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Lexical Density and Sentence Complexity as Stylistic Devices in Poetry: A Comparative
Study of A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel

Abstract

Poetry, like our experiences, is intrinsically abstract and intricate with its oblique language and inventive structure. Sanctioning the fact that human experiences and emotions are inherently so complex that a plain and direct language will fail to articulate, the poet's use of a language flexible and inventive enough to capture the complexity and abstraction of those experiences becomes highly significant. Furthermore, the chief apparatus of creating meaning in a language is its lexicon. Poetry, as contrasted to prosaic expressions, acquires its distinctiveness and lucidity by the choice of unique lexical patterns by the poet. A text acquires a prosaic or a conversational tone according to the ratio between the lexical elements and the functional elements. Writers bank on the syntax and diction to build up the desired tone, temperament and background in a text as also to rouse the interest of the readers in the poetry. This paper makes a comparative study of the use of lexical density and sentence complexity as stylistic devices in the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel.

Keywords: lexeme, lexical density, syntax, diction, sentence complexity

Introduction

Poetry is an art of saying a great deal in minimum words. It is never an explicit expression. It is the form of writing that provides the readers with the pleasure of making connections, of discovering the interrelation between different components of the poem and of creating personal meanings. This pleasure can be compared to the gratification we receive while solving a mystery; just like playing a jigsaw puzzle, the reader must pull together the disjoint cues to create the meaningful picture.

The collection of all the words in a language, or the lexicon, is the chief machinery that is used to convey a certain meaning to a discourse. As Halliday observes, the artistic use of the lexicon creates the context of the abstract art of poetry and hence the creative process of a poem is defined by the context. According to Halliday:

‘Since poetic text is completely detached from the external world, it creates a "context of situation" for itself through special patterning of its own lexis’ⁱ.

This correlation between the context and lexicon is further emphasized by Cummings and Simmons. They put emphasis on the unique role of each lexical item in a text in producing meaning in poetry:

“Every lexical item contributes to produce images in poetry, either directly or in an oblique manner. Once an image has been established in a poem, all lexical items in the poem may probably be applied to it by extending their meaning metaphorically. Even those lexical items which seems apparently unrelated to the established images can be attributed the role of creating more images for the purpose of making the experience of the poem more complex. In this regard, strings of related lexis in a poem can help the reader to understand how the poem creates and co-ordinates different levels of imagery, in order to convey the sense of an experience.”ⁱⁱ

The ratio of lexical items to the total number of words in a text is known as lexical density. Lexically dense texts are generally associated with written and academic texts whereas lexically sparse texts are used for spoken or conversational language. Poets use these features to render their poems with a prosaic feel, scientific tone, or conversational touch.

The two poets under study have striking similarities as well as differences pertaining to their poetic diction and syntax. It is hard to find any aesthetic gratification after reading Ramanujan's poems as he is more an academic poet who looks at the world more impersonally. Nissim Ezekiel, on the other hand, tends to be more a popular poet who looks around the ordinary human desires and follies. The poetry of the two poets is essentially governed by these factors.

Both the poets are masters of using the lexicon in the most creative way. With their unique linguistic craftsmanship, they get the reader immerse into the contextual landscape and help him get an all-round real-time experience of the mental picture of the poets. They give their readers a momentary entrée into their internal world and life experiences through their unique assortment and positioning of the most fitting lexical items.

A poet takes a licence into the syntactical plan in order to create novelty and emotional connectivity in his poetry. It is therefore common for the poets to fiddle with the established grammatical forms and sentence structures with a view to create a desired experience for the readers. The poets under study, A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel, have the unique flair of using diverse sentence structures apposite to the demand of the context. For instance, they create a speedy conversation, wherein they do not want to speak much and depend more on the personal interpretation of the readers, by using short sentences or a thread of many short sentences. They, on the other hand, express profound ideas and complex thoughts through a series of appositives, long compound sentences, or highly parenthesized complex sentences. The level of sentence complexity is therefore a tool used by the poets to create a vivid and

lucid picture of their internal world. The present paper makes a comparative analysis of the poetic technique of A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel, specifically, their use of sentence complexity and lexical density as stylistic devices. Text references taken for this study are two poems of each poet: *Ecology* and *Looking for a Cousin on a Swing* by A. K. Ramanujan and *Night of Scorpion* and *The Hill* by Nissim Ezekiel.

