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INADVERTENTLY AND INTENTIONALLY POETIC ESL WRITING

ABSTRACT: *Arguing against a rhetoric/mechanics split and in favor of greater attention to the lexical level of language, especially where second language writing is concerned, the author demonstrates how syntactic and lexical constraints as well as cultural/aesthetic preferences result in astonishingly poetic effects in the writing of ESL students. Linguistically classifying and analyzing the poetic ESL examples she has collected, she makes connections to the grammar of first-language poetry and to the relationship between error and creativity.*

When writing in a second language or responding to second language writing, as we do more frequently as communities and classrooms become increasingly multicultural, the issue of balance between rhetorical and mechanical matters which has characterized many discussions of first-language composition teaching (see Connor) loses some of its relevance. One of the largest obstacles facing second-language writers is not rhetoric or mechanics, not considerations of purpose and audience versus punctuation and spelling. Rather, it is *wording*—being constrained to pour complex thoughts into the limiting linguistic molds of one's syntactic and lexical repertoires, or—the focus of this essay—inventing *new* expressions, sometimes by relying

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on the more available structures of the native language. Whether working in their first or second language, writers often sense that Aristotle's means of persuasion are available to them, but that the right words to effect these means seem unavailable— Plato's "Words fail me" predicament.

Wording, ESL students tell us, is one of their most compelling concerns. For example, the day she enrolled in our writing center, a Japanese student wrote, "Sometimes I don't know how I can explain exactly what I think or feel in English"; her writing teacher, a native English speaker, empathized in the margin: "Sometimes *I* have this problem, too." A Chinese student wrote, "I never think that I am a writer when I am writing. I just feel that I try to put words together. Frequently I feel I don't have enough words. Maybe I'd better try to memorize more vocabulary." (Actually, she wrote "memberize" more vocabulary, an added layer of meaning (the idea of discourse community) that foreshadows the poetic overtones of ESL writing that I will discuss.

Psycholinguists Herbert and Eve Clark emphasize that it is the *availability* of structures of the language that determines what is said and written and how—for both native and non-native speakers, but especially the latter. According to Denise Murray, the average native-English-speaking college student has a passive reading and listening vocabulary of 150,000 words. She estimates that if most bilingual ESL college students were to learn 40 new words a day, it would take four years to acquire such a vocabulary. It is no wonder that many second-language writers experience more distress at the lexical rather than at the rhetorical or mechanical levels.

When writing teachers read a piece of ESL writing, what immediately strikes them, "as a kind of foreign accent, only in writing instead of speech" (Leki, 129), are the ways in which ideas and feelings are explained, ways that are often different from those of native speakers. Some phrasings might be convoluted and difficult to comprehend, causing double takes, as with the syntactic derailments Mina Shaughnessy discusses. Other phrasings, even if somewhat twisted, are startlingly unique and poetic—refreshing alternatives to the stock phrases, worn-out clichés, dead and dying metaphors, and routine formulas commonly found in native-speaker college student prose. The phrases are "inventive," a word poet Kenneth Koch uses to describe poetry. ESL writers literally invented them instead of using conventional expressions, which they might have bor-

rowed had they known them and felt comfortable using them. According to Boccaccio, "Poetry brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind." "Unheard-of creations," I might add, as opposed to expressions that have been heard over and over again. When first-language composition teachers come across such poetic phrasings, examples of which are below, they often remark, "I wish my native speakers would write like that." "Make it new," they advise those native-English-speaking writers, repeating Ezra Pound's directive. By expressing complex thoughts and intense emotions without convenient access to conventional structures of English, second-language writers cannot help but make it new.

