



Breaking Linguistic Boundaries: Stylistic Innovation in E. E. Cummings' *Love is More Thicker Than Forget*

Dr. Shaukat Khan*

Corresponding Author Email: shaukat.english@suit.edu.pk

Fatima Zeb Khatak

MPhil Scholar. Email: fatimazebk@k@gmail.com

Sana Ullah Khatak

MPhil Scholar. Email: sanaullah.khattak73@gmail.com

Abstract

This study presents a stylistic analysis of the poem “*Love is more thicker than forget*” by E. E. Cummings through the theoretical perspectives of H. G. Widdowson and M. A. K. Halliday. The research investigates how Cummings manipulates language, structure, and poetic deviation to foreground the complexity and paradoxical nature of love. Drawing on Widdowson’s stylistic approach, the study examines the relationship between linguistic choices and literary interpretation, focusing on lexical deviation, syntactic irregularities, semantic ambiguity, and graphological experimentation. Simultaneously, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics framework is employed to explore the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions embedded in the poem. The analysis reveals that Cummings intentionally disrupts conventional grammatical structures and employs paradoxical imagery to challenge traditional representations of love and emotion. The study further demonstrates how stylistic deviation contributes to thematic depth, emotional intensity, and reader engagement. By integrating Widdowson’s interpretative stylistics with Halliday’s functional linguistic model, the paper highlights the interconnectedness of form and meaning in poetic discourse. The findings suggest that the poem’s unconventional style is not merely aesthetic but serves as a deliberate linguistic strategy to convey the ineffable and multidimensional experience of love. This research contributes to the field of literary stylistics by illustrating the effectiveness of combined linguistic frameworks in uncovering deeper meanings within modern poetry.

Keyword: Stylistics, Poetic Deviation, Foregrounding, Paradoxical Nature, Syntactic Irregularities

Introduction

Stylistics is comparatively a new branch of linguistics, which studies literature from linguistic orientation. However, in this regard, there are contrary beliefs among the linguists. Halliday (1966) states, “Linguistics is not and will never be the whole of literary analysis, and only the literary analyst- not the linguist- can determine the place of linguistics in literary studies. But if a text is to be described at all, then it should be described properly; and this means by the theories and methods developed in linguistics, the subject whose task is precisely to show how language works” (p. 67). A piece of literature constitutes a small world of its own, where the deviant and irregular language forms get regular and formal status. Thorne (1970) believes that one can find in poems features that



are irregular with reference to the code but regular within the context of the poem. It is proposed that each poem might be regarded as a different language or dialect which requires a separate grammar. (P. 29).

H.G. Widdowson (1988) says, "The character of literature is that the language of a literary work should be fashioned into patterns over and above those required by the actual language system" (p.47). It means that literary language, unlike the day-to-day language; is deliberately turned and molded in order to fix it in the frame of literature. He further purports that the object of this patterning is to create acts of communication which are self-contained units, independent of a social context and expressive of a reality other than that which is sanctioned by convention. (p.47). However, literary language does not correspond to normal modes of communication and is deviant from the normal language patterns. "In literary writing, however, one constantly comes across sentences which would not be generated by English grammar but which are nevertheless interpretable." (Widdowson. H. G. 1988: 14). He further says, "Poets cannot simply ignore the normal meanings of words and invent entirely new meanings at will, since they are using a language code which already exists and upon which they depend for communication."

According to Fowler (1996), "literary texts do speak and participate in society's communicative principles and are important in influencing world view and social structure". (p. 130). Thus, it is the reader of the text as a participant of the writer's discourse patterns in order to interpret, analyze and understand text of literature on the basis of linguistic models. If Fowler's view is taken in consideration, every individual has got his/ her own approaches towards language interpretation, which in turn does constitute the concept of 'idiolect'. The present study is aimed to justify the ways of readers to the language of E. E. Cummings' poems, keeping in view the mode of communicative approaches.

