Languages as poems

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The purpose of this chapter is to suggest a new metaphor by which to live as we continue to deepen our relationship to language. I have Pete Becker to thank for the question which this chapter attempts to answer. It is a question which I would recommend to everyone, not because it is easy to answer, but rather because the clarity of the answer that each of us can find may reveal to us unexpected aspects of our stance toward language, and toward life. Pete's question is: What is your image of language?

He suggested that I take plenty of time to answer, that I just tell him sometime, when I felt I knew. I would echo his suggestion for you, as you turn this question over and over in your mind, for if your experience is anything like mine was, it will take you some time to settle on an answer.

For this question asks us to choose a basic metaphor around which to organize our thinking, and even though we may know, for example, from Lakoff and Johnson (1980), that many metaphors can "compete" for the same semantic domain (thus Lakoff and Johnson observe that English structures the domain of ideas with the metaphors of animals [*the father/birth of quantum physics*], of plants [*the roots/ blossoming of the notion of free trade],* and of food *[you can really get your teeth into this theory*; *I couldn't digest that article]*, to name a few), still we are being asked by Pete to see if, for us, there is one primary way of seeing language, a way which "makes" more sense to us than any other way.

This notion of sense-*making* is itself an interesting one, and is explored expertly and insightfully by Elbow (1973:147-91). A good example of the activity he refers to as "the believing game" is provided by a common experience. Suppose we are walking down a road, and ahead of us, in the distance, we see an animal in a field. At first, we cannot tell whether it is a dog or a horse, and as we walk on, we try out both of these, to see which gives us a better fit. At some point, when we are drawn close enough, we make a decision: The animal "is" a dog. In Elbow's words, we "get more out of it" by seeing it as a dog than by seeing it as a horse. In our context, Pete's question asks us to decide whether we get more out of seeing language as a machine, a code, an organism, a system, and so on. And, of course, we might have no metaphorical preference.

For me, the most sense was made by seeing a language as a poem. I find this a valuable analogy to draw in my own thinking, and in order to be able to explain to you why this is so, I had better say something about how I see poems, for it is in the way poems work, in the way poets make them mean, that the power of this way of seeing lies for me.

Before I start, let me name a few ways in which I am not suggesting that languages are like poems. First, I know that various poetic genres make us of particular conventions of stanzaic form (for example, the quatrain, the [Elizabethan] sonnet, the haiku, the sestina). I am not claiming that languages have anything comparable to stanzas or to particular rhyme schemes. Second, I know that abstract definitions have been advanced of what kinds of phonetic pairs can constitute rhymes (or alliterations) within a poetic tradition; I do not suggest that such literary conventions have a large role to play in our everyday use of language. Nor do I wish to claim that there is anything like iambic pentameter or dactylic trimeter in everyday conversation, though it does now seem clear that when we interact, linguistically or otherwise, we do so in time, keeping it "in step" with a regular beat

which synchronizes our interactions in an essentially musical way. (See Erickson (1982) and Scollon (1982))

I am not, then, saying that as we speak, we behave like poets who are writing poems within some identifiable literary canon. But if it makes sense to see languages as if they were poems, then it should presumably make sense to identify some people as the poets – the authors of these poems. And who could that be but us? If anyone is to be "the" poet of American (I think it is high time we stopped talking about "English" and started distinguishing among American, and British, and Canadian, and Strine, and ...), it had better be us. So let me talk a bit about what we say, each of us, in particular.

To be sure, there is a set of sentences that all speakers of any of the varieties of English will agree on. Some well-known sentences are: *The farmer killed the duckling. The cat is on the mat*. But these are also boring sentences. Because anyone who is determined to stay firmly within the bounds of the uncontroversial will not learn much about the processes that structures it. As Gregory Bateson observes (Bateson (2000), pp. 457-459), there is more information at the boundary than in the middle, in the steady state. So, for example, while it is a fact, of interest to Passive aficionados, that almost any volitional verb taking a nominal direct object will have a passive counterpart for anyone (this is a fact about the "middle" of the space of passivizability), we have a lot more to learn about the function of and reasons for passivizing at the kinky, idiosyncratic dangerous "edge" of the construction, trying to ascertain which *non*volitional verbs allow their objects to passivize. For which speakers? Under what pragmatic/discourse conditions? Why, moreover, these contrasts? *The rollerskates were found by Mrs. Engeliano / *Adherents were found by the proposed tax cut; The watch was made by Joachim / *The party was made by your cupcakes; His resignation was not desired/?wanted by many*.

I am not suggesting that either type of work – "middle" or "edge" – can be, or should be, avoided. I am suggesting only that we try for a balance. And when we start looking at how speakers of "the same dialect" can vary among themselves, we may find our breath taken away. This happened to me in connection with apparently harmless sentences like (1).

(1)   We have barely $500 in the bank.

At issue here is not the grammaticality of (1) – I believe that most speakers of American find it grammatical. Rather, let us ask a semantic question: What does it mean? I will ask the reader to answer the same question I asked the audience at the oral version of this chapter, a question that I have been asking groups of speakers since about 1965 – by now probably around 3,000 in all. Does (1) mean (2a), (2b), or (2c)?

(2)   a. We have just over $500 in the bank – say $501, $502, $503 ...
           b. We have just under $500 in the bank – almost $500, not quite $500, say
              $498 or $499.
           c. We have around, close to, $500 in the bank – say between $495 and $505.

By now, the range of responses that reach me when I ask this question has settled into the following rough predictability: for most audiences, around 40-45 percent will prefer (2a) as the meaning for (1); 50-55 percent will prefer (2b), and usually around 5-10 percent will go for (2c). Furthermore, none of the people I have asked over the years has had any idea that there was any range of variation at all. If you are a (2a) speaker, as I am, you will probably regard the claim that there are (2b) and (2c) speakers with not a little incredulity – how *could* anyone say (1) and mean

(2b)? The converse is true for (2b) or (2c) speakers. For some reason, this seems to be an area of variation which we all remain unaware of.

I will return later to discuss my conclusion from the existence of these variations around "the" meaning of *barely*. Let me first, however, give two other cases with the same general characteristics.