This lack of availability of structures and lexical items, therefore, is double-edged. It brings forth as much innovation for writers and readers as it does frustration. Thus, Wilga Rivers is not quite right when she claims that "Innovative ability will exist only to the extent . . . that the set of rules has been internalized" (34). Failure to internalize sets of syntactic and semantic rules *can* result in innovative ability—unheard-of creations of what Larry Selinker calls "interlanguage." Ironically, traditional analyses of poetry emphasize the writer's choice of words and structures to achieve poetic effects, whereas in the case of second-language writers, it is often the very lack of choice that contributes to interlanguage innovations and poetic effects. Most discussions in the field of poetics, such as Samuel Levin's *Linguistic Structures in Poetry*, are predicated on notions of choice of patterns and structures—the conscious intentions of the artist to create new forms and meanings.

It is these new forms and meanings that I wanted to examine when I began collecting them from the writing of ESL students enrolled in our writing center. I wanted to classify and analyze them to discover the exact qualities and features that make them seem poetic to native-English speakers. If, as David Bartholomae and Lou Kelly both recommend, teachers read native-speaker writing as carefully and with as much appreciation as they do literature, surely they should read non-native-speaker writing the same way. I will focus on the writing of Asian ESL students from China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea as they are the largest ESL population enrolled in our writing center.

In order to classify and analyze the examples, I "translated" them into more typical everyday English and compared the everyday versions to the ESL ones. For example, in writing

about her parents (example 3a below), a Japanese student noted, "I have never been scolded by them *with big voice and violence.*" I reformulated the underlined prepositional phrase with adverbs, resulting in the more conventional, "I have never been scolded by them loudly or violently." The effect of the original version is poetic; the prepositional phrase "with big voice and violence" slows the reader down and accentuates the idea of loudness and force. Using prepositional phrases instead of the adverbs expected by native-English-speaking readers can certainly be classified as an error on the part of the ESL writer. However, because of the psychological effects of the phrase on the reader, it fits Louis Ceci's definition of "syntactic imagery"—poetic effects achieved by grammatical structures, a relationship whose study, he notes, dates back to Longinas' *On the Sublime.*

Misuse of the indefinite article is another such example. In the passage, "They [those who dropped the atom bomb] gave *a* birth to something very evil" (4b below), the 'a' highlights the evil, intensifying the original meaning. Are these grammatical variations mistakes or are they syntactic imagery? Bartholomae notes that "the distance between text and conventional expectation may be a sign of failure and it may be a sign of genius, depending on the level of control and intent we are willing to assign to the writer" (257)—the elements of choice and intent that seem more appropriate to discussions of first-language writing. I would add that regardless of the level of control and intent assigned, attributing failure or genius should also depend on another element—the cognitive effects on the reader—whether the writer's words generate new layers of meaning in the reader's mind.

A double caveat is necessary here. I am neither trying to romanticize second-language writing by classifying all or even some of it as poetry, nor to trivialize it in the Art Linkletter mode of "International students write the darndest things." The writing of international students enrolled in our writing center is not poetry in the strict sense. It is prose written in response to assignments. It usually doesn't have the consciously constructed rhythmic or sound patterns characteristic of poetry—the conventions of rhyme, alliteration, meter, and verse. In addition, the aforementioned matters of artistic intention and freedom of choice are problematic enough to render a label of "poetry" controversial. However, some ESL writing, as the following sentences and passages show, is *poetic,* primarily be-

cause of its effects on the reader. These words are surprising, unexpected, and innovative, and to paraphrase Richard Ohmann, they set the reader's cognitive and emotional processes in motion.

The features characteristic of ESL poetic phrasings comprise the headings 1-7 on the following list. Before each example is the language background of the student who produced it. Most of the examples are by Chinese-speaking writers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, who constitute the majority of the Asian enrollment in the writing center.

Poetic Features of ESL Writing

1) INVENTED WORDS blends (portmanteaus), analogical reasoning, or different morphemes:

a) (Korean) She laughs well, eats well, and a good *sporter.*

b) (Vietnamese) I can stay in the pool for many hours until my fingers all *shrinkle.*

c) (Chinese) Of 55 persons coming from that city, 5 friends became Christians and many of Christians *revivalized* their spiritual lifes and commitments to God.

d) (Chinese) The difficulty is that every time I feel upset or frustrated here, I cannot get his timely *comfortness.*

e) (Chinese) . . . our curiosity made our *bravity.*

f) (Chinese) For example, the greatest physicist Newton was *sparkled* by a falling apple and Archimedes invented a famous hydrostatic theory during taking a bath.

