Musing on the Language of Literature

Nabaraj Neupane

Associate Professor
Department of English Education, Prithvi Narayan Campus
Tribhuvan University
Email: nabaraj.neupane@prnc.tu.edu.np

Abstract

Literature conveys human ideas, thoughts, emotions, feelings and experiences artistically. The use of distinctive grammatical, semantic, and stylistic conventions make the language of literature a field-based register. Based on these presumptions, this article aims to elucidate the deviant features that are prevalent in the literary texts. To obtain the objective, I have employed qualitative content analysis that calls for interpreting the extracts from the authentic literary discourses. The main findings are related to the five-fold features such as grammatical, semantic/lexical, graphological, prosodic, and ornamental, which create markedness of the literary register. These findings reveal that the litterateurs use figures of speech to beautify the presentation of feelings and ideas. This implies that the readers, the writers, and the material producers (like curriculum designers and textbook writers) should be aware of the marked features of the literary texts.

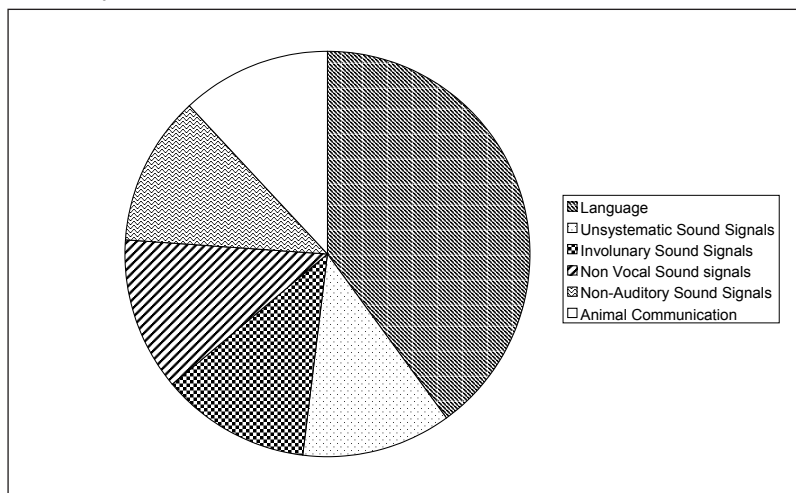**Keywords:** Communication, feature, language, literature, register

Introduction

As a means of communication, language is used to exchange ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions, experiences and so on. Even the animals, such as bees, chimpanzees and dolphins can communicate within their circle. The animal communication is limited, definite, and closed whereas human communication is unlimited, indefinite and open. Therefore, language is devoid of animal communication. This is evidenced from Traugott and Platt (1980), who have

characterized language as "a capacity that distinguishes human beings from other creatures" (p. 1). Likewise, Richards, Platt and Weber (1985) have identified language as "the system of human communication" (p. 153). Thus, language is human species-specific.

Different modes of human communication are visual, olfactory, tactile, gustatory and vocal. Of these modes, the commonest one is the vocal quality that is voluntary and systematic. Neupane, Banstola, Baral, Poudel and Pandit (2012) have clarified that language is a voluntary vocal system of human communication (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Means of Communication

Source: Adapted from Neupane, Bastola, Baral, Poudel & Pandit (2012)

The above discussion shows the orality of the language. Human beings communicate not only through a vocal system but also through a written means. Whether it is oral or written, "Language is an abstraction based on the linguistic behaviour of its users" (Todd, 1991, p. 7). Further, classical works by Sapir (1921), Block and Trager (1942), Hall (1968), Robins (1979), Chomsky (1957) and the like have characterized language as a purely arbitrary and creative means of human communication (Lyons, 2006). Therefore, the terms, like *human, capricious, fecund, voluntary, and systematic*, demonstrate the distinctive traits of language.

