

Pedagogical Stylistics in ELT: Teaching Lexis and Noun Phrases using an Unorthodox Poem

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Abstract:

This research work highlights the application of stylistics in the pedagogy of English language teaching. Stylistic analysis of a very different and unique poem - Off Course - as well as the pedagogical recommendations by Carter (1989) were utilized in an Indian scenario to teach lexicon, qualifier and NPs. His explanation of epithet ordering was tested with the tertiary level English language learners making use of his analysis of the poem. The research outcome has been extremely positive as the productivity index of the participants in the discussed aspects shows a significant increase. The research was conducted at the Lucknow satellite campus of Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad, India.

Keywords: Pedagogical stylistics, epithet ordering, acquisition of vocabulary, NP and d-m-h structure.

Introduction:

‘Off Course’ (1966) by Edwin Morgan is such a piece of literary text that can attract both the connoisseurs of literature and the practitioners of English Language Teaching (ELT) as it has the potential in it to be utilized for pedagogical stylistics in lexis and noun phrase teaching apart

from every other literary or non-literary aspect it touches upon. The most noteworthy of this poem is its structure. That there are no sentence-initial capitals or sentence-final punctuation marks in the poem make it unique in its own way. This poem consists of only noun phrases, each separated by a constant space scheme. The verbs are missing and there are no established punctuation markers. Thus, the number of sentences in the poem cannot be estimated. “The sentence has been defined as the largest unit for which there are rules of grammar” (Lehman, 1993). ‘Off Course’ diverts from the conventional structure of SVO (the Subject-Verb-Object); or the notional definition of ‘a complete thought’ (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2003); or that there has to be a verb for a sentence to be called a sentence. It also deviates from the notion that a sentence should be made up of a logical subject and a logical predicate. This poem is a cluster of words that has noun as its main element. Repetition of words is another marked feature of this poem. The poet’s intention of such repetition may not be ascertained, however, for a pedagogical purpose this works wonders. It’s very magical to see (and show the learners) how the same word plays different roles. From a teaching or classroom viewpoint there is much that can be done with this poem. The text can be used to introduce and form the basis of teaching some key structural features of English syntax such as nominal group organization, participles, verbal relations, etc. (Carter 1989). These aspects make this text very welcoming for it to be utilized as the canvass for teaching lexis and modifiers and the overall meaning of a noun phrase as a whole. It also opens the window for the language learners’ imagination through the predominant use of metaphors.

Discussion:

The first trouble one encounters while approaching this poem is to how to read it – across or down? Another troublesome element in the poem is again a structural element – the unexplained indentation between line 14 and 15. However, among all such unconventional structuralizing one comes across a constant space scheme between the noun phrases which do play a role that of punctuation marker like comma and effect a pause therein. One more element that baffles the reader again is the reason behind the reuse of some words and their role reversal. Nonetheless, there indeed is a consistent pattern about these noun phrases, Carter (1989) calls them nominal groups. The spacing between the noun phrases is same all across, and, the indentation from line 15 through 21 has a consistency too.

Carter (1989) sees each of these cases as a **d m h** structure where d = definite article, m = modifier and h = headword. He establishes that the predominant modifier of the headwords in the nominal groups of this poem is an epithet (Step III from table 1). But they are not all of the same type. As per him, we generally (but not exhaustively) encounter three main types of epithet in English:

e^a = qualitative epithet; e.g. marvelous, interesting, strong, *lovely*¹

e^b = colours; e.g. red, blue

e^c = classifying epithet; e.g. classical, wooden, *global, natural, earthy*².