2) COMMON EXPRESSIONS OR WORDS USED IN A NEW WAY:

a) (Japanese) Disappointment fell on me like a *wet blanket.*

b) (Chinese) Even today a man prefer to marry a tender, *home-style, no ambitious* woman.

c) (Chinese) It is a pity that when people grow up they can scarcely find *an indeed friend.*

d) (Chinese, same writer as above) When I was waken up by the *alarming of the clock,* I thought "How can time pass so fast?"

e) (Chinese) These two problems *wave* together causing the difficult situation I am right now . . . and since they are *maxing toqether,* I can work on one to improve the other and vice verse.

f) (Chinese) There were many *oil bleeding* case happened in Alaska before.

g) (Chinese) My self-esteem was *nibbled by the sense of failure* little by little ever since I started to take Rhetoric class. I was afraid.

3) USING CERTAIN GRAMMATICAL AND SYNTACTIC PATTERNS (i.e. prepositional phrases, nouns) INSTEAD OF OTHERS (adverbs, adjectives) including inverted or archaic syntax:

a) (Japanese) I have never been scolded by them *with big voice or violence.*

b) (Chinese) from "Taking a Passenger Train in China." Many people displayed various kinds of gymnastic skills, but some others simply leaned against us sitting people and seized the chance to vent their *spite of no seat* upon us.

c) (Chinese) I was always so shy to ask her to give me a *dishwash chance.*

d) (Chinese) The sound of the waves and the wind of *the madness ocean* made us feel like the voices of unfortunate people yelled out for help before they die.

4) DIFFERENT CONSTRUCTIONS WITH TWO-WORD VERBS:

a) (Japanese) I was so glad that *she is counting me on.*

b) (Japanese, same writer as above) Perhaps when the atomic bombs were dropped, nobody knew exactly what will happen. When they dropped it, *they gave a birth* to something very evil.

c) (Chinese) To develop a good working relationship with your fellow employees . . . don't try to *show up* too much.

5) UNIQUE METAPHOR OR SIMILE:

a) (Chinese) I tried to concentrate all my nerve and my mind on topic with strong mind . . . however, 5-6 minutes later *all my minds run separately not concerning with my will.*

b) (Chinese) I am eager to do certain thing but *I am bent on a stick and cannot move.*

c) (Chinese, same writer as above) After my grandma died, my grandpa face *never turned bright again.*

d) (Chinese, same writer as above) When a foreigner or a migrant is placed in a group of Americans, it seems like *a turkey in a flock of chickens.*

e) (Chinese, same writer as above) Taking care of her children and her husband is the *portrait of her life.*

f) (Chinese) I write and it seems that in the process of writing I have written out *the question marks in my mind.*

g) (Korean) I had to *chase their eyes* to understand the quick conversation of my classmates.

6) REFERENCES TO/IMAGES FROM NATURE:

a) (Korean, about a friend) So the way home was always a bit sorrowful *with long shadows . . . seeing another's soul over the shoulder* is always a wonderful experience. After that, I hadn't seen him, but only heard his well-being through wind.

b) (Vietnamese) But once he was within 15-20 yards of us, our feet went flying *like that of a deer that just saw it predator, the lion,* and over the fence we went . . .

