

A model of reading incomprehensible poetry — an attempt

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THE PROBLEM

Whatever we consider as literature we have to agree that it is a verbal product and it should be discussed with a reference to its medium into which it is cast.

Since no writer and no one of his readers (source and the receptor of the utterance) have the same notions, there exists a danger faced by both of them that the utterance is rarely perceived by the reader. Great care, sensitivity and also the intellectual efforts in the use of the language reduce to an unavoidable minimum the loss of transmission. (Edgerton, Jr. 1967).

On the other hand there exists a danger that the reader may assume that his control of the media itself is inadequate to his task. The cognitive dimension may not be deciphered by the code he is using. If this is the case the special attention should be paid to the process of explicating the message which is cast in its medium imposing certain limitation and causing certain obstacles in exhibiting the objective meaning.

One of the reasons for the linguistic incomprehensibility might be sought in the fact that the language of poetry is characterized by *compression* e.i., by its ability to say a great deal within a small space. „...the notion of poetic language corresponds to the definition of a communication channel of relatively small capacity [...]. In a word, it must represent the transmission of a large amount of information via a low-capacity channel”. (Abernathy 1962:566).

In this case the principal task of a teacher is to make the students aware that they are not reading what is *in* the text but that they are reading something *into* it. The teacher seems also responsible for equipping the students with the tools needed to maintain the continuity of the codes used to decipher the text of a poem and the code in which the message was originally sent.

THE TEACHER

It seems that both science and arts can be passed on by means of liberal or illiberal procedures. Literature and science can both be treated as „subjects” and stamped in to a student. Or they can be treated as living disciplines of critical thought and of the imagination, in which the student can be trained on an apprentice system. „And though good teachers always encourage individuals to develop their own point of view, they also provide them with the necessary equipment to have one”. (Peters 1973:120).

It can be achieved most effectively when the teacher departs from the rote learning in favour of so-called discovery learning. Features of the discovery method that encourage the student to raise questions and to find his own answers also increase the motivation on the side of the student, facilitate the learning, retention and the subsequent use of the concept. What is worth mentioning is the crucial point that it may also result in a permanent attitude of inquiry toward learning. Within the discovery method the teacher is expected to organize problem situations that encourage insight.

„Insight in problem-solving challenges 'blind' trial-and-error learning and meaningless repetition. Trial-and-error learning, as often interpreted — implies searching for an answer and coming upon it accidentally. In the classroom, trial-and-error learning occurs when students work on problems, first one way and then another until a chance activity leads to the solution. Insight means that the pupil purposefully directs his activities toward solving the problem, applies his previous learnings, experiments with the most reasonable hypotheses that might lead to a solution, and discovers a solution that works. In this case, the solution is the product not of chance factors or of blind searching, but of intelligent activity directed towards organizing them in a unified response. The degree to which insight operates in problem-solving depends on such factors as mental maturity, previous related learning, and the way the problem is presented.” (Blount and Klausmeier 1968:93).

The last of the above mentioned points might serve as the next step in the drift of our thoughts. Of course, some skills have a deep cognitive dimension. This cognitive dimension may be described by the term „knowing that” as opposed to „knowing why”. It seems that in the case of poetry there is a lot to *know that* but there is a lot to *know how*.

THE MODEL

The below presented ideas seem to constitute useful tools in the process of problem-solving the incomprehensibility of the poetic text.

If we want to approach poetry from the linguistic point of view we must decide whether the techniques developed for the linguistic analysis of non-poetic language are equally valid for the analysis of poetry.

„The posing of this question implies what is well-known, namely, that poetry consists of language, yet produces effects that ordinary language does not produce. If this is the case, then the inference is that poetry is language differently ordered or arranged. This would make appear that linguistic analysis, when applied to poetry, would result in a grammar that is different from a grammar that a linguistic analysis of ordinary language would produce”. (Levin 1973:11).

The difference is for Thorne (1965) external. He argues that we should consider a poem as a sample of a different language. Thus students of poetic language should write grammars for the language of specific poems, and these grammars ought to meet the requirements of logical consistency and generality demanded by the general theory of grammars. The grammar of a poetic language should generate poetic sequences beyond the data, otherwise the 'grammar' is a mere classification of facts. (cf. Thorne 1965:189 ff.).

But many poetic sequences are generable by the kind of grammar constructed for ordinary language. To claim that all the structures of literary language are not the result of operation of ordinary syntax, would force us to have duplicates of such rules as the Passive Rule, for example. That is, we would have to postulate a literary and a non-literary Passive Rule.

On the other hand there are many poetic sequences that are not generable by the 'ordinary' non-poetic rules. These are deviations from norms, where norm is equivalent to (perfect) grammaticalness, that is easily generated sentences. (cf. Chomsky 1961).