Human language is full of varieties based on its users and uses. The main varieties are dialects and registers. The former refers to the variations because of geographical as well as social reasons. The latter shows variations in terms of field, mode and tenor (Halliday, 1978, as cited in Durant, & Lambrou, 2010). Of them, the field-based register is a variety of language in terms of field or subject matter (Neupane, 2002). One field-based register differs

from the other in terms of vocabulary, grammar and usage. For example, the language used in the literature differs from the language used in the other fields like education, philosophy, language teaching, and mass media. In light of this, the language of literature is a field-based register.

Different scholars have defined language vis-à-vis literature in several ways. For Sapir (1921), "Languages are more to us than systems of thought-transference. They are invisible garments that drape themselves about our spirit and give a predetermined form to all its symbolic expression. When the expression is of unusual significance, we call it literature" (p. 101). It implies that literature is a vehicle of inner human thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences. Literature is the most creative means of human language and so it permits every possible human creation. To put in Lazar's (1993) words, "One of the hallmarks of literature is that it feeds creatively on every possible style and register-it has become the one form of discourse in which any use of language is permissible" (p. 6). Hence, literature permits various possibilities of human creation. To justify this claim, Neupane (2000) has highlighted that literature begins in the creative possibilities of human language. Thus, literature is the creative expression of the human inner voice.

The language of literature poses distinctive features, which is of unique tone, style and format. These features echo the ancient work like of Aristotle (350 B.C.), who, in his *Poetics*, identified the language of literature as exotic expressions that are deviated from ordinary usage (Shrawan, 2019). The romanticists like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley also delineated on the uniqueness of literary language. Wordsworth (1798/1998), in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads,* highlighted the distinctive traits of the language of literature, specifically poetry. Emphasizing the use of the language of the rustic life, Wordsworth appeals the poets to select the language "really used by men, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect" (164). Likewise, Coleridge (1817/1998), in *Biographia Literaria*, wrote about poetic imagination that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate" (p.190). This implies that the language of literature undergoes through the process of defamiliarization in which the readers are to decipher meaning from the context of use. Likewise, Shelley (1821/1998)), in *A Defence of Poetry*, identified the language of literature as one that "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects to be as if they were not familiar" (p. 233). Thus, the language of literature is "a conspicuous departure from what competent users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of the words, or else the standard order of

words, to achieve some special meaning or effect" (Abrams & Harpham, 2011, p. 107). Further, formalists, discourse analysts, deconstructionists, structuralists, and poststructuralists also identified the language of literature to be defamiliarized, exotic, foregrounded, novel, and implicit (Shrawan, 2019).

These delineations give me a substantial impetus to develop a frame of the language of literature for analysis and discussion. This frame subsumes deviations in terms of linguistic features such as grammatical, semantic/lexical, and graphological; prosodic features; and the figures of speech. The first category includes uncommon word order, syntax, punctuation, use of words, and spellings; the second deals with the features like alliteration, rhyme, and versification; and the third illuminates the ornaments of literary register like simile, metaphor, pleonasm, synecdoche, oxymoron, paradox, hyperbole, pun, and euphemism, among others.

Methodology

Since this article aims to delineate the typical traits of the language of literature, I have employed qualitative content analysis that requires the in-depth analysis and interpretation of the available contents within the domain selected (Bell, 1999, as cited in Al-Jardani, 2012, Krippendorff, 2013, & Bengtsson, 2016). For the discussion of the literary language, I have extracted 16 examples from the authentic poems and literary texts as they are considered the highest form of art. These extracts are selected using convenient sampling procedure. The deliberations and discussions are based on the five criteria of labelling the features like grammatical, semantic/lexical, graphological, prosodic, and ornamental (figures of speech).

Discussion of the Findings

Based on the frame of reference developed in the above-mentioned section, the succeeding sub-sections delineate the deviant features thematically.

Grammatical Features

The language of literature is distinct in terms of grammaticality in general. It does not strictly follow the standard grammatical rules. However, if the rules are only foregrounded (or deviated), the text may become meaningless. Although there is a violation of the standard norms of grammar, the violation is systematic to establish a unique form. This process, which is called cohesion of foregrounding, is established by the use of literary features. It implies that violating the prevailing norms and principles, a noble structure is established. I have extracted

the following three samples for analysis and interpretation.