Stylistics and Its Unique Apprehensions

A more precise and holistic definition of 'Stylistics' would give a natural starter to the introduction and the forthcoming study on the subject. According to Widdowson (1975), "Stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation" (P.03). If the specific term "literature" is substituted with its correlative term "literary discourse", then the common readers might feel satisfied to agree that literature is the leading apparatus of the study of stylistics. The last part of the definition 'linguistic orientation' gives a new dimension to the definition and its relevant incipient studies. 'Linguistic orientation' parallels the study of 'grammar and vocabulary' in the general context of language. However, the definition seems compact but runs the limitation of the writer's perception and thus does not draw a line of demarcation between the two broader fields of inquiry. Rather, they move along two parallel tracks, which neither go away from each other, nor join together at any point. Widdowson further says, "Linguists will be interested in finding out how it exemplifies the language system, and if it contains curiosities of usage, how these curiosities might be accounted for in grammatical terms" (p.05). Language exemplification would be the end product for the linguists, but contrary to them, stylisticians; learners and practitioners of stylistics, would exemplify the manipulation of attaining the best communicative values. They, usually, go a step ahead and derive foreseeable linguistic curiosities and inexorable language patterns in literature, which replicate the 'reality' rather than conventional language encryptions.



Stylistics Is An Area of Mediation Between Two Disciplines

According to Widdowson (1975), “Stylistics is neither a subject nor a discipline in its own right, but a means of relating disciplines and subjects (p.04).” Stylistics is a juncture where two disciplines meet with two subjects. Furthermore, it, not only links disciplines with subjects but also connects one discipline with another and vice versa. Thus, stylistics attains a unique standing among different fields of inquiry. It constitutes a unique platform for literary critics and linguistic analysts. Stylistics can be considered as a language-oriented domain which “attempts to characterize literary writing as discourse and so to mediate between the linguist’s treatment of literature primarily as text and the literary critic’s treatment of it primarily as messages” (Widdowson,1975:05). The basic term ‘stylistics’ is indicative of the fact that it is an interdisciplinary field where, the elsewhere assorted disciplines, literary criticism and linguistics, are set up confluent. The initial component, “style”, of its name creates some mental association between it and literary criticism because it is, and has always been, a major concern of literary criticism to appraise the style of literary products; whereas, the final component, “-istics” of its name is shared by “linguistics” so it binds the two together. (Widdowson, 1975:3)

Basic Understanding of Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding theory has its roots in Russian formalism. The formalists used foregrounding for elucidation purposes in their art-work. Primarily, foregrounding is the opposite of automation. Automation makes an act less obvious and unclear, while foregrounding makes it more vivid and conscious. Foregrounding theory in literature is twofold i.e. qualitative deviation; deviation from some established norms of language codes; and quantitative deviation which are aberration from some predictable frequency. Foregrounding is basically the stylistic effects that occur in literature at different levels. These are phonological level such as alliteration and rhyme scheme, grammatical level like inversion and ellipsis, and semantic level i.e. metaphor and irony. In 1964, Jan Mukarovsky of Prague School published “Standard Language and Poetic language” which defines foregrounding as the deautomatization of conventional language norms. In 1966, Leech issued “Linguistic and the Figure of Rhetoric”; which divides foregrounding into two sections i.e. syntagmatic foregrounding which is also termed as parallelism and paradigmatic foregrounding known as deviation.

E. E. Cummings

Edward Estlin Cummings, widely known as E. E. Cummings, was born on 14th October, 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was the eldest child of his parents: Edward Cummings and Rebecca Haswell Clarke. He was an inspiring American poet, an accomplished painter, a profound essayist, a prolific author, and a renowned playwright. He is reckoned as one of the most groundbreaking and state-of-the-art poet of twentieth century. Cummings, in the list of his fellow writers, stands out due to his unconventional style and peculiar form of writing. His deliberate practice of playing upon words and language structures marked him out as most unconventional poet of his time. He was the master and innovator of his own style of expression. In the world of literature, he went on the new path and paved a way for the upcoming writers to follow.



Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on Geoffrey N. Leech's theories of linguistic deviation (1969). This framework allows the analysis of various variabilities of language to be piloted on three steps model: Realization, Form and Semantics. The first step: Realization covers phonology and graphology, i.e. speech sounds production and word formation respectively. The second step reckons grammar; a set of rules that govern the structure of a language in totality, and lexicon which is the available word choice for any write-up. However, the last step: Semantics ends up in denotative and cognitive meanings of a text. In 1966, Leech issued "Linguistic and the Figure of Rhetoric"; which divides foregrounding into two sections i.e. syntagmatic foregrounding which is also termed as parallelism and paradigmatic foregrounding known as deviation.

Research Objectives

- 1) E. E. Cummings composed good pieces of literature without paying any heed to the grammaticality of his language structure in this poem.
- 2) E. E. Cummings is marked as most unconventional and groundbreaking poet of his time.

Research Questions

- 1) What kinds of deviations are mostly used in the poem *Love is more thicker than forget*?
- 2) How far is his unconventional way of writing justifiable in the poem?

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

The present study is purely based on the theoretical framework without any implication of practical or action research. The intra textual analysis of the selected poem is to be made focusing on the basic language units and patterns. The analysis will range from word to the text level. For this purpose, basic linguistic parameters i.e. morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and literary discourse will be taken into consideration to substantiate the analysis. After the detailed analysis, the data will be presented in tabulated forms to make it more vivid, graphic and elaborate. No statistical tools or numeric data is under consideration.

Discussion and Findings

The tale the title tells

The title of the poem is usually suggestive of its basic theme. Here the title bears unusual syntactical similarity with a famous proverbial saying, "Blood is thicker than water". First of all, detailed explanation of the famous proverbial saying will help to unfold and understand the poem. The proverb is often spoken to express the deep-felt emotions for those who have blood relations with someone. Blood means blood relation and thicker is the representative and symbol of 'love'. Furthermore, blood and water both are liquids, but the thickness ratio of blood is more than water. Here in the poem, E. E. Cummings might have thought of the same feelings and selected the syntactical pattern for his poem. One can get a hint from its meaning that the poem is a love poem and an expression of profound feelings and emotions. The title, "Love is more thicker than forget", is declarative in structure, comparative in form and suggestive of meaning. The kernel structure is declarative in nature and is affirming a 'statement'. The basic



form of it is comparative and it is making a steadfast comparison between 'love and forget'. In other words, love and forget are two distinct human feelings and emotions. The first one, love, is positive and pure emotion. However, the second one is usually tagged negatively and undesirable. 'Love' is pure feelings and is usually used to remember someone and is sign of loyalty. Contrary to it, 'forget' is appended negatively and is detrimental. So, the title is making comparison between positive and negative emotions, i.e. love vs forget. Here, the comparative structure is used, and for the emphasis double comparative components are used which is the selection restriction rules violation and come under the charge of grammatical and syntactical deviations. According to the TGG (Transformational Generative Grammar) rules, an adjective takes the 'er' suffix to derive the comparative form if the adjective is a mono syllabic word. For example, 'Quick' is a mono syllabic word and it takes 'er' and 'est' suffixes to derive the comparative and superlative, respectively. On the other hand, if the basic adjective consists of two or more syllables, then the morphemes 'more' and 'most' are used for the same purpose. But both rules can't be applied at the same time. Here, the usage is combining both the above mentioned rules and, thus, constituting a non-permissible sequence. Furthermore, 'love' and 'forget' are spoken of as liquids because the adjective 'thicker' is used for speaking about liquids like blood, milk, oil etc. Love and forget are human feelings and have no tangible or concrete form. So, the adjective 'thicker' is attributed to the abstract nouns, i.e. 'love and forget', which is the selection restriction rules violation and is a kind of foregrounded deviation. However, E. E. Cummings covers himself under the umbrella of poetic license and is running free of these charges for purely literary objectives.

