Binarities in Contemporary Poetics, The Case of Language Poetry

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الثنائيات في فن الشعر المعاصر، شعر اللغة مثالاً

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مدرس اللغة والأدب ، كلية المأمون الجامعة

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of binarities in the poetic movement known as 'Language Poetry' which emerged in the United States in the late sixties. This study claims that the critical concept of 'binarities' is capable of illustrating how language poetry challenges conventional notions of poetic expression by critically juxtaposing well-established dualities, including meaning and form, language and meaning, as well as linearity and disjunction, among others. Consequently, this study reveals how language poets manipulate syntax and grammar to deliberately blur the boundaries among established poetic norms. Undermining those poetic norms challenges the readers' expectations, turning them, in terms of reception, into active participants in the process of composition. That is, language poetry does not often employ familiar language constructions with direct meaning or message. However, by using fragmentation and disrupted syntax, language poetry confronts the capitalistic values that define dominant narratives and utilize language as a tool to promote pre-packaged ideas. By examining Language Poetry's aesthetics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the movement's unique poetic and intellectual endeavors that serve as a site for critical engagement with the power dynamics inherent in language.

Keywords: Language Poetry, Binarities, Meaning and Form, Language and Meaning, Linearity and Disjunction, Contemporary Poetry, Postmodern Poetry.

Research Statement

Language poetry, known for its experimental nature and emphasis on the materiality of language, often challenges established structures and binaries. This research investigates how Language poetry utilizes and dismantles binarities, such as sound/meaning and materiality, among others, within language itself. Then, it explores the broader implications of this approach for understanding meaning-making and the potential of poetic expression.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do Language poets utilize and manipulate binary oppositions within language in their works?

2. What are the effects of deconstructing binarities on the construction of meaning and the reader's experience?

3. Does the exploration of binarities in Language poetry challenge traditional notions of language and its limitations in representing experience?

Research Scope

This research focuses on a selection of prominent Language poets and their representative works. While a comprehensive analysis of the entire movement is beyond the scope of this study, focusing on key figures like

Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman provides a strong foundation for understanding how binarities are addressed within Language poetry.

Introduction

Contemporary poetics encompasses a diverse range of practices that challenge established poetic norms, including meter, rhyme, form, meaning, and syntax. Those practices tend to experiment with new forms of expression. Language Poetry is one of the movements that expanded those practices pushing them into new frontiers. Language Poetry emerged in the late sixties and gained prominence in the following decades (Haralson, 23). It arose within the broader context of the avant-garde and experimental literature of the time. Language poetry borrows ideas from movements like Modernism, which encouraged experimentation, and the New York School, which brought everyday language into poetry. With poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, with their focus on exploring language itself and breaking free from strict forms, Language poetry began to form as distinguished poetic movement (Ferber, 36).

Moreover, Language poetry gained momentum with publications like the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and the rise of small presses focused on experimental writing. As a movement, Language poetry included poets such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman, and Laura Moriarty. Language Poetry can be seen as a critical response to the dominance of expressive and

confessional poetry that characterized the mid-20th century (Lee, 2). In contrast, Language Poetry prioritizes language itself as the primary focus of poetic exploration, foregrounding the materiality and structure of words (Semino, 69). Language poets tend to disrupt conventional ways of reading and writing poetry, questioning the assumed transparency and universality of language. This research paper aims to investigate how binarities are employed in Language Poetry as a central poetic strategy (Pomarska et al., 187).

1. Materiality and Expression

Language poetry challenges the established landscape of verse, not by rejecting the power of words altogether, but by embracing a new understanding of their essence. As a movement, Language poetry foregrounds the materiality of language which receives language but as a vibrant, malleable substance with its own inherent potential, and not only as a means for conveying pre-determined meaning (Kalaidjian, 234). This aesthetic approach places emphasis on the physical aspects of language, such as sounds, rhythms, and the dynamic interplay between words on the page. In this sense, language transcends its role as a mere transmitter of meaning. Language becomes a material that can be shaped, stretched, and played with. By prioritizing the materiality of language, Language poetry breaks free from the constraints of conventional poetic forms (Davis & Jenkins, 396).