The first is the case of [z] plurals that cause the voicing of the preceding spirant. I guess that all speakers of "English" change the [s] of *house* to [z] in *houses*; probably most would favor *knives, wives, lives, elves, selves,* and *halves* over *lifes, elfs, selfs,* and *halfs*, but what do we do with *wharf/wharves, dwarfs/dwarves, scarfs/scarves, calfs/calves,* and *hoofs/hooves*? Does anyone feel strongly that there is a norm to which they are adhering? And what of "our'" usage when the plural follows Germanic *-th*? Do we choose [s] or [z] for *paths, baths, truths, wreaths,* and *moths*? Make up your mind what *you* do for these words; and ask ten other speakers of American what they do. See if any patterns emerge that remain when you have asked twenty or fifty people.

The second is the case of the ordering of color terms in cases like *black-and-white striped cloth*. Probably all of us prefer this one to *white-and-black striped cloth*, but when we investigate the set of possible color-pairings with some care, as Conley and Cooper (1981) have done, we find that some speakers prefer, say, *red-and-yellow striped,* whereas others prefer *yellow-and-red*. And while some prefer *blue and green* to *green and blue* (or vice versa), most would feel that less rode on their choice for this last pair than for the choice with *red/yellow*.

What unites the three cases I have focused on here: (1) *barely,* (2) "irregular" [z] plurals, and (3) the ordering of pairs of color terms? The point is that there are cases where "the" grammar *doesn't care*; each of us is left to our own devices in making a choice. We are not *required* to choose, and a decision to say *paths* 50 percent of the time with [z] and 50 percent with [s] is also a choice, one of the infinitely many available. We are given free rein to erect any kind of preference network that we would like. The preferences are in no sense necessarily bland, or wishy-washy. I, and the 40-45 percent who agree with me as (2a)-ists, are radically (2a): we can't believe that you (2b)-ists and (2c)-ists could possibly talk so sloppily. Nor can you believe that I do.

This is the point. In these areas, and in unguessably many more, the construction of an idiolect is guided by aesthetic considerations – not necessarily conscious ones, but aesthetic ones nonetheless. I may choose to reduce the first vowel of *identify* to [™´] (the neutral vowel schwa), feeling that you, who always produce a clear [ay], are too fussy; you, for your part, will hear me as being too loose, or permissive. Other speakers of "English" (or American – there is no Atlantic isogloss in such matters) will put down roots in other areas on the continuum between the extremes just described. We have the personal freedom to live anywhere on that continuum that we want to. And this is a poetic freedom.

In the first and third of the foregoing three cases, I doubt that any of us will have a clear intuition of the direction of an ongoing linguistic change. It is not that those of us who prefer *red-and-yellow striped* to *yellow-and-red striped* feel that this year our numbers are greater than they were last year; that speakers who live *yellow and red* are fossils, and are dying out. I think that we are probably unaware of differing preferences in this area, and are therefore *a fortiori* unable to detect any historical shifts in progress. Exactly the same is true with the semantic "facts" of *barely*; while I have not asked *red-and-yellowers* whether they thought they were in the majority or minority, I have asked many groups whether anyone realized other types of preferences existed, with, as I noted, no one saying they did.

With the "irregular" [z] plurals, I would imagine that people might feel the draughts of the winds of change – that *paths* with [Ts] (with voiceless *th*) is more

modern, while [Dz] (with voiced *th*) is more traditional. It is a bit like we feel about *whom*: we know there used to be lots more *whom*'s around than there are now (whether we regret this fact or rejoice over it).

But let us pass on to cases where we know for sure that a construction is new, is marching to wider acceptance. Do we feel comfortable in saying *business-wise*?; *opportunity-wise?* How about *This policy will impact on us heavily?* Or *You will have to corridor this area more adequately*? And, how bout new pronunciations? Do we embrace [nuwky´™l´r] for *nuclear*, or insist on [nuwkliy´r]? Or for *library*, can we stomach [laybEriy], or do we stick to our two-*r* guns with [laybrEriy]?

In all of these cases, we have our choice (a poetic one) to go for a new beauty, the excitement of linguistic novelty, or to join forces with such staunch supporters of traditional values as Edwin Newman and William Safire. We know that as we speak, our language changes under us, around us, with us, and our aesthetic choices lead us either to embrace the newer forms, and *contribute to their spread* by using them ourselves, or to dig in and resist them, tooth and nail, remaining bloody but unbowed. (There are still people today who use *whom* as they "should," decrying their laxer fellow speakers as sellers-out (or seller-outers?) of their language, as people who would allow their language to go to the dogs.)

It is (possibly? probably?) true that speakers can be placed in general at a point, or in a general range, of the continuum that runs from fire-breathing, to-the-barricades radical innovators to copper-clad, clear-water Calvinist conservatives. Nonetheless, each of us can, if they? he? she or he? he or she? we? will, cheerfully be basically radical, while containing conservative pockets, or basically conservative, with radical tumors. Or any mix of these whatsoever. Thus I view myself as being basically pretty much of a fire-breather, and willing to let just about any junk pass under my (ex-)tonsils, but for some reason, the pronunciation of *nuclear* as if it were spelled "nucular', which it doubtless will be, all too soon, sticks in my craw.

The point of this discussion is that we all have a vote in the future of American (or British, Strine, ...; and in the long run, English in general). The productivity of *-wise*, the pronunciation of *nuclear*, the [m] on *whom* – all depend on each individual one of us, though sociopolitical or biographical considerations weigh our votes differentially. (Thus Dwight David Eisenhower's use of *nucular* on national media will doubtless count infinitely many times more than my steely resolve never to say it until my dying breath.) When we perceive a change in progress, we may drag our feet or put our shoulder to the wheel. While our instruments for assessing the differences made by an individual are not up to the task (and they may never be), there can be no doubt that "the" overall grammar of a dialect must be some composite function of the individual preferences of its speakers, its poets.

What else does each of us poets do? It is clear that each of us makes individual decisions about how much agency or intentionality we wish to impute to someone in a situation:

(3)   a. Teresa murdered/killed Harriet.
         b. Harriet was/may have been murdered/killed.
         c. Harriet died tragically.

Or about how much subjectivity we wish to impart to our utterance – how much we wish to hide ourselves:

(4)   a. I'm angry.
         b. I feel angry/anger.
         c. I have a feeling of anger.

d. There is a feeling of anger (in me).