(1)   So long
        So far away
        Is Africa

                            (Hughes et al., 2007, n. p.)

(2)   if i were to see
        her shape from a mile away
        i'd know so quickly

                            (Bear, 1975, as cited in Lohani et al., 1999, p. 11)

(3)   Buffalo Bill's
        defunct
        who used to
        ride a watersmooth-silver
                            stallion
        and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
                            Jesus
                            (Cummings, 1920, as cited in Lohani & Adhikary, 1998, p. 75)

In example 1, Hughes has used an unusual structure. In ordinary writing, it can be "Africa is so long and so far way." However, the poet has created a unique structure to make it distinct and attractive. Similarly, in example 2, all the characters are in lower case. They are unusual; the initial character and the personal pronoun 'I' should be in upper case. Even if they are strange grammatically, they connote that the speaker feels very small and trivial in front of the greatness of his grandmother. Likewise, in example 3, the poet has broken sentence into words and phrases to create a different meaning. These examples exhibit that the literary register may not follow the usual word order, structure and other grammatical rules or systems of ordinary usage.
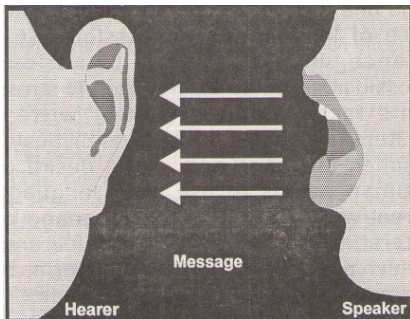
Semantic/Lexical Features

The literary register comprises words and/or phrases to create a specific effect of the text into the readers, who need to decipher meaning from the context. Literary language is unique in its semantics. The expressions in literary texts have connotative meanings rather than denotative ones. This meaning association is maintained by providing allusions, references, and contexts.

The unique semanticity/lexicality in literature is achieved through the use of non-human characters. For ordinary communication, speaker, addresser and hearer/addressee are essential

to take part. The message transmitted shows interchangeability. Figure 2 demonstrates that the communicators must be human beings, be them speaker, addressee, auditor, over hearer or eavesdropper.

Figure 2

Basics of Human Communication

Despite this fact, the communicators in literary texts maybe inanimate things or non-human beings. The following extracts justify this proposition.

(4)   "Come, little leaves," said the wind one day,

        "Come over the meadows with me and play.

                            (Cooper, as cited in Joshi et al., 2016, p.3)

(5)   "Dear mother," said a little fish,

        "Is that a worm I see?

        I'm very hungry, and I wish

        You'd get the worm for me."

                        (Ann &Jane Taylor, as cited in Joshi et al., 2016, p. 30)

        In example 4, *leaves and wind*, inanimate things, are communicators. Likewise, in example 5, mother fish and baby fish seem to talk about a worm. In ordinary communication, leaves, wind, and fish do not communicate. Nevertheless, these terms are personified in these extracts. As such, stone, tree, mud, mountain, and so on can communicate in literary texts.

Graphological Features

The literary register is characterized by deviation in graphology that is apparent in unique spellings. The below-mentioned extracts prove this.

(6)   But thy eternal summer shall not fade

        Nor lose possession of thou ow'st

        Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade

When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st

(Shakespeare, as cited in Lohani & Devkota, 1998, p. 8)

The Shakespearean sonnet (Example 6) shows the oddities of spellings like *ow'st*, *wand'rest*, and *grow'st*, which refer to owns, wander, and grows respectively. The speaker has done such a violation of standard spelling rules just to create a rhyming effect and to mean connotatively.

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech, the metrical ornaments of the literary texts, add grace to literature. To put it in other words, the language of literature is enriched with literary devices. Further, these features are used in literature to convey more than their ordinary meanings and to give more effective expression to the idea (Bhattarai, 1988). Words convey denotative as well as connotative meanings.