The rigid structures of meter and rhyme, once considered the hallmarks of verse, are cast aside. In their place emerged a focus on sonic landscapes crafted through the deliberate arrangement of words. Repetition of sounds, the interplay of vowels and consonants, and the manipulation of rhythm become tools for creating new forms of meaning and emotional resonance (Paeth, 200). This emphasis on the physical aspects of language also opened the door to a multiplicity of interpretations. Poems were no longer expected to deliver a single, definitive message (Roche, 39).

Instead, the interplay of sound, rhythm, and the inherent ambiguity of words encouraged readers to actively engage in the process of constructing meaning (Walpert, 19). The poem thus becomes a canvas upon which the reader's own experiences and interpretations could paint a unique picture. Early influences like the Black Mountain poets, with figures like Charles Olson, emphasized the act of composition itself. For Black Mountain poets, the poem is a dynamic process shaped by the very materiality of language. Words are not simply chosen to convey pre-conceived ideas. However, sounds and rhythms were actively employed to explore new forms of meaning that can emerge through their interaction (Andrews, 108).

Similarly, the New York School, with Frank O'Hara as a prominent figure, further delved into the potential of everyday language. New York School

poets recognized the inherent beauty and power in the sounds and rhythms woven into the fabric of our daily speech (Silverberg, 33). Following the same path, Language poets such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian opened doors to a richer, more dynamic understanding of language's potential. Language poetry's focus on the materiality of language revolutionized the way poetry is received. By foregrounding the sounds, rhythms, and the physical aspects of words, it challenged traditional notions of meaning-making and explored a deeper understanding of language's potential (Varner, 217).

2. Sound and Meaning

In Language Poetry, the relationship between meaning and sound is often disrupted and reimagined. Traditional poetry often emphasizes the conveyance of meaning through language, with the sound serving as a secondary aspect (Watten, 23). However, Language poets challenge this hierarchy by exploring the sonic qualities of language and the ways in which sound can shape meaning. Language poets employ various techniques to deconstruct meaning and sound. They play with word associations, multiple meanings, and linguistic ambiguity to create a sense of semantic instability. Simultaneously, they explore the musicality, rhythm, and sonic textures of language, emphasizing the sound patterns and arrangements of words (Perelman, 15).

By blurring the boundaries between meaning and sound, Language Poetry invites readers to engage with the text on multiple levels. It encourages them to consider the ways in which the sonic qualities of language can shape and enhance meaning, challenging the notion that meaning is solely derived from semantic content. The following excerpt from *My Life* (1980) by Lyn Hejinian is a case in point:

> You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon. My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called "sea glass," bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches. abundant on beaches. There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity. It is as if one splashed in the water lost by one's tears. My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm. She could only give a little shrug. (10)

This excerpt consists of seemingly unconnected sentences. For instance, there's no clear narrative flow or cause-and-effect relationship between the act of spilling sugar and the description of the "sea glass." This fragmented style, a hallmark of Language poetry, disrupts the reader's expectation of a linear story.

My Life heavily relies on nouns, such as "sugar," "spoon," "apothecary jar," "sea glass," "bottles," "beaches" and descriptive details like "rounded," "textured," and "abundant." However, there's a lack of verbs or connecting phrases. This focus on nouns and concrete details prioritizes the individual words themselves over a cohesive narrative. Moreover, the first sentence introduces the act of spilling sugar, a seemingly mundane event. The focus then abruptly shifts to the father and his collection of "sea glass." This unexpected shift disrupts the reader's focus and encourages them to pay close attention to the language itself, rather than solely following a traditional narrative arc.