(Carter, 1989)

So, in a sentence, (1) *Ronald and Donald own a wonderful, blue, natural lagoon in Morocco*, the conventional order of the epithets thus is **a b c** and playing with the order would yield following sentences:

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| (1a) <i>Ronald and Donald own a natural, blue, wonderful lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order c b a |
| (1b) <i>Ronald and Donald own a natural, wonderful, blue lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order c a b |
| (1c) <i>Ronald and Donald own a wonderful, natural, blue lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order a c b |
| (1d) <i>Ronald and Donald own a natural, blue, wonderful lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order b c a |
| (1e) <i>Ronald and Donald own a blue, wonderful, natural lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order b a c |

However, neither of the five orders seem convincing. Of the six possible orders of the epithets, a b c (1) is the most commonly used and easily processable. To some extent, the order a c b (1c) seems convincing too; other possible orders appear awkward constructions.

In terms of classes of epithet, classifying epithet (e^c) predominates in 'Off Course': e.g. the weightless headphone (line 17), the floating lifeline (line 18), the imaginary somersault (line 06): even to the extent that the majority of the participles used are of a classifying kind. However, rules for epithet ordering does not surface in 'Off Course' as only one modifier has been used at any one time.

It is to be noted about English and realized through the poem in hand here that it can accommodate only three qualifiers (epithets as shown here) to a noun head. Of course, one may add endless number of qualifiers/epithets to a noun head as a matter of creativity very much like the permissible scenario from the Indian languages as “creativity and innovation in language use should not be seen as the exclusive preserve of literary writing” (Simpson, 2004). However, if one were to assess the positional potential of the epithets across languages, all will find their respective space in the three brackets discussed herein.

Apart from the epithets, English allows numerals, past and present participles and other nouns as modifiers in the noun phrases. These features have been exploited to its best in ‘Off Course’.

(i) Numerals/determiners:

We do not see any change at the initial position of the noun phrase, i.e., marked presence of ‘the’ in all the noun phrases in ‘Off Course’. Neither do we see any numerals coming in as a modifier. However, in the above example (1), we do see a non-definite article ‘a’ that gives the sense of ‘one’. So, ‘a’ can be replaced by any number and its positioning would be at the very beginning of the noun phrase. A numeral takes the very first position, extreme left, in a noun phrase and does the job of quantification determination. Any deviation in its positioning shall lead to an awkward composition as is evident in the examples:

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| (1a) <i>Ronald and Donald own natural, blue, wonderful a lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order c b a |
| (1b) <i>Ronald and Donald own natural, a wonderful, blue lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order c a b |
| (1c) <i>Ronald and Donald own wonderful, a natural, blue lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order a c b |
| (1d) <i>Ronald and Donald own natural, a blue, wonderful lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order b c a |
| (1e) <i>Ronald and Donald own blue, wonderful, a natural lagoon in Morocco.</i> | Order b a c |

(ii) Past participles:

- (2) The **golden** flood.
- (3) The **smuggled** mouth-organ.

- (4) The **golden** lifeline.
- (5) The **smuggled** orbit.

The past participle forms of the verb ‘smuggle’ for example in (3) and (5) exhibit a perfectivity. Can the same be said about ‘golden’, does it show perfectivity? In (2), we may position ourselves to say that it has attained perfectivity as the colour golden has been acquired by the flood water since the ‘goldification’ of the flood water is not in continuum. It has already been attained. The structure of the NP in these constructions is - DET+PARTICIPLE+N.

(iii) Present participles/progressives:

- (6) The **growing** beard.
- (7) The **floating** crumb.
- (8) The **shinning** rendezvous.
- (9) The **turning** continents.
- (10) The **crawling** deltas.
- (11) The **crackling** headphone.
- (12) The **turning** earth.
- (13) The **shinning** spacesuit.
- (14) The **growing** moon.
- (15) The **crackling** somersault.
- (16) The **floating** lifeline.
- (17) The **crawling** camera.
- (18) The **turning** silence.
- (19) The **crackling** beard.
- (20) The **floating** song.