We also decide how much politeness and/or formality we want to put in each sentence, and how vague or clear we wish to be, and how fast we want to speak (therefore, how many of the fast speech rules will apply). Will *four hundred and seventy-five* be [fowr h´ndr´d Qnd sEv´ntiy fayv] or [fçh´rs˜Eyfay] or something in between? The choice here is up to us, and as with the above cases, it is a choice made on aesthetic grounds. Each of us has feelings about what sounds sloppy or too prissy for a given situation, and the degree of speed that we use is chosen as a consequence.

In all of the cases discussed so far, what was at issue was where individual speakers chose to position themselves within the space of possibilities that are already present in the language, in some sense. But in addition, each of us takes a stand with respect to how much we are willing to break new ground. This summer, I heard a speaker on a Georgetown University podium say *conspirational* (with a meaning roughly like "conspiratorial'). Tom Robbins, in *Jitterbug Perfume*, coins the world *deathist*. And I once said something like *I'm going to de-Agatha-Christify my solution*. These are new by virtue of being stretchings of word formation rules; it is easy to find stretchings of conditions on syntactic rules as well.

(5)   The *by now on their feet and cheering wildly* delegates approved the proposal on the first ballot. [Stretching of the normal conditions on prenominal modifiers.]

(6)   a. Is it OK to park your car on the bridge tonight?
          b. Is it OK to park my car WHAT the bridge tonight? [Stretching of the normal condition limiting WH-words to NPs, PPs, APs, and verbs (*You're going to WHAT my proposal!??!?*), in that order of preference, to include prepositions.]

(7)   ... you've got to be grabbed by this knowledge, lived by it – you've got to be *beed* by it. [Approximate quote from a Ram Dass talk. Note how he has, in analyzing *be* as a transitive, passivizable verb, made it into a regular one: the irregular (normal) *been* is replaced by the regular (abnormal) *beed*.]

In a sense, we can view each such innovative use of the system that is American as a referendum, to be rejected or ratified by later speakers, just as some great lines or phrases from previous poets get ratified and become part of the prior texts (Becker 1995) of most educated speakers (*the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; seen through a glass darkly; to be or not to be; not with a bang but a whimper; things fall apart – the center cannot hold*). (Some truly incredible things have been voted in – a personal favorite of mine is *stick-to-it-iveness*. Who would have given that one a chance to survive? Maybe there is yet hope for *de-Agatha-Christify*.

The American language of today, full of the results of countless referenda, with their fallout – words like *be-in, spaceshot, airhead, far out, to streak NP* – is a bit like what we might call *"The" book of American folk songs*, which contains "De Camptown races," "Go tell Aunt Rhody," "You are my sunshine," "Roll out the barrel," and so on. American is like a living artistic tradition.

Thus one of the things that American, like all languages, shares with a poem, is the fact that it is part the result of happy accidents, like the fact that the verb phrase like *stick to it* ends with the [It] ~ [´t] which often precedes *-ive: additive, operative, figurative, administrative, diminutive, intuitive*. This accident of phonetics made it possible for some unremembered poet to take a flyer or *sticktoitive*, the presumed base of *stick-to-it-iveness*. `Enough people liked this flyer to vote` `(with their tongues) for its adoption,` *et voilà!* `Another word is born.`

Having laid some weight on the serendipitous aspects of American, let me counterbalance by insisting that Ferdinand de Saussure was absolutely right in his dictum *La langue est un système où tout se tient* ('Language is a system in which all parts hold together'). This finds an echo in William Blake's statement from "A Vision of the Last Judgment":

"Not a line is drawn without intention ... as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant. So Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass Insignificant, much less an Insignificant Blur of Mark."

I want to emphasize one phrase of Blake's in particular: "Poetry admits not *a Letter that is Insignificant*." In my work on poems, I have taken Blake at his word, and have benefited enormously from doing so. To live by this maxim of Blake's has been to dedicate myself to finding explanations for the distribution of each individual phoneme (and of course, *a fortiori*, for the distribution of every linguistically significant higher-order property – e.g., initial consonant clusters, or polysyllabicity, or morphologically complex words, or prepositional phrases, or . . .).

I have found Blake's maxim, which I refer to as the Assumption of Total Significance (ATS), to be an extraordinarily tough drillmaster, but I see no alternative weaker than the ATS which it seems to make sense to adopt. Let me show another case in which living under the discipline of the ATS brought rich rewards. The poem in question is a justly famous one by William Carlos Williams, from *Spring and All*, published first in 1923.

$_1$so much depends

$_2$upon

$_3$a red wheel
$_4$barrow

$_5$glazed with rain
$_6$water

$_7$beside the white
$_8$chickens.

A first impression may suggest that this poem concerns the mental act/state(?) of reflection – reflection about the interconnectedness of the ecological web of which we are a part. As George Miller suggested to me, the poem might evoke the kind of experience we could imagine as follows: we have been working in the garden, and the rain has come, forcing us to interrupt our work and seek shelter. After the storm has passed, we open the door to go out again to our farming, and we see the tableau the poem describes: the wheelbarrow, a symbol of the implements and artifacts we humans use to help our planet to feed us; the glaze of the water that the sky gives us to satisfy our thirst, and make our crops grow; and the chickens, symbols of the animal world who we have tamed and who feed us. The colors mentioned are the primal ones of red and white, and the colorlessness, the transparency of the clear water we need to drink – three of the most basic visual experiences.

Williams has made this a static scene: by calling the water a glaze, he has stopped it from flowing, made it into a mirror. And Williams reverses normal order

by placing the wheelbarrow beside the chickens. We normally say, as Ann Borkin helped me to see, *The farmer* (movable) *was beside the barn* (immovable), rather than the reverse. To say *the barn was beside the farmer* seems to freeze the farmer in his tracks. Williams had drained the motion from the chickens.

As the time around us has slowed to a stop, we sink into our reflection of how much we depend upon the simple tools and foods and water, and upon the good Earth from which they come – until the last word of the poem, the only one of the poem's four disyllabic even lines that has a short, quick, high front vowel: *chickens*. Paradoxically, despite the fact that *beside* seems to have frozen the chickens into immobility, the sound of this word breaks the spell, snaps us out of the mystical feeling of union with the things of our mother, the Earth, who supports us. We return to life as usual, pick up our wheelbarrow, get back to our work. Thus, the experiential journey that the reader is invited to participate in is a voyage from usual time, to stopped, mystical time, the time of the state of Union with Universe – to return, with a jerk, to everyday, regular time, again – but with everything changed, freshened – as the earth itself is refreshed, the air cleansed, by the rain.

