Phonic features such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance and rhythm are used by writers not only as ornaments but also as containers of meaning. As a distinct genre of literature, poetry makes judicious use of sound elements and figurative expressions which enable the writer to say many things with few words. These sound elements are patterned in such a way to make the message of the writer vivid to the reader, unfortunately, the inability of the learner to recognize the functions of the phonic features, makes the study of poetry a “nightmare”. In this study some excerpts were selected and analysed, paying due attention to the patterning of the sound elements. The findings reveal that figures of sound are crafted by writers in a way to generate meaning. The paper concludes that to penetrate the message of a poet, one should consider how the writer manipulates the various phonological features.

Introduction
Every writer has a message for his audience and depending on the theme, he adopts communicative strategies that best suit his purpose. Again, the materials should also be helpful to the reader who strives to decode the message of the writer. Literature is a mode or method of expression which mirrors life’s experiences. It does not only depict something but also deploy a suitable method in portraying such a thing. Other disciplines merely express a thing. They are not concerned about the methods used in expressing ideas or messages. Literature is a functional, concrete, experiential and imaginative discipline which exerts diverse influence on humanity. It awakens imagination, enriches the mind and ennobles the human spirit. Ryken (1984) posits that literature is an interpretative presentation of human experience characterized by beauty, craftsmanship and techniques. This definition alludes that literature is incarnational in nature, in that the knowledge that literature provides of its subject is the kind that is obtained by living through an experience. Literature enables man to use language creatively. The application of figurative expressions is a veritable asset to a writer in his imaginative drive to entrench the reality of a situation. To a child, literature is the first light-giver to his ignorance. It is the first nurse to him, whose milk by little and little enabled him to feed later on tougher knowledge.

The study of literature is basically the study of a specific method as opposed to the study of subjects like Geography and Economics. Literature is the way and manner in which something is said or written. The critics are more interested on how a thing is said than what is said. This is why the relationship between matter and manner is water-tight and symbiotic. The essential thing in literature, therefore, is that it is a method or art with certain identifiable features. The three genres of literature are novel, poetry and drama. Each of them has the features of literature which essentially deals with the method or style of presenting a message.

The trio deals with how the resources of language are used in depicting life’s experiences. Although each of them has its peculiar style of invention and creation. The novel, for instance, suggests mainly by an invented series of story, drama enacts a story through actions, and poetry, by invented images or pictures. Of the three types of
literature, poetry is the most “economical” in the use of the resources of language. In poetry, many things are said with few words. Poetry makes judicious use of images, symbols and figurative expressions. This is the major reason, poetry is often difficult for a learner or reader to understand. Literary language is specific and characterized by deviations. Departures in literature, are undoubtedly the cause of linguistic oddities. The oddities in turn colour the language of literature. In the language of other disciplines, the occurrence of violations is sporadic whereas in literature, violations are intentional, meant to create some kinds of effects and functions.

The nature of poetry
Poetry formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm. Poetry is the art of rhythmical creation of beauty. The Macquaire dictionary defines poetry as the art of rhythmical composition written or spoken for exciting pleasure by beautiful imaginative or elevated thoughts. Di Yanni (1983) says that more than fiction, poetry is an art of condensation and implication; and that poems concentrate meaning and distil feeling. Poetry is a speaking picture while picture is mute poetry. Egudu (1977) defines it as a method of expression by suggestion through invented or created imagery, beat or rhythm and sound. One of the major functions of poetry is that it serves as a source of healing to the body and soul. Inaya (2014) notes that the poet prospects for materials in the world of harmony in which love, joy, happiness, truth are the beings or actors.

According to Egudu (1977), saying what poetry is, implies saying how poetry expresses thought by means of suggestion and invention. He notes that invention is effected first and what is invented is next used for suggesting meaning. The end product of invention and creation done in poetry is meaning. This meaning is mostly shrouded with the way the poet manipulates the resources of language. These materials which are deployed from the syntactic, graphological, lexical, semantic and phonological levels of language, are compressed in such a way that so many things are said with few words. That is why Onwukwe (2012:75) notes that “the analyst looks at all these levels; he takes into account the patterns of recurring sounds (e.g. rhyme, alliteration); graphics (i.e. graphological foregrounding); the choice of words and their distribution in relation to one another (paradigmatic and syntagmatic associations); the syntax. The analyst should focus on these different means of communicating meaning, and strives to see if there is a consistent use of a particular linguistic apparatus for communicating meaning. He then points this out as a stylistically significant feature of that text. When this is done, poetry will cease to be a “nightmare” to learners, since “its words are full of suggestion, of unrevealed meaning, a meaning which will grow out of them under the influence of thought and imagination (Egudu, 1977).