Off Course, 1969

Verbs generally work to establish a functional role between the agent (subject) and the action, or the agent and the resultant(object). Although there is no such active verb in the lines in, the presence of participles (past and present) does give visual imagery of actions happening or have happened, in ‘Off Course’. Through examples like (i) the turning earth (line 12) and (ii) the earth turns, the difference between the two verbal items – the participle form of the ‘verb’ work

both as a defining or classificatory function and to underline a sense of continuing action – get established more effectively. The absence of verb accounts for no direct relativity among the objects in the poem. The objects either do not seem to act upon each other or have no particular ‘action’ of their own. The participles in ‘Off Course’ do give visual imagery of the actions either having been over or being in continuum or in suspension. For example, ‘growing’ in (14) gives the images of various stages of the moon being in progress. Similarly, each participle modifier in (6) to (20) portrays its respective headword, a noun, in continuum, in transition and in progress. Thus, the structure in these NPs is - DET+PROGRESSIVE+N. This particular feature can be transferred very creatively to the L2 English learners by involving them in this kind of imagination and the distinction between past and participle can be achieved (Step IV from table).

The experiment:

The discussion so far about the stylistic and functional aspects in ‘Off Course’ can be the best tools to employ in the pedagogy of English language teaching. From a teaching or classroom viewpoint there is much that can be done with the above observations. They can be used for fuller interpretation of the text for they can form the basis of discussion of the function of different parts of speech. The text of ‘Off Course’ can be used to introduce and form the basis of teaching elements from English syntax like the noun phrases and its constituting elements. In fact, one real advantage of such framework is that grammatical forms are not learned in a rote or abstract way or in relation to made up examples; instead grammar is taught in action and in terms of communicative features (Widdowson, 1975). So, a copy of the poem should be handed out to the learners (students). Once they have gone through the piece, they can be made to realise the pause effected by the space-scheme. Here, it is important that they understand the role of each punctuation marker and figure out which one of them has been replaced by the space-scheme and where. Is it only one or more than one punctuation marker that has/have been replaced by the space-scheme? Next, they should be asked about the number of sentences present in the poem. This should lead to a discussion about what constitutes a ‘sentence’. They must realize the idea of one complete idea/thought being conveyed through a sentence, and that there has to be a tense carrier for a sentence to be called a sentence. Thus, they should be brought to a consensus about the poem bearing no sentence in a real technical sense. Once these two steps are completed and the objectives successfully achieved, they should be asked a question again. The question should

be aimed at extracting the headword of the noun phrase. So, they can be asked about the most important word of the phrase in terms of constructing meaning. They should realise that of the three words, how the word at extreme right position controls the meaning. They should be asked/helped to determine the category of the words at the extreme right position using their imagination. This third step should help the instructor yield ‘nouns’ from them. Once they are settled with the notion of noun, talk of different forms of the verb as the fourth step. They should be explained about how the –ed form and –ing form of the verbs are functioning as modifiers, in what way are they qualifying the meaning. With examples like ‘the smuggled mouth-organ’ and ‘the growing beard’ the state of the objects (or their being), i.e., the action of smuggling has taken place already, and, the beard continues to grow, can very well be elaborated. As a next step they should be asked to check for the repetitions – one, of the word at the same place, for example:

the floating crumb	(3)
the space crumb	(20)
the space debris	(7)
the cabin debris	(17)
the space debris	(7)
the space walk	(8)
the hot spacesuit	(5)
the space silence	(11)
the space crumb	(20)

and two, of the words whose position in the phrase changes, for example:

the orbit wisecrack	(4)
the smuggled orbit	(15)

Through the first kind of repetition, they should be made aware that the words are being repeated but their positions are the same. Thus, these words irrespective of number of repetitions continue to play the same role: that of a noun (example – **crumb** and **debris**) and adjectival (example – **space**, repeated six times). However, in the second, due to the change of place of occurrence there is a change in the role too. The learners should be made careful of both the roles

orbit plays – as a noun (line 15) and a modifier (line 4). We can notice how the repetitions are not in effect no simple repetitions. The repetitions of words help to tell a story. The *space debris* referred to (line 7) has become the *cabin debris* (line 17). Bits and pieces floating in outer space are relatively normal but the presence of debris in a cabin works to suggest that events may have taken a turn for the worse. While making the above observations of *Off Course*, Bowring et al. (2001) make the generalization that the basic grammatical pattern provides a structural frame within and across which there are changing partnerships of words which in turn cumulatively create patterns of meaning.

