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## RELEVANCE THEORY AND POETIC EFFECTS

**Abstract.** Why should poets choose to repeat concrete sounds or abstract structures when conveying their poetic messages? After all, it would seem that repetition tends to slow down comprehension and require greater cognitive effort. The key to understanding the rationale behind these poetic devices is the communicative principle of relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson: interlocutors communicate on the assumption that *what* is being said is relevant in the communicative context. But *how* things are said is also relevant: poets create patterns for pragmatic, communicative reasons. Poetic devices also promote affective states, which cannot be reduced to cognitive ones.

### I

**R**ELEVANCE THEORY IS a theory of communication developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson<sup>1</sup> that takes H. P. Grice's work in the philosophy of language as its point of departure.<sup>2</sup> Grice originally proposed that linguistic communication was a cooperative affair that extended beyond interlocutors' sharing a language and a context. They had also to abide by the same communicative principles, the most important of which was the "cooperative principle": "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, p. 26). Under this general principle Grice recognized several conversational maxims, falling under the categories of (1) quantity, (2) quality, (3) relation, and (4) manner, as follows:

- 1.a. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the purposes of the exchange)
- 1.b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
  
- 2.a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- 2.b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
  
3. Be relevant.
  
4. [“supermaxim”] Be perspicuous.
  - 4.a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
  - 4.b. Avoid ambiguity.
  - 4.c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
  - 4.d. Be orderly. (Grice, pp. 26–28)

For Grice, such maxims helped make salient an important distinction between what is said and what is “implicated” by means of words, where the former is a matter for semantics and the latter a matter for pragmatics. Besides a common language and context, then, Grice adds an intentional dimension to communication, referring back to the minds of interlocutors; as Sperber and Wilson note, “Grice put forth an idea of fundamental importance: that the very act of communicating creates expectations which it then exploits” (S&W, p. 37). One way in which a communicator may exploit common communicative expectations is by flouting one or more maxims. One could, for instance, flout maxim 4.a. by being deliberately obscure, so as to avoid communicating something undesirable. We can see the flouting of maxims as evidence that, in normal circumstances, they are at work.

By asking the basic question, “What is the rationale behind the cooperative principles and maxims?” and proposing that they all reduce to the maxim of relation (“be relevant”), Sperber and Wilson developed the Gricean insight of explaining the communicative process by reference to the minds of speakers and hearers rather than to any shared social codes (S&W, p. 36). Whereas social codes are learned, the presumption behind relevance theory is that minds are “prewired” to work in a certain fashion, and that communication operates in an analogous manner.<sup>3</sup> We could say that the main idea behind Sperber and Wilson’s theory is that what is true of life in general remains true in linguistic communication: we want to get as much as we can for as little work as possible. And, whenever we are made to work a little harder, we expect

that there should be reasons for it and that we shall be rewarded for it: overtime work means extra pay. Thus there is, in every communicative exchange, an assumption of relevance: I expect the linguistic string I am required to process to result in contextual effects—it should tell me something: “The assessment of relevance, like the assessment of productivity, is a matter of balancing output against input: here contextual effects against processing effort” (S&W, p. 125).

There are many details to relevance theory; here I will outline only what I consider pertinent to the discussion that follows. One important idea in relevance theory is that minds “store” concepts in various interconnected ways. Concepts in turn collect information (as an “address” in memory) lexically, logically, and denotatively, and they appear as constituents of logical forms when they are accessed. A concept’s *lexical entry* indicates the word or phrase in natural language corresponding to that concept. The *denotational* or *encyclopedic entry* “contains information about the extension and/or denotation of the concept: that is, about the objects, events and/or properties which instantiate it”; finally, the concept enters into logical forms, and thus there must be rules governing its behavior within those forms—the *logical entry* contains a set of deductive rules (S&W, p. 86).

According to Sperber and Wilson, speakers fully share the logical entries attached to a conceptual address and, when speakers share a language, the lexical entries as well. The encyclopedic entry, however, is peculiar to an individual, containing all that the individual believes to be the case about that concept. Naturally, encyclopedic entries, while they vary from person to person, must still overlap to an extent sufficient for communication, and may overlap considerably. If speakers shared only the information available at the logical and lexical entries attached to the concepts they have stored in memory, it is unlikely that their exchanges would result in the exchange of much information.