c) (Vietnamese) When I was 7 or 8 years old, I was told that it was a bridge built across the *sea.* Wow! I wished that I could have walked on that bridge. But later on I realized that the fishing boats made up such *a bridge of night.*

d) (Chinese) We rode on bicycle for a long time, *accrosing the creek,* following the curve roads, seeing those rice field aside,

facing the *fresh breeze* . . . the bridge was narrow and swang with the *wind.*

7) HEIGHTENED EMOTION AND/OR SPIRITUALITY expressed via (3) including old-fashioned and inverted syntax:

a) (Korean) from "A Gap between Reality and Want to Be"
Alas! What a tragedy! When I think about that idea, I expected a pure, a brilliant, and perfect expressions. But the result, I rather say, practical reality, is always a tragedy. So usually I decide that wonderful idea stays in its own way, and lives in its own life—in my mind, of course.
I guess that would be better for it than *sculptured* by coarse, pretended artist—me, and humiliated by shallow-minded people.

b) (Korean, same writer as above) You may think that I'm romantic. No way. But yes! *Just a little romantic and a little realistic am I!*

c) (Japanese) It seemed to me that *desires come limitlessly forever.*

Some of the Asian ESL passages listed contain a combination of two or more of these features, increasing their poetic quality. For example, in 7b, heightened emotion is indicated by two exclamation points and inverted word order characteristic of Wordsworth and the romantic poets. At the same time the student is professing to be romantic. Some of the types of poetic phrasing are more unintentional, what can be called "inadvertent" poetry (Features 1-5), and some intentional (Features 6 and 7); that is, the appearance of metaphor, nature and intense emotion in some Asian ESL writing is not an accident or a mistake, but a complex rhetorical and cultural phenomenon related to: 1) the writing center's encouragement of self-expression and verbal risk-taking and its historical valorization of personal and nature essays; 2) the rural and small-town backgrounds of some of the students; that is, they have had more experiences with nature than many suburban U.S. college students; and 3) most importantly, national and cultural preferences for certain features in writing.

Hence, poetic features result primarily from ESL interlanguage but also from cultural preferences, with inadvertently poetic features arising from interlanguage effects and intentionally poetic features from cultural preferences. According to the

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study of writing which involved fourteen countries (unfortunately not the four Asian countries above), preferred features for writing vary according to a complex of interrelated factors: the nation, its culture, its educational system, and its writing pedagogy (Purves). What makes writing "good" for many Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese students educated in their home countries, may be slightly different from what makes school writing good for many U.S. students. More Asians might place greater value on writing that is aesthetically pleasing, more Americans on writing that is clear and precise. As a Korean student enrolled in our writing center wrote, "In Korean, the more being poetic or has meanings in a sentence, the better it is considered. In English, being clear and straightforward seem to be the way to write." Jie and Lederman's study of entrance exams in China revealed that essays with metaphors and literary references were rated higher than those without. The Chinese preference for images and metaphors may also be related to their pictographic writing system, as Nancy Duke Lay says, "the concrete imagery of the language." "The written character . . . is the direct representation of that which is being described . . . . A sincere person is a man standing by his words" (41).

Inadvertently poetic interlanguage effects result from the transfer of specific native-language grammatical patterns. The dense, telegrammatic nature of Chinese students' English prose is caused by direct transfer from Chinese grammar, which lacks function words such as articles and prepositions (cf. Lay's example of "city springtime" instead of "springtime in the city"). Some Japanese ESL writing has poetic qualities also—because of telegrammatic denseness, but possibly because of cultural preferences as well. In JoAnn Dennett's survey of Japanese technical writing students, she asked them how they would characterize good technical writing. Such writing, they answered, would engage the emotions and possess beauty, surprise, and flow—not usually the features stressed in technical and business writing courses and textbooks in the U.S. In fact, a native-English-speaking reader might perceive some Asian ESL writing as poetic because the kind of transactional, down-to-business prose that we are culturally accustomed to expect of U.S. students because of their preference for and training in clarity and the plain style, probably may not contain as many images, metaphors, and references to nature. Such

national comparisons and contrasts must be made tentatively. Research in culturally preferred features for writing—the field of contrastive rhetoric—is still in its formative stages. Likewise, in a "global village" united by corporate, technological, and media influences, cultural preferences shift and change, thereby making a "national writing pedagogy" difficult to define or pin down.