The language of poetry is replete with deviations. From the norm. This is triggered by “poetic license”; that is the poet has the freedom to use language in an unorthodox way. Some of the deviations include:

- coinages
- violation of language rules through the use of unusual collocations
- the use of sentences without subject; the nominalization of verbs.

Figures of sounds
The language of poetry is highly figurative, a feature which is mostly unique to it. Figures of speech are stretches of language
or lexical items whose meanings are not always a direct translation of what is overtly conveyed by the words contained in them. They are like idioms in that their meaning is not equal to the sum of the meanings of the individual words that make them up.

Ndimele (2007:166) notes that figures of speech have the following communicative values:

i. they create a stylistic effect or impression on the hearer
ii. they emphasize a point in discourse or to give additional communicative prominence to a particular phenomenon.
iii. they elicit some emotional response from the hearer, and
iv. they convey the emotional disposition of the speaker towards a particular phenomenon or situation.

Since the focus of this work is on sound patterning, we shall restrict our attention on figures of sounds:

- **Alliteration:** This is the repetition of a consonant in quick succession in a group of words for sound effect. Example: The mad man made a mat

- **Consonants** can be used in a poem to determine its texture which can be in consonance with the meaning of the poems. Onwukwe (2012) avers that liquids and nasals /l,r,m,n/ are said to suggest softness while the voiceless plosives /p,t,k/ suggest hardness.

- **Assonance:** It is the frequent succession of a specific vowel sound, especially in a line of verse or in a prose sentence: Example: The dog holds the bone in its jaw.

- **Onomatopoeia:** The formation of words in the imitation of the actual sound made: Example: Splash, bark, chirp, pong. It is the marriage of sounds with meaning.

- **Rhyme:** It is the similarity of sounds of words in different lines or in the same line of poetry. There are rules that can be used to govern rhyme, which can help the learner to determine if any two or more words actually rhyme.

Egudu (1977:54) gives the rules as:

i. The vowel sounds in the words must be identical, as in “share” and “spare”.
ii. The consonantal sounds following the vowels must also be identical as in “bang” and “clang”.
iii. The consonants immediately preceding the vowels must be different as in “share” and “spare”, “bang” and “clang”, “fan” and “van”. Each pair is only different in the initial position.
iv. The rhyming syllables should be accented alike as in the case with “purity” and “security”.

According to Egudu, the examples given above, are called perfect rhyme. The figures of sound are responsible for the presence of the phonic features which are largely considered and analysed when doing a stylistic analysis of poems. What is most striking and relevant is that these phonic features in most poems are organized and patterned in a way that they do not only serve as mere ornaments but are used to perform specific functions in poetry. Such patterning creates the rhythm of a poem which can help to make the message of the poet clear. Unfortunately, most readers or learners find it difficult to penetrate most poems as they find it hard to relate to the functions of these figures of sound as used in poetry.

**Rhythm and metre**

Rhythm is the melody of English. It is movement, beat, recurrence, alternation or
variation. In poetry, rhythm is determined by the position of accented and unaccented syllables that constitute the words of a poem. Egudu (1977) avers that the pattern in which stressed and unstressed syllables are combined in a line of poetry is called metre. Therefore, poetic rhythm is based on metre.

As was mentioned earlier, sound patterning performs a pivotal role in literary discourse, particularly in poetry. Rhythm and metre have an important bearing on the structure and interpretation of poetry. When a poem is being read aloud, it is the metre that enables the listener to know that the text is a poem, especially if the listener is a primary school pupil.

Simpson (2014:15) says that rhythm is a patterned movement of pulses in time which is defined by periodicity. Osisanwo (1998:116) defines rhythm as a regular succession of one type of sound feature or the other used in achieving melody and sometimes meaning in human language. Pike (1945) notes that the rhythm of a language is determined by how chest pulses and stress-pulses recur their mode of succession and coordination.

In every line of poetry, there are groups of stressed and unstressed syllables, but the number of each group differs from time to time. Every group must have at least one stressed syllable. Roash (1991:94) states that English speech has a rhythm that allows it to be divided into feet (more or less equal intervals of time). Each group forms a foot. If we have five groups in a line, there are five feet, and the rhythms in the line is determined in the manner in which the five feet or group are patterned in that line. If all five groups are similar, the rhythm will be regular, but if they are varied, the rhythm will be irregular.

Inaya (2014:70) distinguishes two types of rhythm to include:

i. Euphony: It is a type of rhythm whose sound is smooth, pleasant and musical to the ear and at the same time, pleasurable to the soul. This type of rhythm is characteristic of lullabies.

ii. Cacophony: In this type of rhythm, the sound is harsh, rough to the ear and soul. For example, the rhythm of the drum and song of war, depending on context, could be eerie to the pacific.