While the logical entry provides (deductive) rules for the use of the concept, and the lexical entry the linguistic tag that will be used for it, information from the encyclopedic entry provides the contextual information that will particularize the inferences drawn with it: “stereotypical assumptions and expectations about frequently encountered objects and events” (S&W, p. 88). For instance, the encyclopedic entry for “cow” for a Hindu Indian and a person from most other countries will be very different. For the Hindu, the encyclopedic entry for “cow” will involve the idea of a sacred animal, one whose meat ought not to be consumed (at least not by those who hold it sacred), and one that

freely roams the streets in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> None of these three is likely to be part of the encyclopedic entry for “cow” for, say, a person in most Latin American countries.

*Thoughts*, according to this view, are “conceptual representations (as opposed to sensory representations or emotional states)” (S&W, p. 2). What Sperber and Wilson call *assumptions* are thoughts that an individual takes to be representations of the actual world, as opposed to fictions, desires, or representations of representations (S&W, p. 2). This does not mean that an assumption may not be, in fact, a fiction—it only need not seem so to the individual. An assumption, then, is “a structured set of concepts” (S&W, p. 85). An assumption may be relevant or irrelevant in a context; it is relevant in a context “if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context” (S&W, p. 122). The fundamental insight of relevance theory is expressed in the extent conditions that determine the degree of relevance of a given assumption:

*Extent condition 1:* an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

*Extent condition 2:* an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it is small. (S&W, p. 125)

The most relevant assumption is the one with the most optimal ratio of extent condition 2 to extent condition 1; that is, of effort to contextual effects.

In view of these distinctions, what is important for communication to occur is not that there be mutual *knowledge* about the subject of conversation between interlocutors, but rather that there be what Sperber and Wilson call “*mutual manifestness*.” A given fact “is *manifest* to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true”; a set of facts manifest to an individual constitutes a *cognitive environment* (S&W, p. 39). As has been noted,<sup>5</sup> on the relevance theory account, “It is the communicator’s responsibility to judge what contextual assumptions are manifest to the addressee. Where she judges them not to be manifest she must make them available through further utterance” (Pilkington, p. 63). Communication occurs within such a sufficiently shared cognitive environment, and involves an initial *decoding* phase—phonemic or graphemic representations are decoded into semantic representations and incomplete logical forms—and an *inferential* phase, i.e., filling in

the gaps in the logical form so that, from the resulting propositional forms, conversational implicatures and propositional attitudes may be derived (Pilkington, p. 67; see also S&W, pp. 12–13).

In everyday communication, individuals address particular interlocutors, and so must be attuned to what may or may not be manifest to them so as to ensure the success of conversational exchanges. In the case of literary communication, an author typically does not have a particular known individual (or set thereof), but a general, anonymous readership. It may be thought that in such cases the burden lies entirely with the text to provide a cognitive environment: “In the case of literary communication this detailed attention to the needs of a particular addressee does not apply. The text is carefully shaped by the author with a view to the effects it will have upon a reader, but this reader is, in the term familiar from literary theory, an *implied reader*. The context needed by the implied reader must be determined by the text itself” (Pilkington, p. 63).

Yet that requirement is too strong. It is true that, typically, an author does not have a particular addressee in mind (though lyric poems are frequently written for specific individuals, as are occasional poems such as eulogies and epithalamia, and a novel may be a message in disguise). But even if this were not so, no readership is altogether “general.” An author must have an idea of who will read her work (who else will “imply” the reader?) and, as rule and at a minimum, writers write for their contemporaries. If this is so, and if writers also assume that their readership will be familiar with particular uses of language (say, slang, which is invariably local) and with specific cultural cues (say, what life is like in twenty-first-century Porto Alegre), then it is also true that a myriad of contextual assumptions are left unspoken (unwritten), assumed to be manifest to the targeted readers. Just as no conversation could take off if every assumption had first to be made explicitly manifest between conversational partners, so no literary work could ever end, or begin, if everything had to be contextualized for the reader. The interpretation of works from different cultures or earlier times is difficult precisely because such contextual assumptions are not readily available to readers and must be retrieved by research beyond the literary text. Works, like conversations, obtain their meaning within a contextual environment.

