Semantic deviation in Marge Piercy's "The Secretary Chant"

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Abstract

The study deals with semantic deviation in examining the poetic language featured in the text "The Secretary Chant" by Marge Piercy. By specifically focusing on the analysis of deviating features such as metaphors, the analysis hopes to interpret the meaning of the poem. Informed by Leech's (1969) classification of tropes, semantic relations are marked through the evaluation of lexical features. As suggested by MacIntyre's (2002) procedure of examination, the text reveals the poet's use of figurative devices to create a vivid picture of the persona's melancholic state. The occurrence of heavy metaphors suggests a strong use of semantic deviation. This is determined by the identification of irregularities in lexical choice to unmask the text's sense. In addition, the poet's graphological organization of the poem's structure reinforces the resolution of the theme. Pedagogically, this study promotes critical poetry reading by encouraging creative and responsive skills.

Keywords: Poetry, semantic deviation, stylistics

1.   Introduction

Reading poetry is quite an intimidating mind exercise. Considering that a reader is often bombarded with so many terms that make him or her feel a stranger, poetry reading puts one in a situation where he or she needs to give himself or herself a push to experience the pleasure of the poet's world. Initially, before a reader can have a sense of what the text means and determine where it is going, he or she needs to stumble once or twice. However, becoming sensitive to the poet's choice and arrangement of words or being aware of the poem's structure can be a good starting point. In responsive reading, one can begin by anticipating the different strategies the poet might have employed in the poem. Eventually, answers can later be generated through further examination of words, descriptions, and form. Meyer (2002) opines that appreciating poetry is appreciating language. In actuality, human experiences are usually presented through language. Being regarded as a significant part of man's existence, life instances enhance any person's ability to sense the magic of words. Although poetry demands more skills in understanding, it often captures the interest of those who enjoy the play of words.

The language of poetry is distinct from other literary genres. The linguistic peculiarities prominent in poetry produce special effects on the meaning it offers the readers. Poetic language likewise supports what Leech (1969) termed as deviations. When a writer wants to put a strong impression on the reader's mind, he has to break rules of language to form irregularities – something distinct to what is normally practiced in everyday living. By so doing, creativity ascends and curiosity sparks. Deviation makes a part of a poem more

visible as it creates a psychological effect on the readers (Short, 1969). According to Cook (1989), nonconformity to norms result in the irregularity of the structure, which allows readers to notice variability as to what they are used to see. In effect, people's curiosity is stimulated. This then leads them to finding the message concealed in the distinct use of language. The writer's conscious violation of rules, as Crystal (2003) explains, gives the readers the chance to fill the gap. Similarly, Trougott and Pratt (1980) point out that deviating means departing from the linguistic norms, and the distinctiveness it brings to the language impacts on the readers' way of understanding its meaning. Evidently, deviation highlights the significant part of what the poet intends to foreground, which significantly directs the readers to ascertain the message it tries to convey by relating it to the linguistic features present.

Leech (1989) presents various aspects of poetic discourse. To illuminate both the creative and mechanical use of language in poetry, he discusses eight types of deviation: lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, morphographical, semantic, dialectical, and register. The present study specifically deals with semantic deviation found to be relevant in understanding the poem's meaning. Semantic deviation here is comprehended in metaphorical sense. As Leech mentions, all poems have irrational elements. Irregularities are viewed to be normal in the poetic context. Metaphors, for instance, in terms of transference of meaning, are one of the types of figurative language that bring mental variability. As what Leech called as tropes, they create irregularities of content by representing differently the truth. To further elucidate, poems employ words that need careful analysis of meanings, just like strange collocations that have effects on style, thereby, bringing figurative meanings. The stylistic advantage of using metaphors is that it enhances readers' understanding of the poet's message by drawing the words nearer to disclose the meaning. Semantic deviation, as Short (1996) defines, is a logical inconsistency of meaning relations and "metaphors are aid to fit into this characterization" (p. 43).