Once the concepts are clearly grasped, the learners should have an engaging session in production. They should be asked to form as many such phrases as they can on a blank paper sheet in a given period of time. After the stipulated time is over, they may be asked to exchange the same with each other and look for the predominant patterns. If the samples lack connectivity in terms of patterns, the learners can be asked to establish it as a next task. It must be ensured that the teacher's talking time (TTT) does not exceed students' talking time (STT) in order to achieve communicative participation. Table 1 hereunder shows the step by step execution of the pedagogic objectives.

Table 1: Stepwise objectives and procedure.

Target group	Late teenagers and adult learners. (In this case, PG students of Arabic, Persian and Urdu at MANUU, Lucknow, India)
Overall objective	Acquisition of the MEANING and USE of the noun phrase constructs with participles, gerunds and nominal modifiers/qualifiers.
Materials to be used	Print outs of the poem 'Off Course' by Edwin Morgan. A board and a marker.
Step I	Give the poem to the learners to go through. One of them can read it for all. (Make them notice the pauses affected by the space scheme.)

Step II	Ask them – How many sentences are there? Stimulate a discussion on what constitutes a sentence. Make them realize if at all is a sentence there in the poem.
Step III	Make them identify the most important word at the right most position. Is this the word that contributes the most for constructing meaning? Establish its category.
Step IV	Verb in form of gerund and participle as modifier. Get their attention to the word in the middle. How is it connected to the word at its left and the one at right? What is it doing to the word at extreme right position? Establish the usual order of epithets. Ask them what kind of exploitation of these features is made in the text.
Step V	Make them go through each noun phrase from the poem. See if remains any that cannot be understood.
Step VI	<u>Production</u> (1) Ask them to create 18-20 such phrases. (2) Exchange these newly created noun phrases between them and evaluate for each-other.
Step VII	Make them count the number of noun phrases that can be thematically close. Discuss the poem's undercurrent theme. They should be able to realize that the noun phrases in the poem are actually thematically connected.
Time	TTT: STT: 50:50 (TTT must always be less than 50%)

The framework shown in table 1, was executed with a sample size of 40 which were masters level female and male students of three different languages. The subjects were PG students of Arabic, Persian and Urdu at the Lucknow satellite campus of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India. They were part of a compulsory skill enhancement course of two credits titled Communicative English. The average age of the subjects was 22 years. Reader’s initial response is held as highly crucial in stylistics. Since they already had a background in the literature of their respective language, it was initially difficult for them to make out what the piece, ‘Off Course’ was and whether it was a piece of literature at all. As they are accustomed to rhyme scheme or idea cohesion or idea development etc. in poetry, it took them a while to receive it as a poetry. Some were indeed confused, on ‘how to read it – horizontally or vertically’ and attempted the bottom-to-up path too in order to decipher what the poem conveyed.

The students were randomly grouped as pairs and shown a couple of passages using the power point slides; their votes for the nouns, verbs and adjectives were recorded; and the average correctness came out as 24 out of the total sample size, i.e. 12 groups out of the 20. A number of similar tests were conducted to record the pre-test value (pre-intervention in this case). After the elaborate session of ‘Off Course’ and the associated elements as discussed in the previous section the post-test value, i.e., the post-intervention value was recorded using the similar test using worksheets containing a mix of the older as well as new passages.

Findings:

The findings of the experiment as enlisted in table 2 exhibit a significant positive outcome of the pedagogical stylistic measure as proposed by Carter (1989) and his contemporaries as well as later stylisticians.