Literary works tend to differ from everyday linguistic exchanges, however, in that they often require more cognitive effort from their readers than is usually the case with conversation. Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory predicts that any “greater effort involved in accessing the

intended contextual assumption is repaid by an increase in contextual effects: a wider range of implicatures being communicated” (Pilkington, p. 79). How does this occur, and is it always the case that greater effort results in greater reward? With regard to the second question, it is a sad truth that communication may, and often does, fail in spite of great efforts being expended by both parties. So we should rather add a modal dimension to Sperber and Wilson’s idea: it’s perhaps more accurate to say that greater processing effort generates the *possibility* of greater reward in the form of more contextual effects: if and when one’s extraordinary efforts are successful, the rewards are greater. We may pursue the reverse situation as well: can there be many contextual effects with little cognitive effort? Perhaps such is the effect of puns and jokes—perhaps too of poems. We thus return to the first question, regarding how literary, and in particular poetic, works produce their effects. This will be the concern of the following section.

## II

It is a fair question why poets should choose to repeat concrete sounds and/or abstract structures when conveying their poetic messages. After all, it would seem that repetition devices tend to slow down the comprehension process and require greater cognitive effort. Following Pilkington, I think the key to understanding the rationale behind these devices is the communicative principle of relevance. If it is true that speakers seek to make their contributions as relevant as possible, and hearers assume the contextual relevance of what they hear, then when something unusual occurs—say, a word or sound is repeated—hearers will assume that optimal relevance is still at work. If those repetitions require more processing effort, on this view hearers should tacitly assume that the effort will be repaid with greater contextual effects. This is precisely what poetic techniques are meant to produce. Without stating anything explicitly, merely by using words that sound alike (for example), a poet may lead us to consider ways in which the concepts signified by those words relate to one another, or novel ways in which to consider the concepts themselves. A lovely example is the following stanza from Ezra Pound’s 1920 poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*:

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,  
 Made with no loss of time.  
 A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster  
 Or the “sculpture” of rhyme.

In *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, Paul Fussell provides a masterful analysis of this stanza, one that exemplifies precisely how form is contributing to content, so I will indulge in a lengthy quotation and only add that “kinema” above is further contributing to the meaning of “plaster” as something that is not real and substantial, but merely an image of reality:

Here *plaster* and *alabaster* “sound alike,” all right, just as *time* and *rhyme* do. But when we inquire why they have been disposed so that their sound resemblances will organize the stanza, we perceive that their relationships are not only logical but witty as well. Plaster and alabaster are total opposites as materials for plastic art: plaster is squeezed or molded into some predetermined shape; it often mimics some other material—most often stone—and it is conspicuously fragile and impermanent. Alabaster, on the other hand, must be worked from the outside: it must be incised, and incision implies a sharpness in both the cutting tool and the intelligence that commands it. The shape of a figure cut in alabaster cannot be wholly predetermined, for it will depend in part on the unique texture of the stone. And finally, no one works in alabaster without some aspirations toward permanence.

By rhyming the words which represent these two rich symbols of technical, aesthetic opposition, the stanza appears to compare them while ironically it actually contrasts them. That is, the sound similarity “says” that they resemble each other, while the rhetoric of the stanza asserts their difference. We are moved in two directions at once, or we are abused only to be disabused: irony is the result. A similar sort of irony results from the rhyming of *time* and *rhyme*—or actually *no loss of time* with “*sculpture*” of *rhyme*. The sound similarity implies a semantic similarity between fast manufacturing and permanent beauty. And again, our perception that the implied comparison is really masking a significant contrast produces our experience of irony.<sup>6</sup>

What Fussell notes regarding a reader’s expectations when words sound alike can be accounted for by Sperber and Wilson’s principle of relevance. If a listener expects a speaker’s contribution to be aimed at optimal relevance, then that listener should expect that when words are matched in position and sound, as they are in Pound’s stanza, this was done for a reason and attention is thereby being called to them. So here I will expand upon Pilkington’s proposal that relevance theory can explain poetic effects, focusing particularly on the role repetition structures play in aiding our understanding of what poems say, and in promoting affective responses.



