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An Analysis of Deviations of Register in T. S. Eliot's Poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Muhammad Saleem, M.Phil.

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* as a piece of literary collage by way of exploring various deviations of register in it. T. S. Eliot's modern poetic sensibility, in its creative processes, tends to hug the shores of different registers, discourses and disciplines of knowledge. The words that he borrows from registers of medical profession, marine world, smoky atmosphere, polluted urban landscapes, religion, commonplace and absurd current cultural behaviours and literature are metaphorised and proverbialised in his literary collage. Their surrealistic nature does at once familiarize them with the reader. This orientation of modernity helps the poet to portray skillfully the feelings, situations and dimensions of modern life actualized through characters like Prufrock.

The study at the lexical, phrase and clause level consists of three phases of identification, description and interpretation of the violations of poetic register in the poem. These borrowings from different registers and discourses are not only to defamiliarise and foreground the text; they also betray the exact size and colour of the psychological conditions and emotions of the persona. These irregularities of content that point towards the unification of modern learning and knowledge are the chief sources to prove strength, shine and weave of the modern poem.

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Key Words: Deviations of Register, Literary Stylistics, T. S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Foregrounding.

1. Introduction

Learning, in modern terms, is no more linked with once watertight compartmentalization of different disciplines of knowledge; vast fuzziness at the boundaries of disciplines and overlapping of the modern branches of knowledge is a common phenomenon today. Under the influence of this fashion/trend the modern poets “asset their freedom from constraints of ‘poetical’ language” with “an unprecedented audacity” (Leech, 1989, p. 49-50).

Wide and deep observation, vast experience, mature wisdom, scholarly outlook and superb sensibility of poets like Larkin, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot propel them to “make use of the stylistic device of transposing pieces of ordinary, non-poetic language into a poetic context” (Leech, 1989, p.59) and graft the borrowings of words, phrases and sentences from the multiplicity of non-poetic registers into the poetic discourse.

This method of “composition recalls the painter’s technique of ‘collage’” (Leech, 1989, p.58). T.S. Eliot’s poetry is an example of literary collage as we meet here a lot of deviations of register and mixing/mingling of registers rubbing shoulders with the poetic diction incongruously. Nearly all the deviations of register in the poem *The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* work as metaphors. Holme says that a metaphor consists of two domains: “source domain and target domain” (Holme, 2004, p.17). The source domain maps onto the target domain. Metaphors create new meanings. In this process the reader has to abandon the literal meanings and resort to the imaginative meanings.

Geoffrey N. Leech’s noted book on literary stylistics *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* is chosen to work as the theoretical frame for the present study.

2. Linguistic Items Referring to Medical Profession and Routine Activities

The third line of the poem ‘Like a patient etherized upon a table’ is an example of register borrowing; the linguistic chunk ‘a patient etherized upon a table’ belongs to the medical register. This phrase is a common place practice in the medical register but it turns into a powerful metaphor of modern life when grafted in the poem; it is to serve different artistic purposes.

First, it foregrounds the start of the poem to attract the attention of the reader. Second, this metaphysical conceit is, in fact, to shock and destabilize the reader; it tells us, categorically, about the total paralysis of the persona; ether is “not the breath of the spirit but the deadener of consciousness and volition” (Drew, 1950, p.54); this chunk of medical register not only materialises a psychological state of the persona, it also conveys the size and colour of that state. It is described with finality that if ‘Let us go’ pointed to some type of possibility for an action at the start of the interior monologue, ‘Like a patient etherized upon a table’ does roll it back.

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The clause 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' itself echoes the disposition of a literary collage. The phrase 'coffee spoons' refers to the register of kitchen. To measure out life collocates with evenings, mornings and afternoons, but to use it with 'coffee spoon' is a deviant use; the recontextualisation of this chunk transfers its semantics into the pragmatics. The transplantation of a non-poetic expression 'coffee spoons' into poetic discourse, here, concentrates upon the noisy, mechanical, disturbed and lifeless mornings and afternoons of the persona.

Each and every moment of the modern man's life is under the grind and din of the 'coffee spoons' which symbolizes the latest practices and measures of the present civilization which is enveloped in artificiality only. Traditionally, coffee taking is an important activity because it leads to the doing of some important task. But now, with the present persona, this principle of cause and effect is inversed. Here the din of the coffee spoon draws a parallel to the current absurd life which is essentially noisy in its composition.