Stanza # 1:

The starting couplet of the first stanza makes a unique usage of adjectives by stating the opposite adjectives to heighten the effect and make it more vivid. "*Love is more thicker than forget more thinner than recall.....*" Here love has been attributed as a powerful force- a common practice in the world of fiction. 'Love is more thicker than forget' and 'love is more thinner than recall'. Two opposite verbs are stated i.e. forget and recall. For the elaboration of contrary effect opposite adjectives are used, i.e. thicker and thinner. Thus, the poet tries to maintain the balance by such phraseology, forget vs recall and thicker vs thinner. However, both are making a carefree violation of foregrounded deviation by constituting non permissible construction of comparative form of adjectives, i.e. 'more thicker and more thinner'.

The last two lines of the first stanza are patterned in the same style where the usage of the intensifier 'more' is prevalent. The structure seems more redundant for the common reader because if the same subject is placed in front of the four predicate, it would look like....

Love is more thinner.....

Love is more seldom.....

Love is more frequent....."

The structure looks very redundant by making abundant usage of 'more'. Again contrary statements are posted for elaboration of the subject. But from the linguistic point of view, it seems weird usage because it looks like a puzzle game to think of '*love more seldom than a wave is wet and love more frequent than to fail*'. The apprehension of antithesis is prevailing throughout the poem for deriving the desirable objectives of the poet and here 'seldom and frequent' are no exception.



Stanza # 2:

The second stanza starts with an unusual note by writing *'It's most mad and moonly'*. Firstly, the pronoun 'it' refers to the antecedent 'love' which is the main subject of the poem. Here love has been attributed human feelings and thus love is personified by associating it with the human attributes of madness and dementedness. The usage of superlative particle 'most' needs a determiner 'the' to get free of grammatical charge, but it has been ignored for unknown reason. The word 'moonly' is also irritating for the grammatical sense because of (moon+ly) extension. This 'ly' suffix addition to the stem 'moon' is uncommon in English grammar and is glaucoma for an average reader. The second line of the couplet is no less deviant in style and form: *'and less it shall unbe'*. First of all, particle displacement is made from the root which is non-permissible. The particle 'un' is displaced from the root 'less'. It should be *unless* but has been prefixed to the wrong stem 'be.' The syntactical order of the clause needs to be changed from *'and less it shall unbe'* to *'and unless it shall be'*. Here love is attributed and linked with heavenly bodies like moon and sea but the relevance is missing. If the lines are rephrased, it will look like 'love is most mad and moonly than the sea'. Love is most mad means it is the maddest in the list of stated heavenly bodies, i.e. moon and sea. Here the readers are getting to another probability of thinking of 'love' as one of the heavenly bodies like moon and sea. Otherwise, it's beyond their comprehension. Other than that, the syntactic order needs modification also from *'sea which only is deeper than...'* to *'sea which is only deeper than...'*. Sea which deeper than sea is used as an intensifier, but it is an imbalanced comparative statement.

Stanza # 3:

In the third stanza, the first line, *'love is more always than to win'*, is deviant in many ways. First, the comparative intensifier 'more' is out of place in the line. It doesn't go with 'always'. Secondly, the statement is wrong and needs to be rephrased from *'love is more always than to win'* to *'love always win'* or *'love is more than to win'*. The next line also needs syntactic modification and is running under serious charge of foregrounded deviations. It needs to be changed from *'love is less never than alive'* to *'love is never less than alive'*. Here the word 'less' is a comparative form of little and it is basically a quantifier. The usage of a quantifier adjective with the noun 'love' is out of the compass. In the third line, the same quantifier in the comparative form, 'less' is used with another comparative adjective 'bigger'. If 'less' is the comparative form of 'little' then it means that double comparative adjectives are used at a stretch which are selection restriction rules violation. The last line of the third stanza, *'less litter than forgive'*, doesn't make any sense for the common reader. 'Litter' makes no connection to forgive. Probably E. E. Cummings is more concerned with rhyming his lines for attaining poetic flavor rather than making any sense for his readers. It is also possible that he, as usual, left it to his readers to connect the disjointed organs into a whole body of their choice.