There are different types of metres which can be determined according to the number of, and ordering of their constituent stressed and unstressed syllables:

i. Iambic foot: It is a group having an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. It has the de-dum patterning:

By the margin willow veiled
s w s w s w
w s w s
w s w s
w s w s

a. There are five feet in the line. Thus the metrical scheme is iambic pentameter. An important thing about metre is that it transcends the lexico-grammar. Metrical boundaries are no respecter of word boundaries, a consequence of which is that rhythm provides an additional layer of meaning (Simpson, 2014:16).

ii. Tochee: This is the opposite of the iambic metre. It has a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. It has the dum de patterning:

The plough/man home/ ward plods/
his wea/ry way
w s w s w s
w s w s
w s w s
w s w s

By the margin willow veiled
s w s w s w
w s w s

Tropical Journal of Arts and Humanities, Volume 2, Number 2, 2020
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dum de dum de dum de
dum de

iii. Dactyle: It is a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables:
What is that smell that so offends the nose
s w w s w w s
w w
dum de de dum de de dum de de
dum de

iv. Anapaest: It is a line in which two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed one:
in the moon
w w s
de de dum

Function of rhythm and sound elements
Rhythm has an important bearing on the structure and interpretation of poetry. Rhythm implies movement, as such it can show the kind of feeling or emotion that is at the background of the movement. In real life, one way to ascertain the mood of a person is to watch his movement. For instance, if his movement is slow or sluggish, we may infer that he is meditating, sick, angry, discontented or sorrowful. On the contrary, if the movement is leisurely, our guess may be that he is relaxed, joyful and unperturbed. If the movement is hurried, our guess could be that he is excited, overjoyed and angry.

In poetry, our judgement of the function of rhythm in relation to emotion is not exactly the same with the rhythm of a man’s movement. This is because in poetry, words are used for the purpose of communication. The words employed in poetry give a clue to the emotion found in it. Thus in poetry, rhythm serves as the force that propels emotions than a clue too them. This force has to suit the occasion, subject matter and mood already present in the words. Egudu (1977) notes that “it is in this context that rhythm becomes truly the “natural accompaniment of strong emotion”, and as such, it contributes to and intensifies the emotional impact of a poem by offering “sometimes a drug, sometimes a stimulant, under the influence of which we more readily accept the poet’s meaning and respond to his magic”.

In analysing the role of rhythm in poetry, we do not only concern ourselves with our intelligence but also our emotions. The rhythm of a poem can help to strengthen its meaning. For instance, a regular and simplistic rhythm which is often associated with children’s poems, lullabies and dance music, is an indicator of lightheartedness. On the contrary, there are cases where a monotonously regular rhythm tends to be indicative of sorrow and melancholy.

Rhythm does not only express emotion in poetry, but also facilitate the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the theme of a poem. If the rhythm signals joy or pleasure, it is likely that the generating experience has been a pleasant one. On the other hand, if the rhythm suggests the emotion of sorrow, one suspects that the theme has to do with an ugly or tragic experience (Egudu, 1977:46). The meaning a poet wants to communicate and the emotion that goes with the experience are in sync with the tone and the rhythm of his expression.

Reeves (1967:322) cited in Egudu (1977) observes that “rhythm cannot be isolated except for purposes of general discussion, from meaning, any more than we can think of the flow of a stream without thinking of the water”. To flow is a characteristic feature of a stream, and from Reeves’s observation, if there is no stream, there is no flowing, since there is nothing to flow. As the knowledge of the action of flowing leads us to discover the presence of water in a stream, so does rhythm lead us to discover the theme (or meaning) of a poem (Egudu, 1977). It is the theme of a poem that
gives us insights into the presence of a particular rhythm in the poem.

Rhythm helps to determine the structure of conventional verse forms as blank verse, free verse and the heroic couplet. Blank verse can consist of iambic pentameter line which are not rhymed. Apart from helping to reveal meaning, sound generally, makes us derive pleasure from a poem. Citing Kreuzer (1955), Egudu (1977) notes that the elements of sound in poetry are not there as an end, but as a means to an end. He further opines that the entire sound pattern of a poem ought to be considered in terms of the whole poem. No more can we place much emphasis on content of the poem alone but a realization of the effects sound creates. Thus, sound is a tool used to create beauty whose ultimate end is to give pleasure.

Other elements of sound that need attention are “end rhyme” and refrain. Of the two, “end rhyme” is the most commonly used and consciously sought for. Since it comes at the end of a line of poetry, it is given emphasis as a musical effect and contributes in the creation of musical effect except rhythm and meter. When it comes at the end of the line where poem is not written in stanzas, its organization helps us in segmenting the poem. On the other hand, a refrain separates one group of lines from another where there may be no stanzas but marks the end of stanzas in case where the poem is written in stanzas.