Lexical Density as Stylistic Device

The ratio between the lexical elements (the lexicons that are the prime carriers of meaning like the nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and the functional elements (the lexicon that carry little or no meaning like articles, conjunctions, auxiliaries, prepositions, pronouns, some adverbs, determiners, and interjections) is referred to as lexical density. Lexical density is associated with the tone of a discourse. Depending upon the percentage of the lexical items in a text, it is identified as written, academic, scientific or spoken, everyday, conversational text. As Halliday remarks:

“Written language tends to be lexically dense, but grammatically simple; spoken language tends to be grammatically intricate, but lexically sparse.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Lexicalization or the process of finding appropriate words for encoding the poet's complex experiences is an essential part of a poet's creative endeavour. Many poets have written poems celebrating their continual conflict with eluding words to conceptualise their enigmatic experiences of life. A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel use lexical density as an efficient stylistic device. They use lexically dense text in those poems where they want to express those experiences that create a mental labyrinth to the poets and when the poets are sarcastic or cynical about that experience. Their poems are lexically sparse when the idea to be communicated is so profound that words cannot express; where the poets leave it to the

reader to read between the lines and decipher the unspoken message. In other words the impersonal messages are expressed in lexically thin poems.

Ramanujan's *Ecology* is an ultimate example of his lexically dense, academic or prosaic writing style. This 156 words long poem is a complex representation of the poet's exasperation over the complicated and tangled familial ethos and the conflict between tradition and modernity. It is written in high lexical density to suit the theme.

The poem brings into picture the Indian ethos and spiritual values associated to nature. It portrays a typical Indian mother who would undergo all pains but not allow the cutting down of a flowering tree despite the fact that its pollen causes her lasting migraine every season. The symbol of fertility, a flowering tree holds high reverence in Indian culture. Furthermore, the Champak trees, being as old as the mother and planted, according to her, by some divine intervention, hold high sentimental value for her.

The density of the nouns in the poem is the highest. The second highest density is of the adjectives which is nearly 18% of the total text. The reader gets a dense volley of images that are complexly interwoven, and thus feels the sense of being at the scene and empathises with the poet's frustration. The complex deep structure having large number of complex subordinate clauses is befitting the relational complexity and several layers of socio-cultural-ethical reasons associated to mother's rage at cutting down a flowering tree.

The 44 nouns make the 28.2% of the words. These nouns and adjectives are clustered around familial relations, people, nature, places, sentiments, season and gods.

Noun Class	People	Nature	Places	Sentiments	Season	Others
Nouns	Mother ³	Champak	Home	Rage	Day	Ears, Eyes
	Grandchildren	Trees ²	Door	Migraine ²	Rain	Scales, Smells,
	Daughters ³	Flowers ²	House	Temper	Years	Bone, Voices

		Pollen ²	Walls Creeks	Gods Dower	Season ² Fog Wind	Silver, Knickers Droppings Cold Pack
Total	03	05	05	05	06	12

Noun Classes in '*Ecology*'

The lexical elements comprise 44 nouns, 28 adjectives, 14 verbs and 11 adverbs summing up to 97 words out of the total 156. The lexical density thus calculated is 62%. When we discount the repeated lexemes and consider the range of unique words, this density reaches 78.5%. Ramanujan employs this style of high lexical density to make a vivid portrayal of his single flash of memory, each lexical element adding colour to the complete mental picture.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	44	28.2	36
Adjective	28	17.9	26
Verb	14	9.0	14
Adverb	11	7.1	8
Preposition	11	7.1	7
Auxiliary Verb	7	4.5	3
Pronoun	15	9.6	7
Conjunction	16	10.3	4
Articles/Determiners	10	6.4	2
Total	156	100.0	107

Ratio of Lexical and Functional Elements in Ramanujan's '*Ecology*'

The lexical items constitute more than three quarters of the total words. These items make a total of 84 out of 107 lexical types (Nouns, Adjectives, Verbs and Adverbs).

