Poetic language

Convenors and contact

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Meeting Description

57th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea
August 21–24, 2024
University of Helsinki

Call for papers

Abstracts of 300 words max. (including figures and tables but not references) should be sent to both workshop organisers by November 10, 2023.

Workshop description

It is well known that cultures and speaker communities often employ language in a way that intends to signal and negotiate social relations. A pertinent example is poetic language: As a cultural technique, it may serve as an important glue within social groups (Baumann and Briggs 1990). On the formal side, poetic language involves much more than the stylistic elaboration of linguistic forms: It appeals to aesthetic evaluation that arises from coding techniques by which the choice and arrangement of linguistic material is driven not only by purely linguistic necessity, but by entropy reducing patterns of equivalence such as, e.g., rhyme, parallelism, or alliteration. This form of arrangement of linguistic material is referred to as 'poetic function' by Jakobson (1979).

It is often hypothesized that poetical use of language is an omnipresent, if not universal trait of human culture. As any cultural practice it is transmitted and spread across generations, communities, and space. As other related vocal behaviour, it is rooted in widespread rhythmic processes (Andreetta et al. 2021) which are often deployed together (Menninghaus et al. 2018) and contribute to the synchronisation of behaviour within and across individuals, e.g.,

marching in step, dancing, applauding (Kotz, Ravignani, and Fitch 2018). Becoming meaningful through the regular ordering of linguistic units, poetically used language affects cognitive processes (Blohm et al. 2021) and triggers specific aesthetic perceptions shared among social groups (Jacobs 2015). As important as poetic practices are from a social perspective and as revealing they are when it comes to the sociocultural relevance of language, their basic linguistic underpinnings, the cross-cultural diversity, and performative conditions are still not understood in a comprehensive way.

While concerning music, progress is being made in understanding its evolutionary roots (e.g. Savage, Loui, et al. 2020; Mehr, Krasnow, et al. 2020) as well as the potentially universal aspects underlying its diversity and areal patterning (Mehr, Singh, et al. 2019; Yurdum et al. 2023), the contribution of language to vocal music, the position of poetically used language on the 'musilinguistic spectrum' (Savage, Merritt, et al. 2012) as well as the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural diversity and impact of poetic language still await an encompassing investigation, including questions of vertical transmission and areal clustering. A crucial prerequisite for this endeavor consists in developing an descriptive approach that is able to capture Vedic hymns, Korean Sijo poetry, Albanian heroic songs, Nordic skaldic poems or Shakespearean sonnets alike, just to mention a few examples of the wealth of historic and living poetic traditions around the globe.

The workshop intends to address these and related questions on a broad empirical basis by bringing together researchers from various disciplines – such as philology, linguistics, anthropological linguistics, cognitive linguistics, musicology, cultural anthropology, etc. – dealing with the emergence, diversity and function of poetically used language as a deeply entrenched cultural technique. Possible topics include – but are not restricted to – the following:

- What does the design space of poetic language look like?
- How can we best capture the cross-cultural diversity of poetic language, e.g., in terms of units, patterns, and rules?
- How are poetic compositions performed and perceived? How are they embedded in cultural practices? What functions do they serve?
- How can we model the evolution and diffusion of poetic language and poetic traditions?
- How can we assess the aesthetic effects of poetic language, also as compared to non-poetic language?
- What are the cultural and biological roots of poetic language and poetic practice?

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