Features 1 through 5 imply that mistakes were made and errors committed, albeit unintentional, innocent ones. Yet accident, error, and mistake should not be construed negatively. Many of the best discoveries in writing, research, and life occur by accident, as artists and those who study artistic processes remind us. Poet Kenneth Koch describes the value of error in generating poetry in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams,* a book about teaching poetry to New York City public school children, many of whom are also bilingual. He tells how he assigned his students a poem which required a strangely composed object in every line with the word 'of' in between the words—again, an "unheard-of creation." A third grader accidentally wrote "Swan of bees," when he meant "swarm of bees," a mistake Koch thought an improvement over the original because of the added, meaning/image of a swan shaped with bees or assaulted by bees. He notes: "Believing that the student's error had created something interesting and beautiful, I wanted to share it with the class; I was pleased to have a live example of the *artistic benefits that come from error and chance*" [emphasis mine] (13).

Alan Maley and Alan Duff, also poets, and authors of *The Inward Ear,* a book about teaching poetry to ESL students in England, argue that poetry's tolerance for what would be considered error or deviant in conventional discourse makes the genre ideal for ESL students' reading and writing. Children and second-language speakers, if they are not inhibited and apprehensive about error, are excellent sources of inventive language use.

H.G. Widdowson in his analyses of the grammar of poetry discusses poetic error in terms of "deviance" from the syntactic patterns of conventional discourse. He shows how poets such as Wordsworth, Eliot, Tennyson, Shakespeare, e.e. cummings, and Ted Hughes violate the rules of standard communication when they use inverted and deviant syntax and word order and heightened emotion, and when they use one part of speech for another (i.e., nouns as verbs)—the very same features found in

many of the ESL phrasings above. Widdowson points out how many of these poets' constructions, if used by children or foreign learners, would be regarded as incorrect. Widdowson's view of poetic and metaphorical discourse as contrasting with and deviant from "normal" discourse conflicts with the views of Paul Kameen and of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who argue against the dichotomy, emphasizing the metaphorical nature of everyday "normal" conversational discourse.

What are some of the processes by which second-language writers come up with new expressions or common expressions used in a new way? What are some of the cognitive operations that result in such "unheard-of creations"? A partial explanation is given by Suzanne Irujo in her article "Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth," a discussion of how Spanish-speaking students arrive at interesting expressions such as the one in her title, reminiscent of the humorous constructions (Spoonerisms) of the Reverend Spooner and of ESL TV characters such as Latka from *Taxi*, Mipos from *Perfect Strangers*, Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff, even Mork from *Mork and Mindy*. Irujo notes that one way ESL writers arrive at these constructions is by confusing part of an idiom they have heard but not mastered, producing such examples as, "to go out on a stick" instead of "to go out on a limb" or "to kill two birds with one rock." A second way is by combining part of an English idiom with a Spanish idiom such as "to spread the voice," a combination of "to spread the news" and "correr la voz." Substituting the equivalent of Spanish words in English idioms creates unique approximations such as "looking for a nail in the backyard" instead of "a needle in a haystack."

The Chinese preference of using such maxims, aphorisms, and proverbs in their writing results in unique constructions when such sayings are translated successfully or not into English. What was routine in Chinese becomes poetic when translated, for example, the reference to time with which many of Carolyn Matalene's Chinese students began their essays: "Time flies like an arrow" (794), an expression which is not clichéd in English. To summarize the process, the unintentional and inadvertent, or incompletely learned second-language sayings, combine with the intentional and purposeful, or cultural preference for such sayings in the native language to produce poetic effects.