There are many such features. The conventional ones are simile, metaphor, metonymy, personification, allegory, circumlocution, euphemism, imagery, onomatopoeia, parody, paradox, oxymoron, pun, hyperbole, pleonasm, synecdoche, sarcasm, satire, and the like. The below-mentioned examples highlight some of these features.

(7)   Drinking a lot of water can often make you feel thirsty.

(8)   Divide into four quarters.

(9)   Give us this day our daily bread.

(10)   My vegetable love should grow

         vaster than empires. (Marvell, as cited in Murdoch, 1993, p. 5)

(11)   The word without a word the word within.

(12)   He is an only honest thief.

(13)   He is in a rest house.

Example 8 seems contradictory or absurd in superficial reading. Generally, after drinking water, one cannot be thirsty. .By creating an unusual context, the speaker implies a different meaning. This line exemplifies the case of paradox. Likewise, example 8 presents an illustration of pleonasm that permits the use of more words than is needed for communicating ideas. In the very example, the term *quarters* includes the meaning of *four* but the line shows redundant use of the terms to create a specific effect in the reader's mind. The next figure of speech, i.e., synecdoche, is presented in example 9. The term synecdoche refers to the use of the whole of something to indicate its part. In the example, *bread,* which connotes to the food we take as a whole, refers to the food for the specific day. Thus, it is also called a specific

metonymy that allows the use of one word/phrase to express something associated with the expression.

Similarly, example 10 is an illustration of hyperbole that is an exaggerated statement used not to mean literally but to mean connotatively. Hyperbole is an overstatement used for creating typical effects like humour and irony in the reader's mind. The very example shows the speaker's love, which is evergreen and eternal, spreads everywhere as the empires do. The speaker has used such a figure speech to cox his/her beloved one. However, in ordinary communication, such overshooting is not used. A similar type of literary effect is reflected in a pun (example 11) that is a play on word or words, which are homonymous but mean differently. Puns are also used to create some thoughtful, satirical or comic effect. In example 12, the term *word* has appeared three times to mean three different associative meanings.

Example 12 shows the use of oxymoron (condensed paradox) that is the mixture of incongruous words or ideas to create a specific literary effect. In the presented example, there is a deliberate combination of seemingly contradictory terms like *honest* and *thief*. Generally, *honest* describes good conduct whereas *thief* is indicative of a person with mischievous behaviour. By integrating the two terms, *honest thief* creates a noble meaning of thief. That is, theft done for the good purpose (for example, to distribute the property to the needy people) maybe an honest deed. The next case is of euphemism, which is the use of the more polite or more indirect word or expression, is present in example 13. In this example, *rest house* is more polite, agreeable, and pleasant rather than a *toilet*. Such expressions are profusely used in literary registers to present the ideas, views, thoughts, feelings, and experiences mildly.

The figures of speech, discussed above, are a few out of many types. These exemplars prove that the language of literature is rich with such literary devices that are also called ornaments of literature. Thus, the literary register, unlike ordinary usage, is beautified by the use of figures of speech. These examples exhibit that language of literature is enriched with figures of speech and hence, the language of literature is distinctive.

Prosodic Features

Prosodic features, which refer to the specific sound patterns and rhythms, create a metrical composition in literary registers. These features subsume alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, rhythm, foot and meter. They also refer to the study of the principles and practices of meter, rhyme and stanza forms. (Cuddon, 1982; & Abrams & Harpham, 2011).

(14)   Oh, my love's like a red red rose (alliteration)

         (Burns, as cited in Lohani & Adhikary, 1998, p. 152)

(15)   Tiger, tiger burning bright.

In the forest of the night (rhyme)

(Blake, 1794, as cited in Lohani & Devkota, pp. 1-2)

Of the prosodic features, example 14 shows the repetition of the same consonant sound /r/ in the world initial position. This is termed alliteration that is used to create a rhythmical effect in the expression and to add beauty to the text. Likewise, rhyme is seen in example 15. The terms *bright* and *night* create a rhyme. Further, there is the use of /t/ sound in words like *tiger*, *bright*, *night*, which shows the use of consonance. To create a rhyming pattern like this, the literary registers permit different combinations of foot and meter, specifically in poetry.