According to Sperber and Wilson, a “speaker aiming at optimal relevance will leave implicit everything her hearer can be trusted to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt” (S&W, p. 218). This occurs frequently in everyday conversation, as when someone says “I’m cold,” with the intention not (merely) to inform another of her state, but also to inform that other that she is uncomfortable and to request that the window be shut. Literature in general and poetry in particular exploit this aspect of linguistic communication. Poets take advantage of various poetic devices so as to say more with fewer words. This is one reason why paraphrasing a poem is so problematic, and typically involves considerably more words to express a presumed poetic message than were used in the poem itself. We need only consider Pound’s dense stanza above in contrast with Fussell’s insightful analysis of it. We can say that one of the things left implicit by Pound, and that he expected his readers to bring to the interpretative table, was something like “compare and contrast words that sound alike and are placed in parallel positions in their respective lines.” In relevance-theoretic terms, we can say that techniques such as this are invitations to readers or listeners to explore the encyclopedic entries of the concepts involved; they are “ways of encouraging readers to explore memory more thoroughly, to combine memories stored at different conceptual addresses in order to increase the range of cognitive effects” (Pilkington, p. 77).

Are such techniques, then, cognitive facilitators or are they hurdles we must jump over on our way to understanding what is being said? The picture above suggests that passages such as Pound’s follow the economic spirit of relevance theory, since they convey more with fewer words. But Pilkington, as well as Sperber and Wilson, view the use of such techniques as requiring greater processing effort than passages that do not have them.

Within our framework, the task of the hearer faced with these utterances [where repetition occurs] is to reconcile the fact that a certain expression has been repeated with the assumption that optimal relevance has been aimed at. *Clearly, the extra linguistic processing effort incurred by the repetition must be outweighed by some increase in contextual effects triggered by the repetition itself.* (S&W, p. 220; my emphasis)

There is an assumption in the theory that sentences where repetition occurs do require more linguistic processing than sentences where no

repetition is used. It is not clear to me that this is always the case. But in light of that possibility we would do well to distinguish between a lexical economy (fewer words used) and a cognitive economy (less processing effort required). Clearly, an economy of words does not entail that less effort will be required to process them. Indeed, *more* effort may be required, as in cases where there aren't sufficient contextual assumptions mutually manifest to the participants in a conversation. Still, where sufficient assumptions are mutually manifest, it could be that repetition saves rather than demands more effort on the part of a listener.

Sperber and Wilson consider in particular the technique of epizeuxis, the repetition of words. The use of epizeuxis, they argue, is no guarantee of poetic effects. The effects of epizeuxis, Sperber and Wilson claim, vary from (1) merely expressing propositional content ("Here's a red sock, here's a red sock, here's a blue sock"), to (2) expressing a speaker's attitude toward a given propositional content (say, that of being committed to what it expresses, as in "I shall never, never smoke again"), to (3) *exhibiting* a speaker's attitude, in a *non-propositional* manner, to a given propositional content ("My childhood days are gone, gone").

The difference between the last one and the first two is that the first two could be paraphrased without loss of content ("Here are two red socks and one blue sock" and "I am truly committed to never smoking again"), whereas the last one could not. Utterances such as "My childhood days are gone, gone," according to Sperber and Wilson, "as it were *exhibit* rather than merely *describe* the speaker's mental or emotional state: they give rise to non-propositional effects which would be lost under paraphrase" (S&W, p. 220, my emphasis). Epizeuxis in the last utterance, then, produces a poetic effect, whereas its use in the first two does not. How does it do this? In such cases, "the repetition should yield an increase in contextual effects by encouraging the hearer to extend the context and thereby add further implicatures":

the repetition in ["My childhood days are gone, gone"] cannot be accounted for by assuming that the speaker's childhood days are longer gone, or more definitely gone, than might otherwise have been assumed, so if the presumption of relevance is to be confirmed, then the repetition of "gone" must be interpreted as an encouragement to expand the context. . . . In other words, the hearer is encouraged to be imaginative and to take a large share of responsibility in imagining what it may be for the speaker to be way past her youth. (S&W, p. 221)