If the basic experiential journey is thus the ABA of the sonata form, what has Williams done with the forms his words take? For as Williams says before reading aloud one of his poems from *Spring and All*:
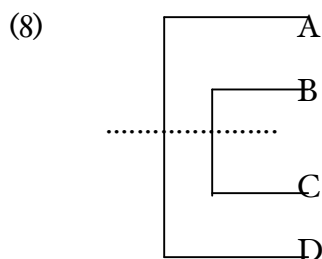
> You notice what I said: there is *no* subject the modern poem cannot approach. There is *no* selected material. It's what you *do* with the work of art. It's what you *put* on the canvas and *how* you put it that makes the picture. It's how the words fit in.
> Poems are not made of *thoughts*, beautiful *thoughts* – it's made of *words, pigments,* put *on* – here, there; made; actually.[1]

So let us see how Williams has made his canvas.

Each of the four four-word verses of "The Red Wheelbarrow" has a rigid form: three words on its first line, and one disyllable as its second, giving even the visual shape, as Mieke Hoffmann has pointed out to me, of four small wheelbarrows. Aside from these four even-line disyllables, there are only two in the poem: *depends* in the first stanza, and *beside* in the last. And each of these two consists of an unstressed prefix ending in [´], followed by a stressed root. This extra syllable in lines 1 and 7 thus links first stanza to last, as does the fact that the two [z] suffixes are placed to end the poem's first and last lines. The two central stanzas are also linked together by salient properties: they contain the poem's only two compound nouns, *wheel/barrow* and *rain/water*, placed identically so that the first half of each compound comes at line end. And these two stanzas also contain all of the poem's six liquids: one [r] per line, and one [l] in each odd line of the central pair of stanzas.

Thus, if we refer to our four wheelbarrows as A-D, we see clear evidence that Williams has shaped them into the reflecting structure shown in (8).

(8)

Since the location of polysyllables plays such a salient role in the establishing of this mirror structure, let us look inside the individual syllables, to see how Williams made use of the possibilities that the syllabic structures of American afford. Overwhelmingly, the poem's twenty-two syllables are of the simplest types: ten are of the simplest consonant + vowel form [(C)V], and seven more are closed by a single consonant: CVC. The first word to contain a syllable which contains a consonant cluster is the last word of the first line *depend + s*. Its cluster, though clearly triconsonantal /ndz/ morphophonemically, is probably realized as the phonetically biconsonantal [nz] in the speech of most Americans, who do not distinguish phonetically between *fends* [{fEnd+z} and *fens* [{fEn+z}]. The last syllable to contain a consonant cluster is the last word of the last line - also a bisyllable: *chicken + s*, and its cluster is also bimorphemic, since it contains the plural morpheme *-s*. Thus, seen from the point of view of final clusters, the poem links its extremes in yet another way: [nz] opens and closes the poem.
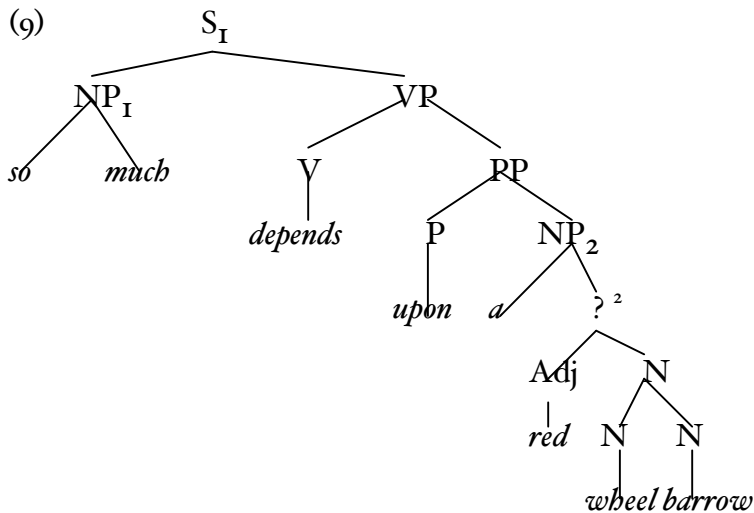
When we turn to initial clusters, we find the same phenomenon: the first candidate for cluster pronunciation is *wheel*, which can in careful speech be realized with an initial [hw]. I suspect that in 1923, when the poem was written, this was even more the case, though in listening to Williams' own pronunciation, say of the short quote above, the three occurrences of *what* are all spoken without clusters, as [w]. At any rate, it is clear that most speakers would feel that any word spelled with <wh> *could* be pronounced [hw], in a sufficiently careful pronunciation, so I think it is relevant that the first initial cluster (possibility) in our poem, namely, the [(h)w] of *wheel*, is matched by the last initial cluster: the [(h)w] of *white*. And both of these words are at line ends, in corresponding lines in the two halves of the poem – the third line of the first half (AB), and the third line of the second half (CD).

Let me de-Agatha-Christify slightly: I have been trying, dear Reader, to lull you into overlooking the fact that there is one syllable in the poem, and only one, which both begins and ends in a cluster:
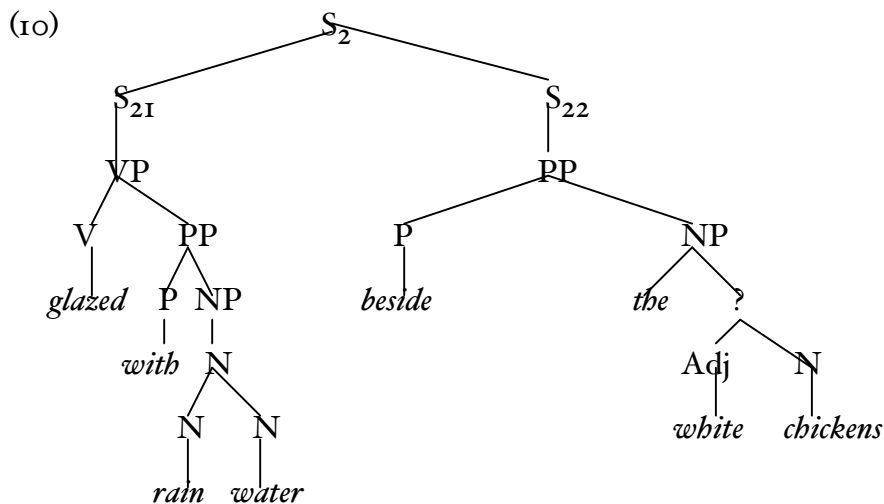
glazed

This word, coming as the ninth of the poem's sixteen words, opens the poem's second half. Geometrically, with respect to the mirror symmetry displayed in (8), it comes immediately after the invisible mirror axis dividing CD from AB. And this word, highlighted as it is by being the poem's most complex syllable, is also given a high profile by virtue of containing the only other suffix, the past tense/participle forming *-d*, besides the *-s* of *depends/chickens*.