One finds another dimension to the relationship between poetic and stock expressions in the growth and development of the language itself. The process, recounted by George Orwell in

"Politics and the English Language," is that overly used metaphors become "frozen" or dead; they lose their symbolic or analogic meaning, and become idioms or clichés. What was once unique, vivid, and poetic, when repeated, becomes overused, common, and normal. However, new second-language learners find it hard to tell the difference between what is *fresh* and what is *frozen.* For example, beginning ESL students, upon learning the English word "breakfast" (break/fast) might think it metaphorical, quaint, and poetic. They might even draw the same conclusions about English speakers themselves, marveling, "Ah, breakfast, the meal at which the fast of the evening is broken." Yet there is nothing really poetic in the 20th century about "breakfast." We say it and eat it without experiencing metaphoricity. By the same token, when English-speaking learners of Spanish as a second language first encounter the expression "Ojalá que," literally "Allah grant that," they marvel, "Ah, the Moorish roots of Spanish." But Spanish-speaking people of the 1990s are not actually invoking Allah when they say Ojala, they are merely thinking "I hope that," which is the way the expression is translated. The break/fast and Allah meanings have become frozen or dead. With many examples of ESL poetry, however, it seems that the *opposite* of the process of freezing metaphors and turning them into standard expressions is happening. With the new semantic levels and overtones supplied by the so-called mistake, the frozen idiom or stock expression such as "wet blanket" or "home-style," thaws out, is "re-freshed," becomes revitalized, or "revivalized" (1c) and poeticized, which is why these expressions reveal so much about language, culture, and life experience.

How do we college English teachers respond to writers of passages with thawed-out idioms, invented words, and other new, unheard-of creations? By simply applauding their poetic nature in the margins or in a writing conference? ("What a beautiful phrase!") By correcting them and substituting typical native-speaker versions? ("No, what you really meant to say here was 'loudly and violently.'") We can both compliment the writer on the freshness and inventiveness of, say, the portmanteau "shrinkle," explain why it affected us the way it did, and discuss how she may have come up with it, but we can and should also teach her the conventional, perhaps more boring ways of conveying a similar idea. Such complex and subtle responses and discussions are more effective in one-to-one conferences than in a classroom or via comments on students' papers.

Walker Percy, in his essay "Metaphor as Mistake," discusses metaphorical mistakes that lead to poetic thinking and discourse. For example, as a boy, Percy thought the name of his favorite bird was the *Blue Dollar Hawk*, not the Blue Darter Hawk. The black people Percy knew called a coin-operated record player or juke box, a *Seabird* instead of a Seeburg, the company that made it. Both mistakes added a new layer of meaning, lost when Percy found out the correct name of the bird and the juke box. Such mistakes, Percy says, caused by "misnamings, misunderstandings, or misrememberings, have resulted in what the critic Blackmur calls 'that heightened, that excited sense of being'—an experience moreover which was notably absent before the mistake was made" (65). By misconceiving or misnaming something, the namer conceives it with "richer overtones of meaning . . . even as being *more truly* what it is . . . " (68).

ESL "mistakes," such as those above, do the same. They add richer overtones of meaning and get closer to the truth of what the writers are communicating. *Timely comfortness* (1d) is more consoling somehow than the correct "comfort" maybe because of the calming effect of three almost equal syllables—com-fort-ness. The *alarming of the clock* (2d) will wake one up more quickly than the ringing of the clock because when it first rouses you from a peaceful sleep it is indeed alarming. Having one's self-esteem *nibbled by . . . failure* (2g) is more disconcerting, and threatening to selfhood than having it just whittled away or diminished. Oil spills, because we are numbed by hearing the phrase so often in the news, are more easily dismissed than *oil bleeding* (2f). *The madness ocean* (3d), with its extra nominalizing morpheme "-ness," is much more fierce and frightening than "the mad ocean." Such "noun-piling" is also characteristic of some first-language poetry. *Accrosing the creek* [blending the preposition and the verb] conveys more motion/movement than just crossing the creek or going across the creek (5d).

Returning to Percy, through these phrasings, we do know these phenomena better, "conceive of [them] in a more plenary or full fashion and have more immediate access to [them] . . ." (68). Error is most certainly an instrument of knowing, not just knowing the writer's "logic of error," but knowing new meanings and reaching and sharing new understandings about the world.

Note

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