These illustrations exhibit that the language of literature poses distinctive quality that is different from the day-to-day usage of the language as a means of communication.

Conclusion

The language of literature possesses marked features that are unique to the field itself. Such markedness is symbolic of the violation of standard norms, principles and systems. The violation is systematic that is called cohesion of foregrounding. This destructing and restructuring the norms of ordinary usage yield the field-based literary register that comprises various distinctive features. The literary register demonstrates the deviation in grammar, semantics, graphology, and every aspect of linguistic features. Further, it is full of figures of speech and prosodic features. All these features of deviation make literary register unique from other forms and uses of language. This implies that the readers, the writers, and the producers of the literary texts should be aware of its marked features.

References

Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2011). *A handbook of literary terms.* (6th Ind. Repr.). Cengage Learning.

Al-Jardani, K. S. S. (2012). English language curriculum evaluation in Oman. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 2* (5), 40-44. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v2n5p40

Bhattarai, G. R. (1988). *An introduction to English literature.* Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *Nursing Plus Open, 2*, 8-14. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001

Coleridge, S. T. (1817). Biographia literaria (Chapters xiv, xvii, xviii). In D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chikera (Eds.), *English critical texts* (pp. 190-224). Oxford University Press.

Cuddon, J. A. (1982). *Dictionary of literary terms and literary theory.* Penguin.

Durant, A., & Lambrou, M. (2010). *Language and media: A resource book for students* (Sp. Ind. ed.). Routledge.

Hughes, L.,Rampersand, A., & Roessel, D. E. (2007). *The collected poems of Langston Hughes.* Alfred A. Knof. https://www.worldcat.org/title/collected-poems-of-langston-hughes/oclc/810949779?referer=di&ht=edition.

Joshi, B. R., Joshi, L., & Dhungana, P. (2016). *English: Grade 9.* Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Curriculum Development Centre.

Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology.* Sage.

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching*: *A guide for teachers and trainers.* Cambridge University Press.

Lohani, S. P., & Adhikary, R. P. (Ed.) (1997). *Magic of words.* M. K. Publishers & Distributors.

Lohani, S. P.,& Devkota, P. P. (Ed.) (1998). Generations: A thematic anthology of poems. Educational Enterprises.

Lohani, S. P.,& Adhikary, R. P. (Ed.) (1998). *Mosaic readings in the genres.* Ekta Books.

Lohani, S. P., Adhikary, R. P., & Subedi, A. (Ed.) (1998). *The heritage of words.* Ekta Books. Lyons, J. (2006). *Language and linguistics: An introduction* (Repr.). Cambridge University Press.

Murdoch, D. (1993). *The siren's song*: *An anthology* of British and American verse. Orient Longman.

Neupane, N. (2000). Contemporary society and functions of literature. *Shiksha Shastra Saurav*, *8*, 84-87.

Neupane N (2002). Press and democracy: Challenges to modernization in Nepal. A. D. Fave & M. B. Pun (Eds.), *In pursuit of a sustainable modernization* (281-295). Arcipelago Edizioni.

Neupane, N., Banstola, P. R., Baral, R., Paudel, P., & Pandit, B. R. (2012). *A textbook on foundations of language and linguistics.* Prime Publication.

Richards, J. Platt, J. & Weber, H. (Eds). (1985). *Longman dictionary of applied linguistics.* Longman.

Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. Harcourt, Brace.

Shrawan, A. (2019). *The language of literature and its meaning: A comparative study of Indian and Western Aesthetics*. Cambridge Scholar Publishing

Shelley, P. B. (1821/1998). A defense of poetry. In D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chikera (Eds.),

English critical texts (pp. 225-255). Oxford University Press.

Todd, L. (1991). *An introduction to linguistics*. Longman York Press.

Traugott, E. C., & Pratt M. L. (1980). *Linguistics for students of literature.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Wordsworth, W. (1798/1998). Preface to Lyrical Ballads. In D. J. Enright & Ernst De Chikera (Eds.), *English critical texts* (pp. 162-189). Oxford University Press.