2.   Method

2.1   Focus of Analysis

The study aims to examine the irregularities of the poetic language (Leech, 1989) present in the poem "The Secretary Chant" by specifically focusing on semantic deviation. The term "irregularities of content" used by Leech (1969) refers to the features of the text that break the established rules at any linguistic level in which "semantic deviation" is reasonably translated mentally into "nonsense" or "absurdity" to force the reader to think beyond the literal-minded way (p. 48). The conscious or unconscious strategy of poets in featuring oddity is viewed as highly expressive. Examining the peculiarities in the poem is helpful in inferring the meaning through understanding the purpose of deviation. Short (1997) cautiously reminds that language helps unlock the meaning of any text; therefore, for intuitions to be reasonable, the analysis of deviating features should be carefully undertaken.

This paper considers the noticeable occurrence of metaphors in the poem. As the study tries to examine the said dominant linguistic features, it offers an analysis that may facilitate the transference of meaning to the readers. To objectively interpret the text's intent, recognizable features are examined, particularly on the use of metaphors based on the framework employed for the analysis.

Informed by Leech's (1969) classification of tropes (i.e., foregrounding and irregularities of content), this paper considers metaphors as one of the types of figurative language used for the creation of meaning. Decoding the message embedded in the poem through metaphors means finding clues from the text that reveal the message. Furthermore, the interplay of lexical features through semantic relations is considered in the analysis.

The paper offers a clearer understanding of the poem's meaning by examining its lexical features as the primary components of the piece. The language used as the most visible element is highlighted for the disclosure of the poem's message. To account for the interpretive effects of the text, the paper attempts to study the literary text's linguistic details as suggested by MacIntyre's (2002) procedure of examination. Through this, the study provides the answer to the question: What irregularities are demonstrated in the poem in terms of semantic deviation?

2.2   Text

"The Secretary Chant" by Marge Piercy was written in 1973. It talks about a woman who seems tired and unhappy of her job. Her narration of her desk duties while in her working zone – the office – details her day-to-day routine. The poem is meaningful, for it was written right at the beginning of the feminist movement. Thus, the message it brings to readers suggests the need to empower the seemingly weaker sex, women. Additionally, the researcher's observation of the distinctiveness of the language used in the poem prompted the interest in determining the purpose of heavy employment of a linguistic feature, i.e., semantic deviation, prevalent in the literary piece. Such an experiential reason drove the researcher to consider the text under study.

The Secretary Chant (1973)
Marge Piercy

1   My hips are a desk,
2   From my ears hang
3   chains of paper clips.
4   Rubber bands form my hair.
5   My breasts are quills of
6   mimeograph ink.
7   My feet bear casters,
8   Buzz. Click.
9   My head is a badly organized file.
10   My head is a switchboard
11   where crossed lines crackle.
12   Press my fingers
13   and in my eyes appear
14   credit and debit.
15   Zing. Tinkle.
16   My navel is a reject button.
17   From my mouth issue canceled reams.
18   Swollen, heavy, rectangular

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19   I am about to be delivered
20   of a baby
21   Xerox machine.
22   File me under W
23   because I wonce
24   was
25   a woman.

(Note: The lines are marked with numbers for easy reference in the analysis.)

3.   Results and Discussion

The procedure in analyzing the text under study is informed by MacIntyre's (2002) *Doing Stylistics*. As cited in the method of analysis in the said work, the types of words consisting the text may give rise to the understanding of the message. By simply looking at how it is worded, the poem seems to consist mainly of words associated to animate and inanimate things. These words are classified as nouns belonging to two semantic fields, which account for things/objects and humans. The examination involves the assessment of lexical items from the two said categories, which may explain the connection between the word classes. The initial examination leads to possible categories in which these nouns may fall. These nouns are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Semantic fields of nouns in the text

Inanimate (Objects)	Animate (Human)
desk	hips
chains of paper clips	ears
rubber bands	hair
quills of mimeograph ink	breasts
casters	feet
delivered file	head
switchboard	fingers
crossed lines	eyes
credit	navel
debit	mouth
reject buttons	baby
canceled reams	woman
Xerox machine	

Table 1 shows the classification of nouns based on two dominant lexical groups. As listed, the words pertain to inanimate objects and animate words used to associate specifically to office things and human body parts. The use of feminine attributes, such as *hips, hair, breasts, navel, baby,* and the like, are descriptions that help identify the gender of the persona even without the explicit mention of *"woman"* in the last line (25). The use of true linking verbs (*is* and *are*) to connect the two semantic fields can be perceived as a means of creating