Table 2: Findings before and after the innovative pedagogical stylistic intervention.

Sl. No.	Criteria	Before	After

1	No. of students who could differentiate between noun and adjective	24	34
2	No. of students who could identify the noun head.	18	32
3	No. of students who could place the noun head as the qualifier and reverse.	12	28
4	No. of students who could produce a poetry on the similar lines.	--	18
5	No. of students who could produce a poetry around certain theme.	--	10
6	Cases of more Gerund than participles	--	80-85%
7	No. of participants not considering 'Off Course' a poem	29	21
8	No. of students who could identify the similar NP structure in a newspaper.	14	29
9	No. of students who could identify the noun head from the NP structure in a newspaper.	18	29

10	No. of students who liked this method to learn nouns/lexicon.	--	34
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The elicited responses (see full list in Appendix I) show a positive trend as the post-test value is higher in every respective factor noted for this exercise. The number of students who could differentiate between the noun and adjective increased from 24 to 34 showing an increase of 25%. The number of students who could detect the head word in the NPs also remarkably almost doubled (from 18 to 32) post-intervention. However, the figures showing capacity in utilizing the noun and the qualifier interchangeably within the same NP do show a rise of more than 200%, but the overall figure does not show the same picture. Only 28 (14 groups) could use the noun and the qualifier interchangeably or in another phrase with a role reversal. Rest of the six groups did not show improvement post-intervention. A possible reason could be their non-exposure to any degree of English thanks to their Madarsa background. However, to imagine someone with zero vocabulary in English in the times of mobile phones and internet technology at the tertiary level is unthinkable. On being prompted about the vocabulary related to mobile phones like ‘delete’ and ‘save’, they indeed could come with constructions like ‘The delete message’ and ‘the save photo’. However, they could not be accepted as correct submission on grounds of the desired structures of DET+PROGRESSIVE+N or DET+PARTICIPLE+N along with the spelling errors. Although scaffolding to a certain degree can certainly improve their skill, it is beyond the ambit of present research.

Conclusion:

The findings of this research show that the instructed learning of vocabulary can be made interesting using the stylistical ways and methods. Since stylistics concerns with lexicon, word order, syntax and figures of speech etc. in a very technical way, it can prove very useful for both the practitioners and learners in the field of ESL.

A HIGH post-intervention value for all the variables in the findings above prove the validity of the pedagogical implications of stylistics as proposed by Carter (1989). The excellent outcome in the production phase by the tertiary level learners is in itself a testimony of the same. As many as nine

groups, i.e. 18 out of 40 participants, could form an arrangement of the produced phrases in a poetic manner, of which five groups could stitch it around a working theme. This has to be celebrated as these students who never had attempted poetry in English earlier returned home with a smiling face and confidence in heart. Some went ahead and placed their creation as their status for the day in their respective social media handles. This augurs real hope as some of these participants are marvelous poets with so much depth in their respective domains.

On a technical side, almost 85% of the overall production (see Appendix I) concentrates towards the NPs with a progressive as the qualifier leaving a meagre percentage for the participle-oriented ones reasserting the age-old finding that the progressive form of the lexicon come easily to the ESL learners.

In a nutshell, from their first response to the text as whether it was at all poetic, to loving it more when they could form such constructs with an ease as the exercise moved to the production phase, the exercise can be called successful. Appendix I gives the list of the NPs produced as part of the activity conducted in pairs.

Notes:

1. The italicized example in epithet a is added by this author.
2. The italicized examples in epithet c is added by this author.
3. The international numericals put in parenthesis indicate the line number from 'Off Course'.
4. The numbers in Roman are indicative of the examples considered for this study.
5. 'Off Course' is part of a Stylistics course titled Language and Style (Ling 131) in the Department of Linguistics and English Language (LAEL) at Lancaster University, the UK.
6. For more on Edwin Morgan and his works please refer to the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) archive. Link is given in the References section.