Meanwhile, what is the syntax saying? Very much the same thing. The poem's first clause, which ends with *wheel/barrow*, has two constituents: a two-word abstract subject and a six-word verb phrase. A relatively uncontroversial parsing of this clause would be something like the tree shown in (9).

(9)

S_1
NP_1 — *so* *much* — VP
V — *depends* — PP
P — *upon* — NP$_2$ — *a* — ?²
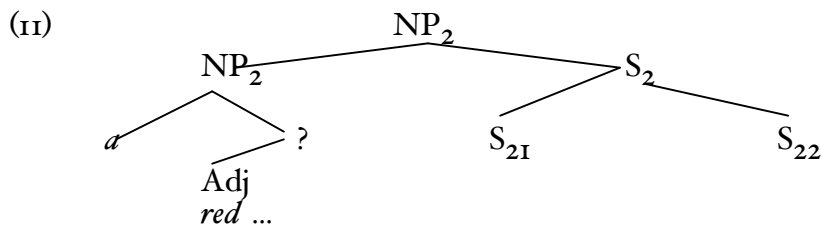Adj — *red* — N
N — *wheel* — N — *barrow*

What we note about this tree is that it is very right-branching. Every one of the words following the subject (except the last of course) introduces a new constituent. There are no constituents which have following modifiers, nor are there any coordinate nodes.

After *wheel/barrow*, however, all this is changed. The third verse is a postnominal modifier of this central noun of the poem, as is the fourth verse. These two modifiers feel coordinate to me, rather than nested: thus a fair guess at their syntactic structure would be that shown in (10).

(10)

S_2
S_{21} — VP
V — *glazed* — PP
P — *with* — NP — N
N — *rain* — N — *water*
S_{22} — PP
P — *beside* — NP
the — ?
Adj — *white* — N — *chickens*

Presumably, this coordinate modifier would be attached in an expanded (9) to another NP directly above NP$_2$. The subtree would look like that in (11).

(11)

NP_2
NP_2 — *a* — ? — Adj — *red ...*
S_2
S_{21} — S_{22}

The point is that after *wheel/barrow*, which ends the long right-branching constituent of (9), we find the poem's first posthead modifier, which is the entire tree of (10). All of (10) depends, syntactically, on *wheel/barrow* — that's how much depends on it. As we pass from *barrow* to *glazed*, we shift from one kind of syntax (right-branchingness) to another (that of posthead modifiers), and from a general pattern of subordination to the large coordinate node (whether it be S_2 or some other is irrelevant) at the root of (10), the node which loosely links the two last verses of the poem. I think this latter change — from subordination to coordination — is a good syntactic analog for the change from the normal perception of time as an evenly flowing medium (cf. expressions like *as time went by*, etc.) to the static perception of mystical time (*time stood still*).

And now let us return for another look at the poem's swing word — *glazed*. For its morphological complexity goes deeper than the fact that it contains a suffix, because the verb *glaze*, to which the suffix is attached, is itself the only derivationally complex word of the poem. Its root is the noun *glass*, and the translucency of glass is the visual experience that is shared by the denominal verb *glaze* and its base *glass*. As Pete Becker called to my attention, here is a fundamental point of fusion for form and function: formally, *glazed* comes at precisely the turning-point in the A B C D mirror antisymmetry whose properties I have been describing; functionally, the meaning of *glass*, and the visual experience of clarity coupled with light reflection, *is* the point of our mental re-flection, of our being flexed back. And the seeing of rain into a glaze, the stopping of time by imputing viscosity to water coincides with the visual experience. Thus Williams' gift to us, in these diamond-bright 22 syllables, is one of those magical cusps, or nodes, of life, in which properties of sound and vision and mind interpenetrate and become one.

But I have yet to honor Blake's insight fully, for I have not shown what results when we examine the dance that each individual sound enters into. I have deferred this matter until I had taken up the broader issue of the experience/concept that the poem centers around, for it is only against the background of reflection, in both its primary visual sense, and in its metaphorical sense of musing, turning over in one's mind, that we can see the fullest significance of the distribution of individual segments on the poem's structure.

Deagathachristifically, what happens is that the theme of reflection is reenacted in the lives of almost every sound we consider in the poem, for almost all of them occur in pairs. Three — all dentals (namely, d, n, and r) — occur in pairs of pairs, and one — the central vowel schwa /´/ ([√] when stressed) — occurs eight times. Furthermore, the way these segment pairs are deployed in the poem makes structural sense. For example, the two [ow]s are the first and last vowels of verses A and B; thus I will say that [ow] "brackets" the first half of the poem. And the two *ch*'s though they are not the first and last consonants of the poem, still occur in its first and last line, so I will say that they too have a bracketing function: they bracket the whole poem, as do the [nz] final clusters.

The two [hw] initial clusters do not bracket, but they function to establish a kind of equivalence between the two halves AB and CD, since these clusters show up in the last word of the third line of each half. Similarly, each of the four audible [d]s shows up in an odd line. In such cases, the [d]s blaze the odd lines, and the [hw]s the even stanzas. And similarly, the liquids blaze the poems two central stanzas, B and C.

In (12), I have listed the pairs of segments, and to the right, where appropriate, I have named the function that I ascribe to them.

(12)   a. s: $_1$*so*, $_7$*beside*   Blazes AD (or brackets the whole poem?)

     b. ow: $_1$*so*, $_4$*barrow*   Brackets first half

     c. ch: $_1$*much*, $_8$*chickens*   Brackets whole poem

     d. p: $_1$*depends*, $_2$*upon*   Blazes A

     e. E: $_1$*depends*, $_3$*red*   Blazes AB

     f. hw: $_3$*wheel*, $_7$*white*   Blazed BD

     g. l: $_3$*wheel*, $_5$*glazed*   Blazes BC

     h. b: $_4$*barrow*, $_7$*beside*   Blazes BD

     i. ey: $_5$*glazed*, $_5$*rain*   Blazes C

     j. w: $_5$*with*, $_6$*water*   Blazes C

     k. I: $_5$*with*, $_8$*chickens*   Blazes CD

     l. D: $_5$*with*, $_7$*the*   Blazes CD

     m. t: $_6$*water*, $_7$*white*   Blazes CD

     n. ay: $_7$*beside*, $_7$*white*   Blazes D

In (13), I have arrayed the poem's three sounds that occur four times: the obstruent [d] and the two sonorants, [n] and [r].