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	44	28.2	36
Adjective	28	17.9	26
Verb	14	9.0	14
Adverb	11	7.1	8
Total	97	62.2	84
Lexical Density: $97/156 = 62.2\%$			
Lexical Range Density: $84/107 = 78.5\%$			

Lexical Density in Ramanujan's 'Ecology'

Through his poetry Ezekiel attempts to depict the lives of the extremes in the society – the poor, uneducated, underprivileged lower strata as well as the elite, educated rational upper class. He does not hesitate to mock both. *The Night of the Scorpion* deals with similar themes – Indian ethos, mother, and tradition versus modernity. Ezekiel presents his contempt for the superstitions prevailing in Indian villages by narrating an incident when his mother was bitten by a scorpion. Villagers, as commonly seen in India, trust on rites and incantations to cure her out of the poison and associate the pain to sin and redemption. Ezekiel seems to have employed more lexical terms over the functional elements as he attempts to bring in a photographic effect in the image that he wants to create.

The density of the nouns in Ezekiel's *The Night of the Scorpion*, like Ramanujan's *Ecology*, is the highest. The 63 noun types (non-repeated) make up the 38.6% of the lexical range. The second highest density is of the verbs which is approximately 20% of the total text. These nouns are clustered around people, time, sentiments, insects and things. The reader is able to relate to the poet's frustration over the superstitious villagers and blindly followed customs because of the apt lexicalization employed by the poet. The words used for treatment of the

scorpion's poison are all related to superstitious beliefs: Sins, Sufferings, Misfortune, Pain, Desire, Spirit, Ambition, Peace, Understanding, Curse, Rites, Blessing, Incantation and God.

Noun Class	People	Time	Sentiments	Insects	Things
Nouns	Mother ⁶ Father Peasants Neighbours Children Man	Night Rain ³ Hours ²	Sins, Sufferings Misfortune, Pain, Desire, Spirit, Ambition, Peace Understanding, Curse, Rites, Blessing, God ³ Incantation	Scorpion ⁴ Poison ⁴ Swarms, Flies, Insects, Movement Evil, Sting Flash, Tail	Sack, Rice, Room, Floor, Centre, Face, Candles ² , Lanterns ² , Shadows, Walls, Tongues, Blood, Birth ² , World, Sum ² , Flesh, Mat, Powder, Mixture, Toe, Herb, Hybrid, Paraffin, Match, Flame,
Total	06	03	14	10	25

Noun Classes in '*Night of the Scorpion*'

A remarkable similarity can be seen between the lexical pattern of this poem and Ramanujan's *Ecology*. The poem comprises 290 words in all out of which there are 162 lexical elements (nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs) and only 128 functional elements.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	79	27.2	63
Adjective	28	9.7	24
Verb	43	14.8	31
Adverb	12	4.1	11
Preposition	29	10.0	12
Auxiliary Verb	9	3.1	4

Pronoun	40	13.8	13
Conjunction	21	7.2	2
Articles/Determiners	29	10.0	3
Total	290	100.0	163

Ratio of Lexical and Functional Elements in Ezekiel's *'The Night of the Scorpion'*

The lexical density thus calculated is 55.9%. When we discount the repeated lexemes and consider the range of unique words, this density reaches 78.2%. This lexical richness also justifies Ezekiel's exceptional art of imagery. After nouns, the highest density of verbs is suggestive of the agitation and reactions of people as well as the associated actions of the scorpion. His sarcastic tone is evident through the choice of verbs.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	79	27.2	63
Adjective	28	9.7	24
Verb	43	14.8	31
Adverb	12	4.1	11
Total	162	55.9	129
Lexical Density: $162/290 = 55.9\%$			
Lexical Range Density: $129/156 = 78.2\%$			

Lexical Density in Ezekiel's *'The Night of the Scorpion'*

Contrary to the lexically dense poems when the poets try to present ideas in a highly sarcastic impersonal tone, leaving it to the readers to construct the meaning, there are poems where there are more philosophical and personal comments on the human psyche. These poems are composed in comparatively sparse lexical arrangement. The tone is conversational and the structure is simple in these poems.