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a connection between the semantic classes as they give additional information about the subject, which happen to be the animated lexical items. Noticeably, these two groups in the poem tend to establish a point of transformation where the persona is visualized to have changed completely into something mechanical. For instance in these pairings, *hips-desk, hair-rubber bands, breasts-quills of mimeograph ink, head-switchboard, navel-reject button,* the comparison tends to almost show literally the woman's lost of her self as she becomes inseparable and unrecognizable from her work's environment. *"My hips are a desk"* does not merely say that they look like desk but *"they have become desk."* The hair does not only feel like rubber bands but *"they sort of form the hair of the woman."* It appears that the lifeless objects try to overpower the human attributes by converting the secretary's body into pieces of office equipment and supplies as all the body parts are replaced by the inanimates. This, therefore, creates an idea of a struggling woman who tries to fight for her identity as a human being as the force from her work environment seems to take over her real identity. The feeling of being dehumanized because of her office functions is shown by the way the animate and inanimate items are equated. Moreover, the pairing of nouns from the two semantic fields leaves an impression of the reduction of human attributes to give way to the dehumanization of the persona.

In addition to the nouns, the presence of finite verbs contribute to the understanding of a serious situation going on because of the movements they signify. The use of the present tense (e.g., *hang, form, bear, press*) in most of the lines in the poem signals the existing actions that happen to the woman. It further establishes the continuity of her transformation. The present simple tense likewise indicates the ongoing struggle of the persona, which may call for urgency as she is almost reduced to being an office stuff. As what MacIntyre (2002) observes in E.E. Cummings' poem, the dynamism indicated by the use of present verbs means immediacy in action. This may explain then the fate of the woman at the end of the poem as she finally became a dehumanized secretary, for no one took notice of her supplication. These impressions based on the linguistic elements present in the poem accentuate what the text wants to convey. By taking the classification of nouns in Table 1, there seems a clear comparison between life and lifeless. The equivalence of words enumerated in the first column that pertain to office materials and equipment and the words in the second column that refer to human features implies an understanding of inevitable consequences of overworking. The use of humor through the lexical choices is clear enough to create a kind of mood that the author wants the readers to feel.

"The Secretary Chant" is heavily loaded with metaphors. Of the 25 lines, only 6 lines bear no metaphor. This means that 76% of the poem's content is metaphorically written. Semantically speaking, there is almost a total distort in meaning as the deviation from the usual understanding of meaning is strong. Conversely, the heavy use of metaphors discloses vividly the underlying thought. A poet's conscious or unconscious employment of metaphor as a figurative device brings stronger impact on the reader's understanding (Nofal, 2011). The poet's preference for the use of metaphor over simile may suggest that the persona being portrayed is not just comparable to objects but is totally losing her personal identity since metaphors have stronger effects on meaning. Sharma (2009) states that drawing analogy without pointing out similarity by using *"like," "as,"* and *"than"* suggests keen perception of the structure. The meaning is then conceived by putting a kind of experience into another. The poet's choice of not using the markers of similarity indicates that there is a strong comparison of the two groups of nouns in the poem that the language itself can demonstrate.

A metaphor, as defined by Nofal (2011) in his examination of the syntactic aspect of poetry, is a device used to compare two objects. As of Leech's (1969) classification, it is a figure of speech used in the transference of meaning; and as one of the tropes, he refers to it as an irregularity in poetry that deviates from the conventions of meaning.

To further establish the initial observation, the words *desk, chains of paper clips, rubber bands, quills of mimeograph ink, casters,* and the like in Table 1 show a literal picture of an office where these are commonly used as materials for a desk duty. On the other hand, the words *hips, ears, breasts, hair, feet, head, fingers, eyes,* and the like are body parts of a human being that are feminine qualities by association. Thus, the mention of both office materials and human attributes brings the readers to thinking that these groups of words are equated. This contributes to what the text is communicating to its readers. The tendency of the inanimate objects overruling the human qualities may suggest the idea of dehumanization.