The distinction between logical *implications* and conversation *implicatures* becomes important in this context. Implications are logically derived consequences; implicatures involve what is *suggested*. A hearer may derive equally many logical implications from “My childhood days are gone” as from “My childhood days are gone, gone.” What Sperber and Wilson claim is that the second sentence has more *implicatures*; that is, “more contextual assumptions and implications which receive some degree of backing from the speaker” (S&W, p. 222). It is important to note that for Sperber and Wilson such implicatures still involve propositional effects: “What look like non-propositional effects associated with the expression of attitudes, feelings and states of mind can be approached in terms of the notion of weak implicature” (S&W, p. 222). In this manner, it seems that Sperber and Wilson want to reduce all that may be transmitted by a linguistic utterance to cognitive effects. This seems to me to be excessively reductionist, and not phenomenologically accurate. Even if it is true that all affective states involve propositions—something that even a cognitivist about the emotions need not agree to—that is not all there is to them. Perhaps there is no change in an affective state that does not involve a change in a cognitive state, but that does not mean that the affective state is nothing but the cognitive one.

Sperber and Wilson contend that poetic effects, which they understand as the “peculiar effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures,” “are typically, but wrongly, attributed to syntactic or phonological constructions of the sentences in which they occur,” inasmuch as “a repetitive syntactic pattern [in their example, epizeuxis] does not invariably give rise to noticeable stylistic effects. The same is true of all the figures of style identified by classical rhetoric” (S&W, p. 222). Rather, they argue, everything reduces to the principle of relevance: when there are syntactic, semantic, and/or phonological parallelisms, these “reinforce the hearer’s natural tendency to reduce processing effort by looking for matching parallelisms in propositional form and implicature” (S&W, p. 222). Again, the claim strikes me as too strong. Does the fact (if it is a fact) that, say, epizeuxis does not create poetic effects every time it is used entail that poetic effects should never be explained by adverting to it? Can’t weak implicatures be explained solely by the workings of syntactic and phonological structures *sometimes*? It is not clear to me that phenomena in language are an all-or-nothing affair.

I think this difficulty is connected with the one above concerning affective states. It seems to me that it is because Sperber and Wilson view

poetic effects as, at bottom, cognitive effects that they cannot accept that syntactic and phonological constructions do, sometimes, promote affective states independently of any propositional content. Consider some of the examples given by Sperber and Wilson:

- (1) "Here's a red sock, here's a red sock, here's a blue sock."
- (2) "We went for a long, long walk."
- (3) "There were houses, houses everywhere."

According to them, in all three cases, though there is repetition, there is no poetic effect. That is because in all three cases, what is said may be paraphrased without loss of content. We have already seen a paraphrase for (1); (2) could be paraphrased as "We went for a very long walk," and (3), they say, as "There were a great many houses." I think the paraphrases offered for (2) and especially (3) in fact do result in a loss of content, and I think that even (1), in a particular context, could be used to mean more than "Here are two red socks and here's a blue sock."

I will leave (1) aside, however, and focus on (2) and (3). I think that, if we assume the principle of relevance, we should expect a speaker to make the choice of saying "We went for a long, long walk" rather than "We went for a very long walk" for a communicative reason. We can easily imagine a scenario in which one utters that sentence to convey the fact that, during that long walk, the walkers had a serious conversation. With the right emphases, that could perhaps also be conveyed by the alternative paraphrase. But it seems to me that the repetition in the first one does away with the need for expressive emphasis; we can see the repetition as substituting for it. So the repetition in this case is not a meaningless choice, and the sentence is not paraphrasable without loss of content. Moreover, again, it seems that the theory itself should predict such choices to be meaningful.