Stanza #4:

The fourth and last stanza of the poem begins with an uncommon annotation. Traditionally, love is considered blind and insane, but here, it has been elevated and marked as most sane and sunly, *'it's most sane and sunly'*. Here the superlative form 'most' is in dire need of definite article 'the' before it. Furthermore, sane doesn't accept most as prefix for its superlative form. It



should be *'the sanest'* rather than *'the most sane'*. Secondly, the word 'sun' which is a proper noun in English grammar has been tailed with the suffix 'ly,' which is aberrant. From the word sun, which is a noun, sunny; which is an adjective, is derived but 'sunly' is not an English word. Probably, the writer has thought of getting it rhymed with the previously used word like 'moonly'. The second line renders 'love' a universal touch by referring it as 'it cannot die'. Love has been tagged as heavenly and universal in the last four lines of the poem. The usage of the comparative adjective 'more' is unusual in practice and out of place here. The last couplet just rhymes with the second couplet of the second stanza and is less appealing from the stylistic perspective. The second stanza stated '*sea deeper than the sea*'; here at the end it is '*sky higher than the sky*'. It's just for heightening the effect and overall tone of the poem rather to render some linguistic charm and beauty into it.

Conclusion

E. E. Cummings, a renowned American poet, is well known for his unconventional and ground breaking writing style. His poetry might offer aesthetic pleasure to the lovers of poetry by virtue of its literary merits, yet the linguists and structuralists love it for its unusual and peculiar style of composition. Cummings' poems bear different morphological make ups, syntactical combinations, semantic organizations, pragmatic derivations and discourse patterns, but still they constitute good and effective literary compositions. He has been tagged as 'free of conventions', and care-free poet who is usually concerned with his 'content' rather than 'form'. As Cummings and Simmons state in *'The Language of Literature'*, "What happens to us when we read literature? We take flight into another existence, into a secondary world of the imagination. We see and hear through language and respond to its stimuli rather than seeing and hearing our actual surroundings or responding to them. It is as though we are hypnotized, released from our own limited bodies and given the freedom to become anything, see anything, feel anything" (1983:01).

References

- Anderson, J. (1992). *Linguistic Representation: Structural Analogy and Stratification*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin
- Bates, E. (1974). *The acquisition of pragmatic*. *Journal of Child Language* 1: 277-81
- Berry, M. (1981). *Systematic linguistics and discourse analysis: a multi layered approach to exchange structure*. In Coulthard and Montgomery 1981: 120-45
- Bever, T. G and Ross, J. R. (1996). Underlying structures in discourse. Unpublished paper quoted in Labov 1972.
- Bradford, R, (1997). *Stylistics*, London:Routledg.
- Caladas – Coulthard, C. R. (1988). *Reported interaction in narrative: a study of speech representation in written discourse*, Ph.D thesis, University of Birmingham Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge cb2 2ru, UK
- Carte Carter, R. (1983). What is stylistics and the teaching of English? In M. Short (Ed.), *Reading, analyzing and teaching Literature* (pp. 161-177). London: Longman, R(ed.) 1982 *Language and literature*. Allen and Unwin
- Jeffries, L., & McIntyre, D. (2010). *Stylistics*. New York, NY: Cambridge Chris