Summing up we may say that the grammar designed to account for the peculiarities of the poetic language cannot be constructed by:

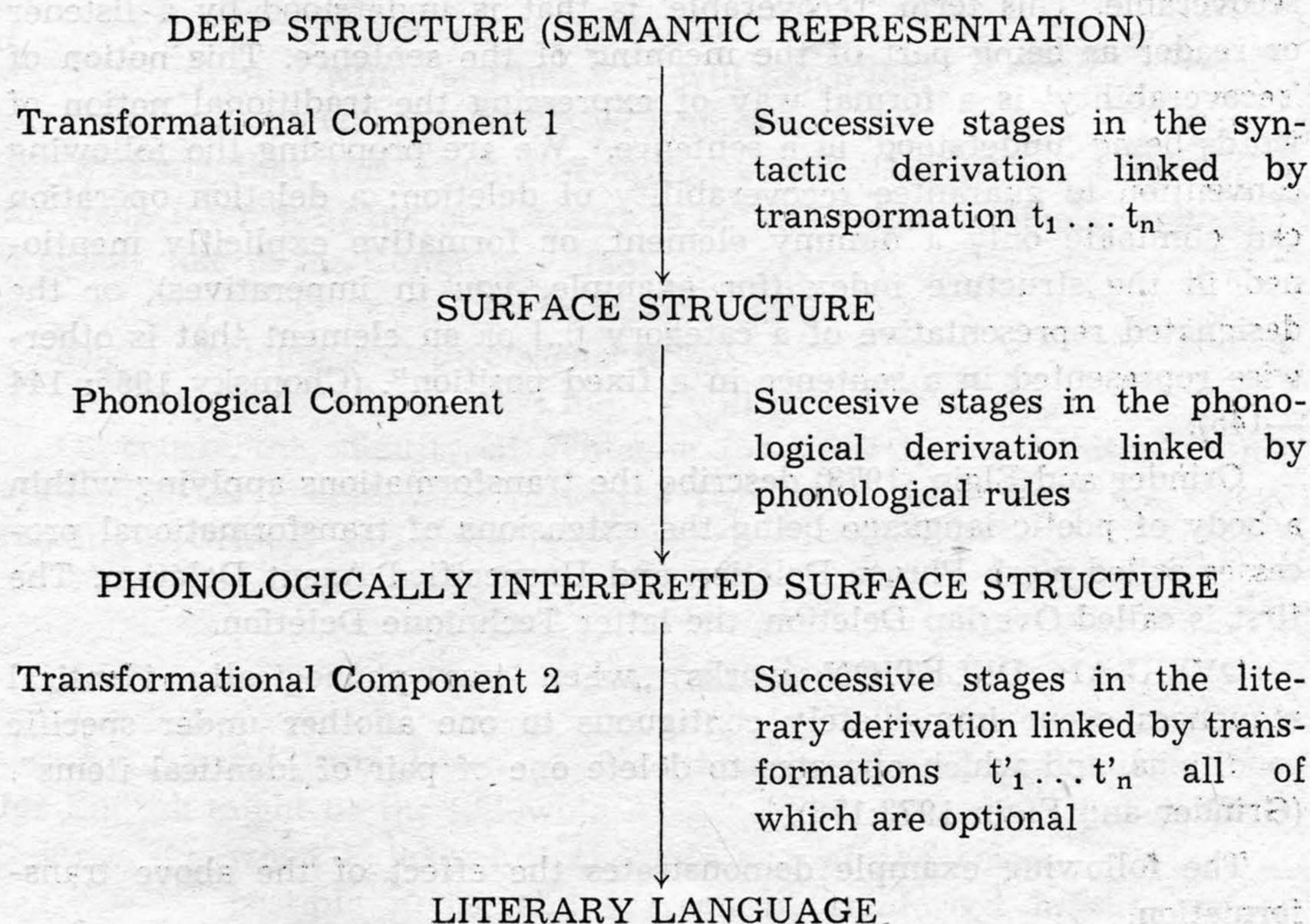
1. expanding the 'normal' (non-poetic) grammar to cover also the poetic data,
2. constructing the 'poetic grammar' for the language of specific poems.

The first notion might be rejected by the fact that this grammar would result in hundreds and hundreds of unwanted sentences. Even if this did not happen (because of many constraints imposed upon the

rules involved) it would lack a kind of simplicity and clarity. The increase in complexity seems to be obvious and unavoidable.

The second notion leads to the conclusion that poetry is language completely differently ordered or arranged, which is not quite true. This kind of unique grammar may lack a kind of generality demanded by any theory of grammar. (cf. Chomsky 1968).

Grinder and Elgin 1973 propose „...that a poem (or any other piece of literary language) begins, just like any other piece of language, as tree structure. This tree structure contains all semantic elements of the total content of the poem. This Deep Structure is then related to its Surface Structure by a derivational process — the series of transformations of the English language — just as any other Deep Structure. The resulting Surface Structure, however, is then subject to a series of optional transformations that are forbidden for ordinary language”. (Grinder and Elgin 1973:176).