The same goes for example (3). There is an expressiveness in "There were houses, houses everywhere" that is absent in "There were a great many houses." The paraphrase again falls flat, and would require extralinguistic contribution in the form of emphases and intonation to achieve the expressive character of the original. Notice that this character could be of different, even opposing, sorts. We can imagine a child from a rural area excited to see the overabundance of houses in a particularly urban area, as we can imagine an adult environmentalist utter those words with regret as he recalls that an area that was previously home to

a virgin forest is now occupied by a large housing development. Switch their sentences to “There were a great many houses” and the contextual effects are considerably altered.

It is also worthy of note that epizeuxis is the only figure that Sperber and Wilson discuss. So it could well be that, even if what they claim for it is true—and I hope to have given enough reasons to cast that into doubt—it could still fail to apply to the many other rhetorical devices available to poets and nonpoets alike.

I think Sperber and Wilson are right that the use of repetition in language does not flout the principle of relevance, but rather that its use can be explained by it. And it seems plausible to say that the presence of repetition is no guarantee of poetic effect, although it seems equally plausible that its use is not random and contributes to the production of contextual effects, poetic or otherwise. Nevertheless, the notion of poetic effect with which Sperber and Wilson are working seems unduly cognitive based. I will now explore that notion further by considering in more detail how relevance theory accounts for our affective responses to linguistic utterances.

### III

As I have noted, for Sperber and Wilson the affective responses promoted by poetic techniques are reducible to cognitive effects:

How do poetic effects affect the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer? They do not add entirely new assumptions which are strongly manifest in this environment. Instead, they marginally increase the manifestness of a great many weakly manifest assumptions. In other words, poetic effects create common impressions rather than common knowledge. Utterances with poetic effects can be used precisely to create this sense of apparently affective rather than cognitive mutuality. What we are suggesting is that, *if you look at these affective effects through the microscope of relevance theory, you see a wide array of minute cognitive effects.* (S&W, p. 224, my emphasis)

It may well be true that affective effects consist, in part, of cognitive effects, and even that some consist entirely of them. However, some affective responses to poetry in particular are engendered by phonological devices that arguably promote responses that are not cognitive. The underlying musical dimension of most poetry, especially formally dense poetry, may be seen as promoting particular moods in the listener or reader, and those moods need not be understood propositionally.

Consider, for instance, the nursery rhymes children around the world grow up with, with their typical two-to-four beats or stresses per line, and one-to-two-rhymes rhyme scheme in a four-line stanza (in other words, quatrains in dimeter, trimeter, or tetrameter, typically with an *abab* rhyme scheme). Their sing-songy and playful effect frequently occurs irrespective of what is being said. Here is a popular English rhyme:

Ring-a-Ring-of-Roses  
 A pocket full of posies  
 Atchoo! Atchoo!  
 We all fall down.

This rhyme, sung joyfully by countless English-speaking children, seems incontrovertibly playful, although its words do not, of themselves, seem to make much sense at all. As it turns out, what they refer to is not the sort of thing a parent would encourage a child to sing about, since, literary scholars contend, they refer to the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe in the fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In this centuries-old rhyme, the first line presumably refers to the first signs of the disease—red, bruise-like marks—while the “pocket full of posies” refers to a practice commonly followed by doctors as a means to ward off the bad smells believed to be its cause. The sneeze of the third line was a sign that the disease had entered an advanced stage, and not long after one would indeed “fall down” for good. (The alternative third line, “Ashes! Ashes!” is presumed to refer to the burning of plagued bodies; that theory, however, founders on the historical fact that diseased bodies were buried in mass graves and not burned.) Indeed, a typical characteristic of nursery rhymes seems to be that they either do not make much sense, at least on the surface, or that they reflect relatively unpleasant subject matter. Nothing seems to matter much beyond the syllable stresses, the alliterations, and the rhymes.

Some patterning schemes seem more “directly perceptible” than others, and for that reason their effect seems stronger. Rhymes can be made more or less obvious, and they are more obvious when they come at the end of a line rather than within it. Anaphora, the repetition of words at the beginning of a line, gives a very forceful and indeed somewhat coarse effect, as can be attested in many of Walt Whitman’s poems, as contrasted with poems that do not make use of that technique. Some patternings seem considerably less available to conscious perception: Roman Jakobson went so far as to note the symmetrical distribution

of adjectival participles in the odd stanzas of one of Baudelaire's *Spleen* poems (Pilkington, p. 17). Naturally, if a pattern is not directly perceptible it becomes extremely difficult to assess what effects it might have on the reader or listener.