(13) a. d: $_1$*depen(d)s*,   [Occurs in a mirror-image

       $_3$*red*   sequence: disyllable, mono-

       $_5$*glazed*   syllable, monosyllable,

       $_7$*beside*   disyllable]

    b. n: $_1$*depen(d)s*   Brackets A   [Note that all [n]s occur

       $_2$*upon* [n]   line-finally, in a mirror-

       $_5$*rain* [n]   image sequence: nz, n, n, nz

       $_8$*chickens*   Brackets CD   2 syll 1 syll 2 syll]

    c. r: $_3$*red*   [The four [r]s alternate

       $_4$*barrow*   Blazes BC   between monosyllables and

       $_5$*rain*   disyllables, and between

       $_6$*water*   prevocalic and postvocalic position.]

Finally, in (14), I have shown how the distribution of the mid central vowel [ˊ] - [√] supports the basic mirroring pattern which sets peripheral stanzas AD off against central ones BC.

(14)   A: [ʒ] $_1$*much*, $_1$*depends*

              $_2$*upon*

       B: [ɪ] $_3$*a*

       C: [ɪ] $_6$*water*

       D: [ʒ] $_7$*beside*, $_7$*the*

              $_8$*chickens*

What can be said about the nonpaired sounds, which I will call "orphans"? There are seven sounds which occur just once; I list them in (15).

(15) Line 1: [m] *much*
      Line 2: [a] *upon*
      Line 3: [iy] *wheel*
      Line 4: [æ] *barrow*
      Line 5: [g] *glazed*
      Line 6: [D] *water*
      Line 8: [k] *chickens*

They have a (not very impressive) kind of logic, despite their irregularity: they occur just once per line, in every line but the seventh.

There is just one other segment to be mentioned. In addition to the 14 paired segments and nuclei of (12), the three quads of (13), the lone octet of (14), and the seven orphans of (15), there is one sound that occurs three times: [z].

(16) Line 1: *depends*
      Line 5: *glazed*
      Line 8: *chickens*

Thus, [z]'s function is to appear in all final clusters: to appear as the second consonant of the cluster as it ends the first and last lines of the poem, and to appear as the first consonant of its cluster at the mirror axis of the poem as it begins the line that starts the second half of the poem. So [z] opens, closes, and splits the poem, and is the consonant which the [s] of *glass* is linked to as it turns into the [z] of the crucial verb *glaze*.

There are many more beautiful patterns that appear as we look ever more closely at the dynamic structure into which Williams has *made, actually,* them, but I must return to my major theme, and leave this dazzling, bottomless work of art until I can return for a future visit.

Let me close, however, with two final observations about this poem. The segmental doubling (quadrupling and octupling) that I have pointed out here is unique in my experience of poetry. It grew organically out of Williams' caring for the reflection that leads to the realization of interconnectedness, and it may or may not ever have been used before or be used again by any poet to make words shine. It is, in Pete Becker's words, a particularity. Robert Frost, in his important essay (Frost (1949)) on composition, "The Figure a Poem Makes," says it clearly:

> Just as the first mystery was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as metre, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled.
>
> It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life - not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has dénouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood - and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own

name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final
phrase at once wise and sad - the happy-sad blend of the drinking
song.[3]

    What is relevant to note in the particular context of this paper is that Frost's
observation about the uniqueness of poetic structures imposes upon the student of
poetry a very delicate task. We must approach the poem with the greatest respect.
While we may have read many poems before, poems which have suggested theories
of possible meters, possible rhymes, possible rhyme schemes, possible stanzaic types,
and so on, we must hold these theories, these previous understandings of poetry,
with a feather-light touch, and be ready to abandon them instantly in case we should
be presented with a structure that has never before been seen in any poem in the
history of poetry (which may well be the case for the "segmental rhyme" that
Williams shows us). Our stance toward the poem must be like that of the martial
arts master, or of the Zen swordsperson – expecting no particular kind of attack,
thus ready, or open, for attack from any quarter. The type of stance that has proved
to be necessary for me in my work with poems is described by the biologist T.H.
Huxley (quoted in Marilyn Ferguson (1982):

        "Sit down before fact like a little child, and be prepared to give up every
        preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses Nature
        leads, or you shall learn nothing."

    How does this stance of openness to the particular in a given poem translate,
for the major concern of this chapter? If we are to see any language we work on as a
poem, this means that we must be ever alert for what the language may be doing in
its articulation of its structure that is absolutely unique in the history of the world.
    To be sure, we study universal grammar and language typology intensively, in
as great a depth as possible before we approach our language, but we hold all of our
conclusions as lightly as we hold our theories of possible poetic form when we
approach a poem. For we are aware that a case of theoretical lockjaw is always a
danger; that if our commitment to what we have seen in our previous work ever leads
us to say anything like "my theory forces me to say ...," then we may miss entirely
the unique gift that this particular language has for us. Pete Becker has told me that
older grammars used to have a section called "The genius of the language"; there they
would discuss those feature of the language's structure that gave it its unique stamp,
its individuality. As syntacticians, we can readily identify some features of this type,
after working with a range of languages. Some candidates that I would suggest are:
for English, the system of auxiliary verbs and its interaction with adverbs of negation
and other types; and the system of verbal particles like *up, down, out,* etc.; for French,
the system of preverbal clitics, and their interaction with causatives; and the mare's
nest of problems associated with *être* (*qu'est-ce que c'est que* and so on); for Japanese, the
tangled lives of the particles *wa, ga, o, ni*, *no, na, mo*, and the system of honorifics; for
German, the problems of the Vorfeld – what constituents can occur preverbally in
main (and in subordinate) clauses – and of so-called Satztönungspartikel (*ja, doch, mal,
schon, aber*, etc.) predominate.
    I'm sure that all of us who have worked in any depth on any aspect of a
language (phonology, morphology, semantics, whatever), would have their favorite
bog to contribute. But my feeling is that we have been taught either to disregard
such kinky uniqueness that we encounter, or to "explain them away," as the locution
goes (away? Where would they go?), by showing how they all follow as corollaries of
universal principles. To hold the vision that languages are to be seen as poems is to