The series of metaphors significantly evokes the transformation of a woman into something mechanical. The increasing number of metaphors as the poem progresses tells the helplessness of the woman as she can no longer stop the process of her transformation. The initial line alone opens with a metaphor, *"My hips are a desk."* Conventions will definitely question the idea of hips as a desk, as desk can never replace a woman's hips. In fact, this line may cause embarrassment to women. Lines 2 and 3 present another metaphor, i.e., *chains of paper clips*, which introduces a deviation from a common understanding that what should be placed are "earrings" not "paper clips." This seems ridiculously humiliating, for women adorn themselves to feel good and not to look funny. Line 4 (*Rubber bands form my hair.*) is perhaps grammatically correct but semantically problematic considering that what form a woman's hair are rubber bands. Additionally, the subject position of the *"rubber bands"* in line 4 assumes control over the word *"hair"* used to associate to humans. This prompts the idea of power and dominance.

> 5   *My breasts are quills of*
> 6   *mimeograph ink.*
> 7   *My feet bear casters,*

Lines 5-7 compare *breasts with mimeograph ink* and *feet with casters*. What readers would commonly expect to come out from a woman's breast is milk, not ink. Line 7 states, *"My feet bear casters."* Roller skates are for mobility, but no way it can become the feet. The comparisons shown in lines 1-7 signify a strange semantic relation that visualizes a woman who begins to turn into a lifeless being. Semantic deviation continues in lines 9-10 with separate descriptions of *head* as *a badly organized file* and *a switchboard where crossed line crackle*.

> 9   *My head is a badly organized file.*
> 10   *My head is a switchboard*

In a literal sense, *file* and *switchboard* are terms used to refer to a clerical job. It is unlikely to see these objects become the human head. If comprehended in a metaphorical sense though, this suggests a blending of an object and a human being that creates another form. This then conceives a sense that the persona is slowly replaced with office materials, making her look like her surroundings.

13   *and in my eyes appear*
14   *credit and debit.*
16   *My navel is a reject button.*
17   *From my mouth issue canceled reams.*
19   *I am about to be delivered*
20   *of a baby*
21   *Xerox machine.*

Lines 13 and 14 contain the phrase, "*and in my eyes appear credit and debit."* In real sense, what one sees in a man's eyes are the internal parts that composed the optical system. Analogically though, a reader can see the persona changing herself into something she usually does, like the sheets of paper she often sees. Lines 16 and 17, *navel* as *a reject button, mouth* as *canceled reams,* are another metaphorical expressions, which are irreconcilable in reality. It is certainly not a button that functions only when pressed. The idea forwarded here signifies an image of a mechanical thing as human-dependent. The sentence in lines 19-21, *Xerox machine* as *baby,* is absolutely unbelievable. Child birth is such a delicate process. Giving birth to a Xerox machine will make it more difficult. This is totally odd as readers cannot equate a baby with a Xerox machine.

Clearly, the use of metaphors in the poem seems to show equality in terms of existence. The effect of providing lifeless counterparts for a human body creates a meaning of a change in form and appearance of the persona. The lines containing semantic deviations lead readers to infer a metaphorical meaning by connecting oddities and normal expressions. Through this, the meaning becomes clearer and recognizable.

Such observations are supplemented in the sequence of metaphors used in particular lines in the poem. Lines 1, 5-6, 7, 9, 10, 13-14, 16, and 17 shown below are grammatically framed, but because of incongruent terms in which the *headwords* pertain to human qualities and contrasted with *predicators* pertaining to office supplies, the sentences' status shows semantic deviation, for naturally, the words associated should complement each other to create a holistic meaning. Moreover, the position of the metaphors can become a point of consideration as the human attributes function as subjects, while office supplies are positioned as predicates but function as complements. This would mean that human characterisctics and inanimates bear significance in the sentences and that the meanings they intend to convey to the readers are also shared by the metaphors. The literal transference of meaning leads to semantic deviation, but its transformation in the figurative plane determines what the poem attempts to communicate (Leech, 1969).