The emphasis here is on the way words are arranged and their relationship to each other. The line "bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea" highlights the transformation process through the use of verbs and descriptive adjectives. This approach prioritizes the exploration of language as a material, showcasing its ability to convey texture, shape, and transformation (Ashton, 116). The fragmented structure, focus on individual words, and lack of a clear narrative align with core principles of Language poetry. The poem disrupts the traditional flow of information and compels the reader to actively participate in constructing meaning from the presented elements (Kosick, 3).

Thus, Language Poetry disrupts the traditional binary relationship between meaning and sound by deconstructing and reconfiguring their roles

within poetic texts. While traditional poetry often prioritizes the conveyance of meaning through language, Language Poetry challenges this hierarchy by foregrounding the sonic qualities of language and emphasizing its materiality (Delbos, 190). Language poets also experiment with wordplay, puns, and sonic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and rhyme to create unexpected connections and associations. They foreground the musicality of language, emphasizing the sound patterns and rhythms. By doing so, Language poets disrupt traditional expectations of meaning, inviting readers to engage with the sonic dimensions of the poem in conjunction with its semantic content (Davidson, 92).

3. Active and Passive Perception

Language Poetry encourages active reader engagement by foregrounding the process of reading itself. Readers are invited to question and actively interpret the text, as meaning is seen as a collaborative construction between the reader and the poem. By disrupting traditional binary structures and employing innovative poetic techniques, Language Poetry invites readers to play an active role in the interpretation and understanding of the text (Gray et al., 445). Furthermore, Language Poetry often incorporates intertextuality, found language, and multiple voices within a single poem. This intermingling of

voices and textual references invites readers to engage in dialogue with various sources and perspectives (Nowottny, 197).

Thus, language poetry encourages readers to question and challenge dominant discourses, expanding their understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts that shape language and meaning. In Language Poetry, the reader is seen as an active collaborator in the meaning-making process (Slessarev et al., 784). The poem is not viewed as a fixed entity with a singular interpretation, but rather as a dynamic and interactive space where meaning is co-constructed between the reader and the text. This active reader engagement is central to the ethos of Language Poetry and reflects its commitment to challenging traditional notions of authority and privileging multiple voices and perspectives. Silliman's poem "Sunset Debris," published in his *The Age of Huts* (1986), is considered a groundbreaking work in experimental American poetry.

The "Sunset Debris" uses constrained writing techniques to subvert traditional forms. it emphasizes the material construction of texts over subjective expression. It remains widely discussed for its radical approach to form and meaning in postmodern arts:

> Can you feel it? Does it hurt? Is this too soft? Do you like
>
> it? Do you like this? Is this how you like it? Is it airight? Is

he there? Is he breathing? Is it him? Is it near? Is it hard? Is

it cold? Does it weigh much? Is it heavy? Do you have to

carry it far? Are those the hills? Is this where we get off?

Which one are you? Are we there yet? Do we need to bring

sweaters? Where is the border between blue and green? Has

the mail come? Have you come yet? Is it perfect bound? Do

you prefer ballpoints? Do you know which insect you most

resemble? Is it the red one? Is that your hand? Want to go

out? (1)

Unlike conventional poems with rhyme and meter, "Sunset Debris" lacks a clear

narrative or a fixed structure. Instead, it presents a series of short, seemingly

unrelated statements and questions. It appears more like a prose paragraph,

lacking a clear structure or story. Sentences are short and often incomplete,

creating a sense of fragmentation.

Since language poetry emphasizes the way words themselves create

meaning, "Sunset Debris," employs repetition of colors, open-ended questions,

and pronouns appear throughout the poem to highlight the act of using language

and drawing attention to its inherent limitations (Siltanen, 90). This repetition

draws attention to the sounds and rhythms of the words themselves, creating a

musicality within the poem. In reception, the poem doesn't spoon-feed the

reader a specific meaning. The questions are general and unspecific which makes the reader active during the perception process. The readers have to find their own answers if they truly figured out what the questions are actually about. Therefore, the poem seems to prioritize the exploration of language's possibilities over conveying a fixed meaning (Conley, 139).