The persona is enthusiastic to seek more and more shelter and refuge in 'time' to avoid action; but time increases his hollowness, unease and tension only; and it is tragic of him. But when he reaches the line 'Before the taking of a toast and tea', the ridicule of the persona knows no bounds. The lexical items 'a toast' and 'tea' deal with the register of food. Their use in the new context mataphorises them. In their implicational suggestions they stand for substanceless crutches that are resorted to because of the absence of integrity of character, self assertion and confidence in the persona.

3. Lexical Items Referring to Urban Landscapes and Fog

The following lines present an example of register mixing to describe the polluted urban landscapes:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent (4-9)

The linguistic expressions 'The muttering retreats', 'oyster-shells', 'one-night cheap hotels/And sawdust restaurants' and 'tedious argument' are related to the registers of army, fish, hotels and logic, respectively. This mixing of different registers is not a normal usage of language; it is a marked use to turn the start of the poem unusual and signalized, to attract the attention of the reader and evoke some desired aesthetic and poetic effects. These different images crystallize the abundance of psychological impasses and mental "locations" (Scofield, 1988, p.58) which will keep the persona involved in his internal world, never to allow him to come to the surface for

action. These various places and locations are the cause which results in effect of ‘a patient etherised upon the table’.

The fog scene presents a striking example of the “incongruity of register mingling” (Leech, 1989, p.50). Different categories of lexemes and linguistic chunks are yoked together, to give birth to the impression and effect of defamiliarisation. The linguistic expressions ‘back’, ‘muzzle’ and ‘tongue’ represent the registers consisting of the parts of an animal’s body and the verbal chunks like ‘slipped by the terrace’, ‘made a sudden leap’, ‘seeing’, ‘curled’, ‘lingered’, ‘stand’ and ‘rubs’ stand for the registers of the motions and actions of the parts of the body; ‘The yellow smoke’, ‘The yellow fog’ and ‘the soot’ belong to the registers of flying impurities in the atmosphere; ‘the window-panes’, ‘pools’, ‘drains’, ‘chimneys’ and a ‘house’ in the darkness of night pertain to the register of concrete objects in the physical environment.

The adjacency and clustering of all these non-poetic discourse types in a piece of poetry turns it into a literary collage, to capture the attention of the reader and serve different artistic purposes. The sooty, smoky atmosphere along with timid, lethargic and filthy cat bracketed with ill smelling drains, chimneys and pools stresses the modern man’s dried up moral fountain, sense of nothingness, insecurity and imprisonment and agonizing states and frustration zones in which he is to exist. The cat scene deals with a “desire which ends in inertia” (Williamson, 1988, p.60).

4. Words Referring to the Marine World and Religion

The lines 73-74 are violently deviant because they consist of some odd lexemes which are never observed in the diction of poetry up till now:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (73-74)

In this example of register borrowing some specific and linguistic expressions like ‘a pair of ragged claws’ and ‘scuttling across the floors of silent seas’, which betray the register of dangerous and ugly marine life, are absolutely non-poetic words, grafted in the body of a poem. It is a very strange example of register borrowing which puts aside all the etiquettes and delicacies of stylistic decorum. This foregrounded section of the poem attracts the attention of the reader and serves different artistic purposes visualized by the poet. The coarseness of the above quoted lexical expressions is synchronized with the persona’s dangerous efforts to escape from the gnawing social realities, his eroding insecurity and the tormenting fears and doubts which continue to dampen his mechanical inhaling and exhaling.

The last verse-paragraph also presents a cluster of different discourse types. The lexemes and phrases ‘bottoms’, ‘trousers rolled’, ‘part my hair behind’, ‘to eat peach’, and ‘white flannel trousers’ point to the register of romantic dandyism.

The lexical items and linguistic expressions like ‘mermaids singing’, ‘waves’, ‘riding seaward’, ‘combing the white hair’, ‘waves blown back’, ‘chambers of the sea’, ‘sea-girls’ and ‘wreathed with sea weed’ belong to the language of ocean and oceanic mythology. Up till the repetition of the clause ‘I grow old’ the persona has been busy in making plans, seeking different avenues and using various channels but in some lonely chamber of his unconsciousness or sub-consciousness, to come to the surface for action. His repeated sense of failure propels him to transcend the sense of imprisonment in the society and migrate to the charm of romantic plane, through the dandy images; from here he moves to the world of mermaids and sea-girls that symbolize the pleasant ideas and objects in the province of imagination and fancy, which like the persona’s various earlier pretences succumbs to ‘human voices’ soon.