1   **My** *hips are a desk,*
5   **My** *breasts are quills of*
6   *mimeograph ink.*
7   **My** *feet bear casters,*
9   **My** *head is a badly organized file.*
10   **My** *head is a switchboard*
13   *and in my eyes appear*
14   *credit and debit.*
16   **My** *navel is a reject button.*
17   *From my mouth issue canceled reams.*

To further explicate the aforementioned observations, parallelism in the sentence components was also analyzed. The headword is introduced with "My" and followed by a linking verb and complement. Parallel linguistic features are viewed to prompt interpretive links. For readers to see semantic associations, analogous words should go together. However, a linkage of incongruous terms will reveal the nonconformity of expressions, and this is where deviation surfaces. Metaphors are understood in the figurative plane, but in the literal sense, it is viewed as atypical, forwarding a message beyond what is usually called as acceptable. In this context, the poet uses a parallel arrangement of sentence components and, at the same time, a series of metaphors. Such a combination creates a conflict as suggested by the terms "parallel" and "deviation." Meanwhile, to see the totality of metaphorical use, the following expressions are recounted: hips like a desk, rubber bands forming the hair, the separate descriptions for head as a badly organized file and a switchboard, navel as a reject button, and Xerox machine for baby. The weight they bring into the poem creates a noticeable impact, for it is regarded that dominance in stylistics informs interpretive significance.

Another point of discussion is the presence of onomatopoeia in Lines 8 and 15 (i.e., *buzz, click, zing,* and *tinkle*), which can be metaphorical to pieces of office equipment. The quick sounds can mean a habit or routine that seems to sound pleasing than irritating. This may also suggest the poem's message of presenting the woman who is turning into a robot. On the other hand, the repetitive use of the simple sentence structure and the use of the pronoun "My" as the initial word in several sentences would indicate an interesting aspect of the poem's meaning. Simple sentences by definition are used to express a single idea. The use of this structure seems to convey the idea that the persona simplifies her complicated situation. The emphasis on **self** as represented by "My" may mean her solitary state of struggle. The repetition of "My" may picture her work as a routine – producing the bursting effect of "My" that may sound like a melancholic complaint in a monotonous repetitive tone, therefore, sounding as irritating as noise. Additionally, the flat sound it produces because of its repetition creates a voice that appears mechanical.

In addition to the above analysis, MacIntyre (2002) mentions that it is typical in poetry to break rules of convention. The unconventional form of paragraphing or line formation in poetry, for this matter, is a sort of a poet's demonstration of independence (Leech & Short, 1981). The graphological organization of the poem, which includes the arrangement of words and phrases, creates a unique form that contributes to the totality in meaning.

The poem "The Secretary Chant" has 25 lines organized in sentence form and marked with explicit deviation from punctuation use. With an open-form type of organization, lines are derived from words, phrases, and sentences. Meyer (2002) regards this type of stanzaic form as "formless," for no strict and fixed form is employed. However, this type relies on an intense use of language to establish relations between meaning and form. By looking at how the linguistic items are structured in the poem, like most lines are constructed to form a complete sentence (*e.g., 12 Press my fingers and in my eyes appear credit and debit, 17 From my mouth issue canceled reams),* there seems to be an order that exists despite the difficulty in finding parallelism in the poem's structure. The compliance with grammatical construction tends to strengthen the observation that indeed order is emphasized. It can be perceived then that the simple construction urges instantaneity of actions, which can be linked to the poem's theme about the dehumanization of the persona who is in a serious situation. Yet, despite her prayer of being noticed, the persona unceasingly changes herself into an object

resembling her job. This can be further supported by the placement of words that may signal the completion of the process of transformation. A closer look at the occurrence of the words *buzz, click* and *zing, tinkle* in lines 8 and 15, respectively, gives an impression that they are situated subsequently in every stage of transformation. These onomatopeic words preceded the lines 1-7 where the persona begins to turn into *a desk, chains of paper clips, mimeograph ink,* and *casters*. In a similar sequence, lines 9-14, which indicate the ongoing changes in the woman's body such as *badly organized file, switchboard,* and *credit and debit,* is followed by the words *zing* and *tinkle* in line 15. The implied meaning in this linear division may pertain to the helplessness of the persona's case of being overtaken by her duties as an office employee.