Moreover, throughout the poem, Silliman throws out questions like "what is the relationship between the poem and the world" or "is the reader a necessary part of the poem." This forces the reader to actively participate, questioning their own role in interpreting the work. In other words, "Sunset Debris" doesn't offer a clear story or resolution. It doesn't follow a straight path. It throws out ideas, plays with words, and forces the reader to think critically about how language works and how to approach poetry (Hofer & Golston, 150). As a language poem, it asks the readers to reconsider their expectations of poetry. It prioritizes the exploration of language and the act of reading itself, making the reader an active participant in creating meaning. In addition, as a language poem, "Sunset Debris" often discards flowery language, instead using the words and phrases we encounter daily. The "Sunset Debris" is filled with ordinary words: "chair," "light," "dinner." This focus on the commonplace reflects the movement's attempt to challenge the notion that poetry needs to be elevated or removed from everyday experience (Perloff, 205).

Another poem by Silliman that embodies the spirit of Language poetry is "The Chinese Notebook," published in his *The Age of Huts* (1986). It is a poem that dives into the mechanics of language itself, rather than focusing solely on traditional storytelling or emotions:

1. Wayward, we weigh words. Nouns reward objects for meaning. The chair in the air is covered with hair. No part is in touch with the planet.

2. Each time I pass the garage of a certain yellow house, I am greeted with barking. The first time this occurred, an instinctive fear seemed to run through me. I have never been attacked. Yet I firmly believe that if I opened the door to the garage I should confront a dog.

3. Chesterfield, sofa, divan, couch—might these items refer to the same object? If so, are they separate conditions of a single word?

4. My mother as a child would call a potholder a "boppo," the term becoming appropriated by the whole family, handed down now by my cousins to their own children. Is it a word? If it extends, eventually, into general usage, at what moment will it become one?

5. Language is, first of all, a political question.

6. I wrote this sentence with a ballpoint pen. If I had used

another would it have been a different sentence? (4)

Unlike poems with a clear narrative, "The Chinese Notebook" reads more like a collection of numbered thoughts and observations. Sentences are short and often incomplete, resembling a conversation with language itself. This fragmented style reflects a key feature of Language poetry – prioritizing the exploration of how words function and interact, rather than solely conveying a single, fixed meaning.

In "The Chinese Notebook", Silliman uses techniques like repetition, such as "chair," "sentence," "word." He also uses wordplay, such as "Chesterfield, sofa, divan, couch—might these items refer to the same object?" and "My mother... called a potholder a 'boppo.'" This playfulness highlights the multiple meanings and connections words can hold, prompting the reader to think beyond their surface value (Perloff, 2020). As in "The Sunset Debris," "The Chinese Notebook" is filled with ordinary terms such as "chair," "pen," "dinner." This focus on the commonplace reflects the Language Poetry as a movement that aims to challenge the idea that poetry needs to be separate from everyday experience.

Moreover, "The Chinese Notebook" sparks curiosity with thought-provoking statements such as "Language is, first of all, a political question." and "This is not philosophy, this is poetry." These statements invite the reader to question the nature of language, its role in society, and even the very definition of poetry itself (Bruns, 142). Language poetry thrives on ambiguity, encouraging readers to actively participate in making meaning. By employing a non-narrative structure, focusing on the mechanics of language, utilizing everyday speech, and incorporating thought-provoking questions, "The Chinese Notebook" showcases the essence of Language poetry. It doesn't present a clear message. Instead, it invites the reader on a journey of exploration, urging them to contemplate the power and complexities of language itself.