The lines 81-83 present a beautiful example of register borrowing:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
 I am no prophet-and here’s no great matter; (81-83)

The lexemes ‘wept’, ‘fasted’ and ‘prayed’, with their clear Biblical ring, belong to the register of religion. The two lines refer to the martyrdom of John the Baptist whose head was brought to Herod’s court because of his prophetic honesty in the revelation of truth. The juxtaposing of these two religious references in the lap of poetic diction is foregrounded and marked to enhance the comic, mock-heroic, ridiculous and ironic dimension of the text to the level of profusion. The persona boasts of fasting, weeping and praying, of which he is incapable; he is, in fact, a mock-heroic John the Baptist, always fearing rather than loving death.

5. Register Mixing

The title of the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* contains a remarkable instance of deviation of register. The phrase ‘The Love Song of’ is poetic in discursal terms but the linguistic chunk ‘J.Alfred Prufrock’ is unpoetic in nature; “‘J.Alfred’ suggests petty bourgeois pretension”(Calder, 1987, p.25) or the name of some company in the modern market economy and commerce; “‘Pru’ imputes prudishness and joined to ‘frock’, ‘primness’; ‘Frock’ further suggests babyishness and perhaps sexual ambivalence” (Calder, 1987, p.25-26); Southam says that the name ‘Prufrock’ “awakens–prudence, primness, prissiness”(Southam,1977, p.29). It means the expressions ‘J.Alfred’, ‘Pru’ and ‘frock’ belong to the registers of the market economy, prudishness and female clothes. This is not a common use of language; it is an unusual organization of words to foreground the title of the poem, to stir the desired stylistic sensations and impressions.

‘The Love Song’, in the traditional terms, is always with an absorbing, commendable and romantic character; but here it is sung by a “jokey name” (Calder, 1987, p.26). The placing of ‘J. Alfred’, ‘Pru’ and ‘frock’ after ‘the Love Song...’ is an intentional and clear realization of the mockery of the traditional love song.

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These three non-poetic expressions do betray the funny features which are in fact the real constituents of the persona: the unfitness of the persona for the activity is concretized through these violations of the poetic register. That is why the poem is “the richest comedy in the annals of literary anecdote” (Kenner, 1979, p.3). T.S. Eliot’s “whimsical feline humour prefixed” (Kenner, 1979, p.3) the name of Prufrock. ‘The love song’ by an unromantic character ‘J. Alfred Prufrock’ produces the ripples of comedy all around, to announce the persona’s mock-heroic voice; he is a clownish image, far short of heroics. For a subtle minded reader the title of the poem under discussion is but a signboard of a theatre whose “mechanism is allied to the mock-heroic” (Kenner, 1979, p.5) effects only.

The lines 37-44 exhibit the mixture of two registers of clothes and of human physiology. The lexical terms and phrases like ‘a bald spot’, ‘hair’, ‘chin’, ‘arms’ and ‘legs’ stand for different parts of the persona’s body and the formal expressions, ‘pin’, ‘necktie’, ‘coat’ and ‘collar’ refer to the register of clothes. The juxtaposition of these two registers deviates from the common norms of poetic diction.

These deviations not only “outrage the stylistic decorum” (Leech, 1989, p.50) but they are also well devised to attract the attention of the reader and highlight the main theme of the poem. In the discussion of artistic effects and sensations that the mingling of these registers stir, the cognitive stylisticians would assert and dwell on the persona’s inability to assert which is highlighted through ‘asserted by a simple pin’. His thin legs, thin arms and thin hair are the metaphor of his thin courage and his costly, fashionable, rich and modest clothes are his endeavour to enrich himself in modesty and calibre but in vain. What is his problem? He is a victim of “too much mental debate” (Bush, 1983, p.137) outlined in *Ash-Wednesday* as ‘too much discuss, too much explain’, instead of taking concrete action.