**Practical analysis**

We set out in the work to establish a relationship between sound patterning and meaning in poetry. The import is that sounds are patterned in poetry in a way that they help us to get the message of the poet clearer.

The starting point of our analysis is a line from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a country churchyard adapted from Simpson (2014:16)

The plough man home ward plods his weary way
w s w s w s w s
de dum de dum de dum de dum
de dum de dum de dum

From the line, we have alliteration such as /pl/ in “plough” and “plod”, /w/ in “weary” and “way”. In terms of their impacts on grammatical structure, the first repetition links both subject and predicator: /Pl/ in “ploughman” and /Pl/ in “plods” and the /w/ consolidates the complement element of the clause.

Taken together, the two patterns give the line an acoustic punctuation. Thus, the arrangements of both /Pl/ in “ploughman” and “plods” gives us an insight into the state of the “subject” whom we are told later in the same line is tired as revealed in “weary way”. Taken separately, the plosive “P” used twice in the line, gives the poem a hard texture. This is akin to the “stressful” efforts that are concomitant with the verbs “plough and plods”. Conversely, the liquid “l” in “plough” and “plod,” and the nasal “m” in “man” and “home” suggest softness. This may picture the tired state of the man who may have been ploughing softly (slowly) because of tiredness, and now walking home slowly too.

According to Simpson (2014:16), a rearrangement of the line into a structure like:
“The ploughman plods his weary way homeward” will make the acoustic punctuation redundant. This is because the Adjunct ‘homeward’ which was positioned between the subject and predicator, thereby separating the subject and the complement, is no longer there. This will distort the original metrical scheme.

We shall use some lines from Shakespeare’s “shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” for more illustration:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate
Rough winds do shake the darling bud of May
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date
Some time too hot the eye of heaven shines
And oft is his gold complexion dimm’d
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st
Nor shall death brag thou wanderst in his shade
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
So long lives this and this gives life to thee

The poem which has a rhyming scheme of ab ab, cd cd ef ef gg, is a 14 lines poem of iambic pentameter. For instance, the first line’s five metrical feet, with stress falling on the second element, make it iambic pentameter. That is, it has the de dum or “weak” “strong” structure. Nonetheless, this classification tends to assume that all accentuation is equal, an interpretation which is not necessarily borne out when reading the line aloud. While in the fourth foot “a sum”, the difference in stress is vivid. In the first foot “shall I”, the second beat is somewhat marginally accentuated, than the first beat. The second foot “compare” shows a degree of contrast somewhere between the fourth and the second, but the third foot appears to have little accentuation on either syllable. This means that there are about four degrees of accentuation in the first line.

All other lines in the poem also have five metrical feet, and are structured like the first. This makes the rhythm to be regular.

From the breakdown, we realise how the metre transcends the lexico-grammar. The metrical boundaries in each line do not take congruence of word boundaries, thereby enabling the rhythm to enhance meaning. In the poem, the liquids and nasals - /l,r,m,n,ŋ/ occur 64 times. They help to reinforce the meaning of the poem which has a sweet musical quality, in which the persona, emotionally compares and esteems his object of admiration, higher than the beauty and joy nature itself can offer. This must be pleasant and pleasantness goes with softness. Thus, the poem has a soft texture.

The regular rhythm deploys in the poem helps the reader to relate with the softheartedness typical of lyrical poems. Egudu (1977:41) notes that “very often regular and rather simplistic rhythm is associated with children’s rhymes, lullabies and some dance music, and is said to be a sign of lightheartedness. The tone of the first line which is a rhetorical question, set the
pace for the expression of the strong feeling of emotion. In the first line, the verbal group is discontinued in that the subject “I” comes between the verbal group “shall” and “compare”, thus yielding an interrogative question.

The persona’s object of interest which is esteemed higher than any other thing, is depicted with the adjectival group “more lovely” and “more temperate” lines 3-8 aptly describe the none permanent state of the beauty nature offers, while the rest of the lines reinforce the sublime nature of the object of admiration.

Findings and conclusion
The paper has shown that sound patterning plays a vital role in the understanding of poetry. Phonic features which are most commonly found in poetry, have an important bearing on the structure and the overall interpretation of poetry. They are useful tools to the poet who must craftly blend them to make his message clear.

While reading a poem, it is important that the reader identifies any significant aspects of sound patterning in the poem. The learner should seek to know if the poem displays a dominant metrical pattern or if its versification is based more on the rhythm of natural speech than on a formal metrical scheme. Such significant features of sound symbolism like onomatopoeia, assonance and alliteration etc, should be considered to discover the functions they perform in the poem. A good knowledge of the functions of these sound elements will enable the reader ascertain the mood or emotional disposition of the persona as well as the central message of a poem and its overall meaning.

Work cited