There may be a worry, moreover, that a given pattern should, in principle, produce the same effects regardless of its lexical instantiation, and an account that worked on such an assumption would provide "a greatly impoverished" view of aesthetic effects (Pilkington, p. 18). But this is an unfounded worry. First, there is some justification, beyond the nursery rhyme scenario just discussed, to think that certain patterns *do* typically produce certain aesthetic effects, and effects that are below the cognitive threshold. Many closed-verse forms have become associated with certain types of subject matter—imagine an elegy written in limerick form—and it is perhaps more sensible to hypothesize that such long-lived associations are not random than to expect that they are. Secondly, although there may be a form association at a broad, general level (say, amusement with the limerick), each poem fills a pre-established pattern with a distinct set of words. So there is an inescapable particularity, which will contribute to the particular effects of each poem, despite the commonality of form.

To succumb to such worries is tantamount to fearing that all of Shakespeare's sonnets should have the same effects, since they're all written in sonnet form—we need only compare "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" with "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth" for evidence to the contrary. We can at best expect that, in general, sonnets will be more serious, whereas limericks will be more lighthearted. The association is not so much of form to topic but of form to a general mood or tone. Nevertheless, there is a pattern to that association, one that emerges more clearly when the subject matter of a poem goes against the tone typically promoted by its form (for instance, a serious topic, in the ballad stanza typical of the lullaby, will have an effect of sarcasm or irony). That they produce such an effect is, I think, some evidence that the association has some basis, one that may be either natural or conventional.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV

Poetry emerged in oral cultures—it relies on speech, not on writing. One might even say that it relies on sounds more than on meaning—though ever more on meaning than on sounds—a result, it seems

clear, of the ever-growing availability of recording devices. (To speak in evolutionary terms, one may even wonder whether we have been gradually losing a basic phonetic and cognitive skill since the invention of the printing press.) Such a cultural practice would naturally involve recurrence patterning so as to convey messages in a memorable and economical fashion. I have endeavored to show that this fashion is indeed economical, and for that I enlisted the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson. Retaining their insight that interlocutors communicate on the assumption that what is being said is relevant within the communicative context, I further develop their idea to include the relevance of *how* things are being said, which accounts for poets creating a pattern for a pragmatic, communicative reason, and for their readers or listeners assuming the contextual relevance of the patterns presented and so seeking out contextual effects on the basis of them. I have argued that in this process readers access their encyclopedic entries for the concepts presented, and that this results (or at least they assume that the poet intended for it to result) in an expansion or a reevaluation of those entries.

Contra Sperber and Wilson, I further argued that syntactic and phonological constructions may also make a contribution both to what is being said and to the communication or promotion of an affective state. In addition, I have defended an expansion of their model beyond the purely cognitive, on the grounds that, although affective states may involve beliefs, propositions, and implicatures, that is not all there is to them, and some moods may be promoted by an underlying linguistic rhythm without having any propositions or implicatures associated with them.

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1. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995); hereafter abbreviated S&W.
2. H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), particularly "Logic and Conversation," pp. 22–40.



3. Although Sperber and Wilson put forth their principle of relevance as a communicative principle rather than (more broadly) a cognitive one, as many have thought, they also believe that an analogous principle is at work at that more general level. According to the *cognitive* principle of relevance, human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance; i.e., “cognitive resources tend to be allocated to the processing of the most relevant inputs available.” According to the *communicative* principle of relevance, “every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (S&W, pp. 260–61).
4. According to PBS, 40,000 of them share the streets with the 13 million inhabitants of New Delhi. See [www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/holycow/hinduism.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/holycow/hinduism.html).
5. Adrian Pilkington, *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000).
6. Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979), pp. 110–11.
7. “Nursery Rhymes,” posted at [www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A288966](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A288966).
8. I defend this view in “Aesthetic Attributions: The Case of Poetry,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70, no. 3 (2012).