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Appendix I: List of Noun phrases (NPs) produced in the classroom.

The walking stick	The floating boat	The dying man	The roaring lion
The typing machine	The writing pad	The loving wife	The loving husband
The loving mother	The loving father	The loving family	The lovely family
The hot samosa	The hot cake	The hot season	The hot purchase
The rocking chair	The rolling stone	The mocking bird	The mock test
The mock interview	The horror store	The haunted house	The haunting zone
The zonal match	The regional food	The regional festival	The regional film
The evergreen hero	The evergreen songs	The evergreen beauty	The evergreen lovestory

The love story	The hate story	The horror story	The comedy story
The match zone	The matching zone	The food zone	The film festival
The interview zone	The motherly love	The loving mother	The seasonal hot
The white tiger	The hungry tide	The beautiful parrot	The morning sun
The evening star	The rising star	The equal opportunity	The equal share
The equal love	The equal status	The equal amount	The equal portion
The equal hundred	The equal quota	The equal miracle	The equal move
The equal honour	The equal justice	The same thing	The same thinking
The thinking thing	The thing thinking	The thoughtful thing	The round thing
The red thing	The rectangular thing	The revolving thing	The available thing
The troubling thing	The regular thing	The reusable thing	The wise thing
The worst thing	The irregular thing	The non-reusable thing	The unwise thing

The relaxing thing	The comforting thing	The jealous thing	The envious thing
The interesting thing	The boring thing	The stupid thing	The endangered thing
The closed thing	The open thing	The locked thing	The unlocked thing
The lockdown thing	The superior thing	The inferior thing	The auspicious occasion
The pious soul	The religious occasion	The ceremonial occasion	An important occasion
A super hero	A superior being	An earthen pitcher	An iron man
An iron lady	A good joke	A poor joke	A cream roll
The tasty biscuit	The mouthwatering pizza	The watering mouth	The great burger
The great gambler	The great saint	A great guy	A good soul
A good chap	A tracer bullet	A tracking camera	The location tracking
The position marking	The moving train	The movable computer	The recharge coupon

The mouth freshener	The idiot box	The solid idea	The national goal
The red carpet	The grand welcome	the chief guest	The formal welcome
The last salute	The solved problem	The problem solve	The killer language
The political rally	The thinking hat	The think tank	The tested path
The tasty dish	The tasty test	The triangular shape	The zero shape
The size matters	The real Romio	The real estate	The mobile charger
The battery charger	The mobile phone	The coal mine	The sold sword
The lost touch	The ready made	The tailor made	The weekend party
The foreign secretary	the foreign trip	The foreign coach	The real locations
The real picture	The picturesque Switzerland	The beautiful river	The beautiful tomb
The beautiful girl	The beautiful flower	The foreign language	The radio jockey
The care taker	The perfect jeans	One nice Tshirt	One single woman

Two little girls	Two small buses	All small things	The three musketeers
The tough job	The popular job	An easy job	A regular job
A real estate job	A marketing job	A doctor's job	The little angel
The singing queen	The idiot box	The entertainment industry	The closing ceremony
The housewarming ceremony	The lawabiding citizen	The gold digger	The humming bird
The thumping win	The victorious team	The standing ovation	The Indian airlines
The aviation industry	The film industry	The new bike	The Chinese wall
The old scooter	The dimple chin	The rosy lips	The fair lady
The desert storm	The royal guard	The careful guardian	The green gardens
The administrative structure	An organizational problem	A situational problem	The Rockstar rooster
The red wine	The cold drink	The relay race	No fair competition

All fair competitions	Fairly fair affair	A regular affair	A daily affair
The alive fish	The green vegetables	The protein diet	The carbohydrate diet
The fresh juice	The protein supplement	The regular exercise	The trade mill
The physical workout	My workout regiment	My workout equipment	My priceless locket
A comfortable bed	A bright star	The LED light	A costly pen
A general coach	An airconditioned coach	A sleeper coach	