The Transformational Component is of primary interest. It seems that the Deletion Transformations constitute the majority among transformations listed as $t'_1 \dots t'_n$. This is due to the compression — the aim

of the poet and the main reason for the linguistic incomprehensibility on the side of the student.

The category to which any particular transformation belongs can be determined by a simple inspection of the Structural Index and Structural Change.

Permutation, Insertion and Substitution transformations seem to encompass the entire range of transformations.

Substitution Transformations include two types:

- A — those that substitute the null element for some term in the Structural Index.
- B — those that substitute some non-null element for one of the terms in the Structural Index.

Type A is more commonly called Deletion Transformations. The normal and obvious condition for the Deletion Transformation is recoverability for the items deleted. Since transformations do not change meaning and the null element is substituted for some element in the Structural Index of the Deletion Transformation, the deleted item must be recoverable. This term 'recoverable' is that is understood by a listener or reader as being part of the meaning of the sentence. This notion of 'recoverability' is a formal way of expressing the traditional notion of words being 'understood' in a sentence. „We are proposing the following convention to guarantee recoverability of deletion: a deletion operation can eliminate only a dummy element, or formative explicitly mentioned in the structure index (for example, *you* in imperatives), or the designated representative of a category [...] or an element that is otherwise represented in a sentence in a fixed position". (Chomsky 1965: 144—145).

Grinder and Elgin (1973) describe the transformations applying within a body of poetic language being the extensions of transformational processes called Verb Phrase Deletion and Unspecified Agent Deletion. The first is called Overlap Deletion, the latter Technique Deletion.

OVERLAP DELETION works „when two phonologically identical sequences occur immediately contiguous to one another under specific conditions, and which operates to delete one of pair of identical items". (Grinder and Elgin 1973:178).

The following example demonstrates the effect of the above transformation.

the sky is so near the earth does not open her eyes

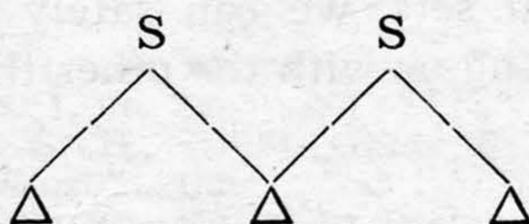
The deep structures are following:

1. the sky is so near the earth
2. the earth does not open her eyes

The effect of the transformation being to reduce a structure



to a structure



should be clearly seen.

The pair of authors follow on the constraints as far as the Overlap Deletion is concerned: „The condition of phonological identity of the immediately contiguous items is very rigid”. (Grinder and Elgin 1973:179).

They give the following example:

- a) I will touch you / you will touch me
I will touch you will touch me
- b) I will touch him / he will touch me
I will touch him will touch me

It seems that this constraint might be released in the cases when the main interest of the poet occurs to be achieving extremely high compression, like in the Cummings' line:

kiss me will go

The underlying structure seems to be:

kiss me / I will go

Of course the identity of syntactic functions is not required. What appears to be necessary is that „the two items have the same lexical reading”. (Grinder and Elgin 1973:179).

TECHNIQUE DELETION

„A tentative formulation of the transformation Technique Deletion for English might be the following:

when a lexical item (i) is one of the small finite set of possible items, and (ii) can be reinforced in the surface structure by such technical devices as rhyme, assonance, and alliteration that lexical item may be deleted for the surface string of poetic language”.

(Grinder and Elgin 1973:183)

Consider the following two examples:

 this small horse newly

 he is fresh from his mother's flesh

There is a small set of possible items that could have occurred after *newly* and that, because of the overt items, we can specify that set fairly closely. The set of eligible items is probably the following:

 born, dropped, foaled, nursed

Given the phonological sets, we can safely eliminate *dropped* from the set of candidates, leaving us with the other three.

 Snowflakes round and round through air

The missing item here is the verb, we are given the phrase *round and round* and thus we know that the missing item is restricted to a verb of motion and the motion must fall within the category *circular*.

The above mentioned two transformations do not encompass the whole range of poetic options the poet has at his disposal. They constitute just an example but even using these we can say that they are useful, though more indirectly so, in assigning semantic interpretation to those sequences which are semigrammatical but have analogical counterparts in a normal grammar. They also offer an insight into the complex relationships that we so often admire in poetry and, what seems to be the most important factor, they have a relatively great explanatory power.

THE STUDENT

The suggested model seems to be more realistic tools in the hands of the student than the explanatory activities of the teacher. In the case of a 'difficult poetry' the text-centered studies seem to be more efficient because they divert the reader directly to the structure and texture of a given work.

At the same time this practice puts the teacher and the student in a different perspectives. It provides both of them with the equipment leading into informed understanding (not based on imitation but on inventiveness).

This kind of language experience can stimulate the student's imagination which in turn can lead to creative writing and oral expression. It can also help the student gain feeling for an author's style as a means of starting to develop his own style of expression.

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