Thus, Language poets then often employ fragmented syntax, disjunction, and textual experimentation, creating spaces of ambiguity and open-endedness. These techniques challenge readers to actively fill in the gaps and make connections between the fragmented elements of the poem. The reader becomes an active participant in constructing meaning, as they are encouraged to explore different interpretive possibilities and engage with the complexities of the text. By encouraging active reader engagement, Language Poetry aims to create a more democratic and inclusive space for poetic interpretation. It invites readers to critically reflect on language, meaning, and representation, fostering a deeper

engagement with the complexities of the world and the possibilities of poetic expression.

4. Subjectivity and Objectivity

Language Poetry often carries a socio-political dimension, seeking to address issues of power, ideology, and social structures. Language poets tend to critique dominant discourses and challenge established systems of language and representation. Language Poetry also interrogates the binary relationship between self and other. Traditional poetry often centers on the individual voice and personal experiences of the poet, reinforcing a sense of subjectivity and individuality. Language poets, however, challenge the notion of a fixed and stable self, blurring the boundaries between the self and the other. Bernstein's poem "Twelve Poems Beginning with A, B, C" (2020) is a case in point.

Clearly, the title itself disrupts the expectation of a single poem. The work is divided into twelve separate poems, each starting with a specific letter (A, B, C), which breaks the traditional notion of a flowing narrative. These poems heavily utilize repetition of sounds and words. Lines like "abracadabra," "biblical babble," and "capitalist cant" showcase how language can be manipulated for specific purposes. This focus on the mechanics of language highlights how it can be a tool to perpetuate certain ideologies and power structures (Bové, 250).

Among those poems, Bernstein's poem "After Magritte" reflects how Language poetry disrupts established norms and ways of thinking, which can extend to challenging societal structures:

This is not a sonnet.

This is not a line.

This is not a sentence.

These are not words.

These are not letters.

This is not a poem.

This is not art.

This is not sound.

This is not thought.

This is not visible.

This is not conceivable.

This is nonsense.

This is false.

This is not now. (11)

In this poem, each line follows the structure "This is not a...," which systematically disrupts established definitions of various aspects related to

language, art, and perception. This approach directly critiques the tendency to categorize and impose rigid structures on creative expression.

By stating "These are not words," "This is not sound," and "This is not visible," the poem throws doubt on the ability of language to perfectly capture reality. This challenges the assumed power of language as a tool for absolute representation and highlights the limitations inherent in attempting to express certain concepts solely through words. Moreover, the repetitive structure creates a sense of rhythm and singsong, almost mimicking a nursery rhyme. However, the content directly contradicts this playful form, creating a surprising and thought-provoking effect. This strategy disrupts the reader's expectations and forces them to actively engage with the poem's message. The poem's deconstructionist approach can be seen as a broader critique of established systems and power structures. By questioning the very definitions of language, art, and even concepts like "now" and "conceivable," the poem opens the door to challenging the status quo and established norms.

Conclusion

In Language Poetry, the boundaries between meaning and sound, presence and absence, and self and others are intentionally blurred and disrupted. While traditional poetry often seeks to create a sense of presence and completeness through vivid descriptions and imagery, language poets employ strategies such as ellipsis, disjointed syntax, and textual fragmentation to create spaces of absence within the poem. These gaps and absences invite readers to actively participate in the construction of meaning, as they are encouraged to fill in the missing pieces and make connections between the fragmented elements of the text. Moreover, language poets often incorporate found language, quotations, and intertextuality within their work, drawing from various sources and voices. This mixture of voices disrupts the notion of a singular authorial voice and emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives.

Language poets also engage with issues of identity, power, and social constructs, questioning the ways in which language shapes and constructs notions of self and other. By challenging the binary distinction between self and other, Language Poetry destabilizes fixed identities and invites readers to critically examine the ways in which language and representation influence our understanding of selfhood and otherness. All of these poetic strategies challenge traditional binary structures, opening up new possibilities for poetic expression.

They challenge the notion that a poem should provide a complete and coherent representation of reality, instead embracing the fragmented and open-ended nature of human experience.

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