University Press

- Baldick (2001), "The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms", by Oxford University Press Inc., New York (C) Chris Baldick 2001
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structure*. Mouton, The Hague
- Cole, P and Morgan, J (ed.) 1975 *Speech Acts. Syntax and Semantics*, vol.3, Academic Press, New York
- Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987) *Literature in the Language Classroom* Cambridge: CUP
- Cook, G. (1989). *Discourse*, Oxford University Press
- Costa, D. "Language Through Poetry: A Stylistic Analysis of Thomas Hardy's 'THE RUIND MAID'. (P.215)
- Coulthard, R.M. (ed), (1987). *Discussing Discourse*, Birmingham, ELRCollins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged © HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003
- Crystal, D, (2003). *A Dictionary of Applied linguistics and Stylistics*, London: Penguin.
- Cummings, M. and Simmons, R.(1983). *The Language of literature*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- David Crystal. (2008). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics 6th Edition*. ISBN: 978-1-405-15296-9
- Duncan, S. (1973). Towards a Grammar for dyadic conversation. *Semiotica* 9(1): 29-46
- Eman Adil Jaafar (2014) "A Stylistic Analysis of Two Selected Poems" College of Education for Women - English language Dept. vol. 25 (1) 2014(238 – 248)
- FAIRLEY, IRENE P., 1975. E.E. Cummings and Ungrammar: A Study of Syntactic Deviance in his Poems. (New York: Watermill Publishers).
- Faerch, C and Kaspar, G. (1984). 'Two ways of defining Communication Strategies', *Language Learning*, 34, i, 45-64
- Firth, J. R. (1935). *The Technique of Semantics*. In Firth 1947: 7-33
- Francis, G. and Hunston, S. (1992). 'Analysing everyday conversation'. In RM Coulthard (ed), 123-161
- Freenborn, D. (1996). *Style: Text analysis and linguistic criticism*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Fowler, R. (1996). *Linguistic Criticism*. (2nded.). London: Oxford University Press.
- George Yule (2006), "The Study of Language", Cambridge University Press, isbn-10 0-521- 54320-7 paperback. The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge cb2 2ru, UK
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1996). *Descriptive Linguistics in Literary Studies*. Longman Press. UK
- Hulst, V. D H. (2004). "On the parallel organization of linguistic components" Department of Linguistics, University of Connecticut, CT, USA
- Jackendoff, R.. (2002). *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Jehanzeb, S. (2012), *A Stylistic Analysis Of "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner"* NUML Peshawar.
- Jussi, K. (2005) *Stylistic Analysis Of Text For Information Access*, Box 1263, S-164 29
- Kiparsky, P. (1978). Recent developments in generative phonology. In: Weinstock, J. (ed.), *The Nordic Languages and Modern Linguistics*, vol. 3. University of Texas, Austin, TX, pp. 42-50.



Kista Sweden SICS Technical Report T2005:14 ISSN 1100-3154 ISRN SICS-T-2005/14-SES

Kumar, S. (ed). (1987). *Stylistics and Text Analysis*, Delhi: Bahri.

Labov, W. (1994). The functional character of change. In *Principles of linguistic*

Thorne, J. P. (1970). *Transformational Generative Grammar*, 14ff.

Verdonk, P., *Stylistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Van P, W. (1986). *Stylistics and psychology: Investigations of foregrounding*. Australia: Croom Helm Provident House.

Wright, L. and Jonathan, H. *Stylistics: A Practical Course Book*, London: Rutledge,

Widdowson, H. G. (1988). *Stylistics and the teaching of Literature*. Longman Press, Hong Kong, UK.

Widdowson, H.G., *Practical Stylistics: An Approach to Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Yule, G. (1999). "The study of language". United Kingdom. University Press, Cambridge



Love is more thicker than forget

Love is more thicker than forget
 more thinner than recall
 more seldom than a wave is wet
 more frequent than to fail

It's most mad and moonly
 and less it shall unbecome
 than all the sea which only
 is deeper than the sea

love is more always than to win
 less never than alive
 less bigger than the least begin
 less litter than forgive

It's most sane and sunly
 and more it cannot die
 than all the sky which only
 is higher than the sky

E. E. Cummings.

Line #	Noun	Verb	Adverb	Adjective	Pronoun	determinor	Conjunction	Prepositon
01	Love	Is, forget		More, Thicker,		Than		
02		Recall		More, Thinner,		Than		
03	Wave	Is		More, Seldom, ,wet		A, than		
04		Fail		More, frequent,		Than		To
05		Is		Most, mad, moonly	It			
06		Shall, unbecome		Less	It		And	
07	Sea		Only			Than, all, the,	Which	
08	Sea	Is		Deeper		Than, the		
09	Love	Is, win	Always	More		Than		To
10			never	less, alive		than		



Line #	Noun	Verb	Adverb	Adjective	Pronoun	determinor	Conjunction	Prepositon
11		begin		Less, bigger, least		Than, the		
12	Litter	Forgive		Less		Than		
13	Is			Most, sane, sunly	It			
14	Die	Can		More	It		And, not	
15	Sky		only			Than, all, the	Which	
16	Sky	Is		Higher		Than, the		
Word count	10	15	04	26	04	20	05	02