The lines 55-61 demonstrate an instance of juxtaposing of three types of non-poetic registers:

And I have I known the eyes already, known them all -
 The eyes that fix you in formulated phrase,
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
 Then how should I begin
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
 And how should I presume? (55-61)

The lexical items ‘fix’, ‘formulated’ and ‘formulated phrase’ refer to the register of shrewd verbal assessment about others; the linguistic expression like ‘sprawling’, ‘pinned’ and ‘wriggling on the wall’ refer to helpless and pinned insect and its pitiable movements; in the line ‘To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways’ the expressions especially ‘spit out’ and ‘butt-ends’ pertain to the register of smoking. All these mingled non-poetic registers, which are embedded in the matrix of poetic language, violently rack and rock all the stylistic decencies and

decorum to arrest the attention of the reader and to foreground the relevant textual portion to serve some artistic purposes and to contribute to the main themes of the artistic piece.

This mixing of registers stresses the three phased regressive movement in the persona; the eyes first destabilize him, then turn him into a mean creature, 'pinned' insect and then they cause the detestable insect to voice his "added self-disgust"(Drew,1950, p.53) in words like 'spit out' and 'butt-ends'. In brief, the persona's insecurities and complexes are emphasized. Description of abject and mean conditions of the persona is not possible without the help of these deviations of register. These words and phrases which are just common things in their parent registers become proverbial in character and richly implicational in the Eliotique world.

The lines 87-96 present an instance of register mixing:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' -
If one, settling a pillow by her head, (87-96)

The lexemes 'the marmalade', 'the tea', 'the cups' and 'the porcelain' pertain to the registers of food and utensils; 'to have squeezed the universe into a ball' echoes the last lines of *To His Coy Mistress*, where the poet urges his mistress to enjoy love with him urgently and intensely. 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead' refers to the Biblical Lazarus who comes to the world of people to warn them of the agonizing life of the hell. The contiguity of all these registers foregrounds the concerned section of the poem, to stir the artistic effects and stylistic impressions.

This cluster of discourse types emphasizes the disjointed and segmented personality of the persona. The quick succession of images and thoughts does not guarantee the solidness of a human; rather it is to define his nothingness, worthlessness and lifelessness only. He thinks that the experience with cups, tea and marmalade should romanticize and energize him sufficiently to squeeze the universe into a ball as a metaphysical lover has capacity to do; but the reality soon dawns upon him and he recognizes himself as a Lazarus who is unable to do any thing admirable except telling people that the dwellers of the hell are the most pessimistic and wretched souls in the universe. Here hell is his own life.

The lines 101-106 also present an assemblage of different registers:

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor-
And this, and so much more? -
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while (101- 106)

The lexemes 'dooryards', 'sprinkled streets', 'skirts that trail along the floor', 'tea cups' and 'novels' account for the register of the modern man's mechanical routine activities; the line 'as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on the screen', which belongs to the register of an x-ray machine, vehemently shakes the niceties of the stylistic decorum of poetry. The transposition of the register of x-raying machine in the poetic language works as a powerful cause of 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!'. This linguistic deviation is devised to reveal the filthy, ill-smelling and inferior interior of the persona accurately.

6. Conclusion

While making a conclusion regarding the above cited research, certain findings jump to our attention.

First, deviations of register in the poem are basically images rather stable images. These solid and concrete images were inevitable to clearly characterize the vague, fluid and instable aspects, situations and entity of the persona. With out these borrowed lexical items the monologue of Prufrock which takes place in some dark chamber of the mind of the persona is simply inaudible and meaningless. We recognize the persona but only through their loud colours and sounds.

Second, the words borrowed from other registers depict the size, colour, gravity, depth and intensity of the frustrations, fears and apprehensions of the persona accurately. That is why the portions where these words are grafted are exclusively the glow and triumph of the poem.

Third, these transplanted linguistic expressions successfully plead the case that human learning and knowledge is unified. Water tight compartmentalization of various types of learning is unnatural. Different disciplines of knowledge and registers are the currents of the ocean that continue to mingle with each other.

Fourth, these deviations of register work as metaphors in the changed context. They are nonsensical in their semantic meanings but when the reader moves to his imaginative

lexicon, they bulge out excellent metaphorical sense which is the main source of the great popularity of the poem.

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