commit oneself to the ATS in all our work as linguists, not only when we look at literary works of art. And this raises mind-boggling swarms of questions for us. For we will have to note not only that a given language is or is not subject to some syntactic constraint; or is agglutinating or synthetic; or has vowel harmony or not – we will have to try to connect the answers to all of these questions. I do not say that there is no work that has this type of holistic bent. Lehmann (1973) and Donegan and Stampe (1983) have exactly this flavor, and there are doubtless many others that I do not know. Nonetheless, if we divide the work of linguistics along the lines laid down by the sociologist Wilhelm Windelband (cited in Kramer 1980:68) into the "nomothetic" (having to do with finding general laws and typological implications) and the "idiographic" (concerning the unique, the nonrepeatable, such as the structure of particular transcripts, particular histories of language acquisition or loss, particular works of art), then the bulk of work in linguistics has been nomothetic.

In arguing that we should view languages as poems, I am suggesting that we right an imbalance. I have done a lot of nomothetic linguistics myself, and I hope to continue. But the taste for the idiographic which working with poetry has given me has convinced me that far better than doing only nomothetic, or only idiographic, work is finding a stance toward language in which both emphases are in dialogue, and mutually inform each other. And in such thinking, we cannot let our theories force us to say anything. The etymology of *theory* suggests that since this word, was derived from the Greek verb *theasthai* 'to watch, observe' (from *thea*, 'a viewing'), it was originally taken to be something like a vantage point from which to view the object of study. I have often found myself arguing for "the" theory of language, of passives, of universal grammar. But now it seems to me far more fruitful to return to the vantage-point conception of theory; for obviously, the more vantage points we have to look at something from, the fuller will be our understanding of it.

We can return to William Carlos Williams' poem for a helpful analogy. In my discussion, I was concerned with showing how phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics unite to give us the experience of reflection upon our interconnectedness. But how do these four great pillars of linguistic theorizing interrelate? How, exactly, do they unite?

In generative grammar, we have talked about a phonological or a syntactic component of the grammar as a whole. But I have come to feel that this word may be inappropriate, since it suggests a metaphor of division, of cutting into pieces. The prototypical entity that has components, after all, is the machine. Carburetors and distributors are components, or parts, of automobile engines. And parts can be removed, or interchanged, or studied (and repaired) in isolation.

I would like to sidle up to a different metaphor for the way phonology, morphology, and so on interconnect. Let me start first with a visual analog, which I thank John Lawler for first suggesting to me. As we study the patterns of distribution of individual segments, of bisyllables, of noun phrases, of morphological complexity, of words that refer to visual experiences, etc., and so forth, and also so on, suppose we think of ourselves as putting the results of each investigation on a transparent sheet of plastic, like those used in overhead projectors. Each sheet will have its own internal logic: that for [ow] in our poem will be concerned with setting off the first half of the poem against the second, while those for [b] or for color words will set off even stanzas against odd ones, and thus contribute to a feeling of alternation, and so on for all of the indefinitely many other sheets we would need. The way we could look upon what happens to us as we read the poem is that we peer down from above, our gaze passing through the whole stack of transparencies.

If we are visual people, the image of passing over a thick stack of transparencies and peering down through them, noting similarities between patterns (say, between two patterns each having the function of separating our four-stanza

poem into two halves) as visual alignments, may speak to us clearly. However, not all of us are visual, so let me suggest one more metaphor – the metaphor of music.

If we listen to a great symphony, like Beethoven's Ninth, we are first struck by the immensity of the total work. But if we are interested in appreciating this awesomeness further, we can go to the score and examine each individual part, each voice of the symphony. Because Beethoven is an inspired creator, every voice we look at/listen to will have its logic, harmony, and beauty. Whether we listen to bassoon, third violin, French horn, or tympani, we know that Beethoven's love and caring extended to the part that each of these instruments plays. So if we listen just to the bassoon's voice, we will hear a beautiful melody. And we will hear, albeit dimly, the Ninth. For the business of the great composer is to find a bassoonic way of "saying" the beauty of The Ninth, a way that is particularly suited to the range of the bassoon and to the particular timbres it affords the ear. Or, said slightly differently (visually, in fact), this business is to find a bassoon "take" of The Ninth. So we can get a taste of The Ninth by listening to the bassoon's voice, another by listening to the tympani's, and yet another from the French horn's. But not until all of these voices are integrated, i.e., sounded simultaneously, will we hear the majesty of the symphony as a whole.

To me, it "makes" sense to *see*, i.e., to think of, the phonological patterns of our poem as individual voices in a symphonic score, and to think of a morphological voice and of a syntactic voice, and of a semantic one. Because Williams is a master poet, each individual voice must within itself articulate the particular beauty of this poem. Let us say, for the purposes of discussion, that in this case, it is a beauty which revolves around the peace and clarity that come from the experience of reflecting upon our interconnectedness. We can "hear" this experience of re-flectedness possibly most directly in the many phonological voices of this poem, but it is there morphologically, syntactically, and semantically/imagistically as well. And not until we hear all of these voices at once can we participate in the great architecture of coincidences and synchronicities – temporal alignments, if you will – that Williams has put on – *here, there; made; actually*.

Let me remind you that I have been discussing the visual metaphor of transparencies and the auditory one of musical voices in the context of my concern with finding a helpful way to deal with the pluralism of all the theories that have been created in linguistics over the years. Insofar as each theory has been made with the same kind of love and caring and respect for language that Beethoven had when he wrote the bassoon voice of his Ninth – and I think that this is almost universally the case – then each theory will give us a "take," or a way of hearing, the central symphony of Language – and we have stretched our theoretical ears and allowed ourselves to hear the particular beauties to be found in each individual theoretical voice.

If we collect and classify the kind of work on language that we have all been doing collectively over the years into the two great rivers called nomothetic and idiographic, then we realize that we must stretch our ears to be able to hear nomothetic beauties (if we are idiographs), and idiographic ones if we are nomothetes. These two basic scientific "takes" are also voices that we must allow to sound together.