The last four lines of the poem may provide an additional explanation to the aforementioned interpretation as regards the persona's melancholic and depressing state of being dehumanized.

> 22   *File me under W*
> 23   *because I wonce*
> 24   *was*
> 25   *a woman.*

Lines 22-25 form a complete sentence that runs over four lines. This seems to show that the poet suspends the idea by breaking the sentence into separate lines in order to emphasize the persona's former identity. The phrase "a woman" that stands alone in the final line tends to draw attention from the readers in seeing her worth as a human being, which was lost because of her unrewarding job. The use of "a" as an indefinite reference presents a strong message of becoming uncertain of her individuality. As the sentence runs over the lines, it seems to create a depiction of death as it sounds like the woman is finally broken down into pieces of office equipment. The slow progression of the event in the last part as shown in the fragmented statement implies the persona's unfortunate destiny.

Lastly, the misspelling of the word "wonce," which should be spelled "once," can be interpreted in two views. Interestingly, the misspelling relates a feeling of confusion and disinterest. As the character finally expresses her concession, her disorientation becomes more apparent in her failure to give attention to details. On the other hand, the use of the misspelled "wonce" might be intentionally considered to establish consistency in the effect of the "w" sound in the final four lines. Hence, the inclusion of "w" to "once" in line 23 is a deliberate move to sustain the initial "w" sound present in each of the last four lines: "W" in line 22, "w" in *was* in line 24, and "w" in *woman* in line 25.

The irregularities of the linguistic features used in the poem "The Secretary Chant" are not so overwhelmingly different from other works of poetry such as those of E.E Cummings and T.S. Elliot. However, the examined irregularities are aesthetically employed to encourage a more responsive and critical reading of the text. The deviations the poet utilized by 'breaking the rules' of the conventional language brought more challenges and excitement to the readers who love to read beyond the lines.

4.   Conclusion

The importance of understanding the construction of any text is a good starting point in the objective interpretation of meanings, most especially in dealing with poetry that requires a careful analysis of its stylistic features. Such a description should not be based mainly on instinct or sensitivity. Instead, recognizing some deviations is helpful in determining the underlying thought the text conveys. The poem, "The Secretary Chant," provides a good ground for literary interpretation, for its language shows explicit peculiarities. Through the prevalent use of metaphors and the poet's wit and humor, readers can relate with the persona's feelings. The choice of words totally captures the message the poet wants the readers to comprehend, making them visualize the real event in context.

Semantic deviation reveals reality as it shows the lexical relations among the words in a poem. Differing and twisting the meanings of lexical pairs unshade the hidden meaning encoded in the text. Thus, a metaphor, as a figure of speech, is an expressive device that allows the visualization of a particular environment shared by both the poet and the reader (Nofal, 2011). Comparing what one reads in the text through personal experiences leads to a better appreciation of a literary text, but digging deeper into the text's meaning through critical reading, such as stylistic analysis, can be a more rewarding experience.

The physical presentation of the poem under study shows a minor style, not as superficial as those of E.E Cummings works. However, ignoring conventionality is not simply viewed as a style; instead, it proposes a message. The poem's lines with no spaces in between may mean an unstoppable phenomenon as the persona shows submission to what she is expected to become anyway. The simple structure of sentences may also suggest simplicity, so the message can transfer automatically, for there is a struggle in the persona's life that needs to be addressed right away as her transformation is becoming inevitable.

Therefore, the examination of irregularities through the lens of semantic deviation makes the meaning of the poem more transparent. The metaphors suggest a figurative transfer of meaning that only skillful readers will appreciate. Generally, the poet's intention of communicating the message of the poem is successful.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings of this study may help assist language teachers in identifying appropriate strategies that can engage learners to become critical readers. Clearly, second to what literature offers, which is pleasure reading, such strategies can promote better appreciation of literary texts through linguistic descriptions. Literary interpretation through linguistic analysis provides the students with opportunities to become better readers and introduces them to a more fact-grounded activity as they begin to mature academically. Further, such a strategy in teaching literature encourages both the teachers and the students to explore more of their creative and critical-thinking skills.

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