How does this work, concretely, this "sounding together"? In the case of the Williams poem, being open to the nomothetic means noticing ways in which the poem conforms to patterns we have seen elsewhere in our work with poetry. Noting, for example, that the first stanza is perfectly iambic, and that the fact that the last word of the poem is a trochee itself does not preclude the last stanza from also being given an iambic scansion. So we use an already developed theory – in this

case, a theory of iambic meter[4] – as far as we can, but we do not let it "force us to say" anything about the second stanza of the poem, which seems completely uniambic. And being open to the idiographic means seeing the pattern of segmental rhyme, in all its intricacy and particularity, even though it may never contribute anything to any theory of possible sound harmonies, because it may never have been used before, and may never be used again.

I said earlier that there were two more things to be pointed out in connection with our poem; the first has been the foregoing discussion of the need to counterpoint our usually predominantly nomothetic ways of study with an equally strong idiographic voice, so that a rarely beautiful uniqueness, like segmental rhyme, can be held up to be marveled at.

The second thing to be observed is possibly so obvious as to be coals to Newcastle, but I think it deserves at least passing mention. It is that, as I have demonstrated in chapter 3 b), poems have what I have called holographic structures. That is, they say what they say neither one time only, nor in only one place. Rather, their "message" (I have been trying to avoid this odious term – poems are not *about* things, they *are* things. They constitute *experiences*, they are musicians, inviting us to dance to their tunes) is shot through them, a bit like a theme through a symphony. Thus it makes no sense to ask of our poem where the notion of reflection is expressed for it appears everywhere – in every pair of segments that we encounter. This means that the conduit metaphor, which Reddy (1979) discusses and exemplifies brilliantly, while it is unquestionably valid and of great importance for many types of communication, is not relevant for poetry. The conduit metaphor views communication as proceeding on the analogy with the transfer of physical objects. Meanings are seen as objects which are located inside the heads of speakers and hearers. Words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are seen as containers, into which speakers may put meaning. Once a speaker has filled a linguistic object with meaning, it is pushed through a conduit, a tube-like passageway, to the hearer, who "unpacks" the linguistic containers, putting their meanings into her or his head. Some conventionalized expressions clearly exhibit the conduit metaphor at work. *Take that thought and put it earlier in the sentence. She really crams a lot of information into this chapter. Am I getting through to you? We couldn't get anything out of this phrase. Her words carry a lot of weight with my boss.*

This image, which we might call the American Airlines view of communication, just isn't relevant for the way poetry affects us, which, as I have tried to show, is multilayered (or polyphonic) and simultaneous. Indeed, the degree to which a given text is multiply interconnected and asequential may well be just the degree of poeticality with which the text was written.

I come now to an aspect of poetry which is absolutely central to my theme, yet also hardest to say anything about. I refer to the mystical aspect of poetry. Possibly the best way to begin is to come back to the words of the poet-philosopher Gary Snyder (1980:21): "The true poem is walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said." It is obvious, as soon as we think about it even a little, that for all the infinities of things that any language allows us to say, these infinities are dwarfed by the immensity of what lies beyond the edge of the sayable. A quick example comes from José Ortega y Gasset's brilliant paper, "The Difficulty of Reading." There, Ortega y Gasset points out that no language has a word for the precise order of white on which the words you are now reading are printed, though it is easy to discriminate visually between that white and dozens of other shades of paper that a half-hour's search will reveal.

And, of course, if describing this white is impossible, how much more so is describing the changing colors of a sunset, or the feelings that the sunset touched off in you? When we look at the vocabulary for emotions that American provides and compare them with those we would like to be able to convey, we can only cry or laugh.

The language in which we live in is like a small, though infinite, island, and all around us is the vast ocean of the unsayable. But poets, when they write what Snyder calls true poems, are not content to let this situation obtain. With the help of the kind of symmetries and patternings that we have seen in our poem, they stretch the envelope of the sayable.

And why do they do this? Why bother? Why all the effort? While there is great utility in our language, while it allows us to infer the existence of other beings as complex and indescribable as we are, through the words they say to us, there are truths and beauties all around us, at every moment, which enrich our lives immeasurably, on our island, if we have ever experienced them: the miracle of love, of forgiveness, of grace. And as we are social beings, we want to tell our friends of these experiences, to share them, for they are truly what makes our lives full, and worth living. All those of us who study language with every ounce of energy at our command, know that if our efforts are pure, and if we persist, and if we are lucky enough, we will be blessed with an Aha! Or even with an Eureka!!! the Light will come to us. I think the whole of science, at its best, is an enterprise for trying to share, and pass on, just one of the unsayable experiences: the experience of Light.

If we regard languages as poems, and thus ourselves as the authors of the collective poem that we speak in, we are led to ask such questions as: What has the creation of American made sayable that would not be sayable without it? Or: What things are sayable in Lakhota but not in American? (For each poem stretches the boundary of our island differently.) And since we study poems to search them for meanings, we can ask: What are the meanings of American?

I do not say that these are easy questions – merely that they are beautiful ones, for me. And I have always been inspired by this line from an introduction by e.e. cummings to a volume of his poems (1963:332):

Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.

I think it is always horizon-expanding to leave the closed realm of the questions that we know how to go about finding answers for and to confront questions that take our breath away. To be baffled is a sacred experience.

I have been going on about languages and poems for probably too long already. I feel like I am arguing a point. But arguing is just the wrong mode. Fusing my vision of poems and that of languages has just been the deepest answer to Pete Becker's question that has come to me. I don't want to urge you to accept my answer, or indeed any particular one. I would just like to invite you to open yourself to Pete's question, and to follow wherever and to whatever abysses that question leads you.

Notes

To whom is my debt for what poetry has helped me to see the most enormous? There are too many to name you all – so let me just start with three, and thank the others in silence: Rosália Dutra, Pete Becker, and Roman Jakobson.

1.   Cf. Williams (1970).   The tape from which the quote comes is included in the collection called *The Poet's Voice* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press].

2.	Exactly what this node should be called, if anything, is controversial, so I will fearlessly give it the '?' label.

3.	I don't know whether these S-nodes (or indeed any) should be pruned; let's leave them in for the nonce.

4.	From the Preface to Frost (1949). I am indebted to Anneliese Kramer for giving me this powerful quote, and for many insights into poetics and into linguistic theory. Cf. her penetrating thesis Kramer (1980)).

5.	A beautifully argued and lucid exposition of a formal theory of iambic meter is found in Halle and Keyser (1966).

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