Ramanujan's *'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing'* is a fine example of lexically sparse poems.

The table showing the noun classes used in the poem shows the contrast between Ramanujan's two poems taken for study. Out of the total 76 types of words (lexical+functional) there are only 11 types of nouns summing up to only 11.8% of the words. This personal expression of the poet is an example of his laconic style.

The poem revolves around two small cousins of opposite sex, who would sit together on a swing and sway rapidly, and would feel the innocent physical touch. They would not feel any hesitation while climbing a fig tree with dense foliage, and there again they would be innocent about the touch. However, when the girl grows up and lives in a city, she is unable to be innocent about the same touch even in her memories.

The noun classes are swing, tree, places, relation, and feelings:

Noun Class	Relation	Tree & Parts	Swing	Places	Feelings
Nouns	Cousin	Tree ² Leaves ² Fig ² Crotch	Swing ² Lunge	Village Cities Suburbs	Feelings Innocent ²
Total	01	04	02	03	02

Noun Classes in '*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*'

Comprising 111 words written across 23 lines, *Looking for a Cousin on a Swing* presents one of the best examples of lexically sparse poems of Ramanujan. The Ratio between the lexical and functional elements is 49: 62 which shows that the functional elements outnumber the lexical elements. Such a ratio is generally associated with informal personal dialogues and conversational language.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	18	16.2	11

Adjective	14	12.6	10
Verb	9	8.1	7
Adverb	8	7.2	6
Preposition	13	11.7	11
Auxiliary Verb	4	3.6	4
Pronoun	18	16.2	15
Conjunction	17	15.3	11
Articles/Determiners	10	9.0	3
Total	111	100.0	76

Ratio of Lexical and Functional Elements in 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing'

There are only 49 lexical elements against 11 words of the poem including the repetition of some representative lexemes like 'tree' 'figs', 'swing' and 'innocence'. The lexical density thus calculated (49/111) is 44.1%. If the repeated lexemes are excluded, the text is rendered even sparse lexically. The total number of non-repeated lexical elements is 32 out of 76 which sums up to only 42.1%.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	18	16.2	9
Adjective	14	12.6	10
Verb	9	8.1	7
Adverb	8	7.2	6
Total	49	44.1	32

Lexical Density: $49/111 = 44.1\%$ Lexical Range Density: $32/76 = 42.1\%$

Lexical Density in 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing'

Ezekiel's most of the poems are in conversational style except a few highly critical poems where a rich and diverse vocabulary as well as impersonal attitude is required. One of the representative poems written in a lexically sparse style is *The Hill*. This poem, like most of the poems of Ezekiel is a criticism of urban life where man is disconnected from nature. The poet entreats the city people to look at the hill not as a distant image but as a place to sport around and find their ambition as well as adventurous spirit at. The ratio of lexical and functional words is 88: 201.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	34	16.9	22
Adjective	11	5.5	10
Verb	26	12.9	19
Adverb	17	8.5	9
Preposition	27	13.4	11
Auxiliary Verb	22	10.9	18
Pronoun	36	17.9	21
Conjunction	15	7.5	11
Article/ Determiner	13	6.5	4
Total	201	100.0	125

Ratio of Lexical and Functional Elements in Ezekiel's '*The Hill*'

Here, in contrast to the earlier cited poem *The Night of the Scorpion*, the poet resorts to an oblique manner of expression. He uses a rather positive tone for which he need not be serious or formal. Therefore the expression is simple and laconic. The percentage of the lexical elements thus calculated is 43.8% and the density of the lexical range (only non-repeated lexemes) is 48% which is in high contrast to the earlier cited poem *The Night of the Scorpion*.

Part of Speech	Count	Density	Range
Noun	34	16.9	22
Adjective	11	5.5	10
Verb	26	12.9	19
Adverb	17	8.5	9
Total	88	43.8	60
Lexical Density: $88/201 = 43.8\%$			
Lexical Range Density: $60/125 = 48\%$			

Lexical Density in Ezekiel's *'The Hill'*

A. K. Ramanujan is generally referred to as an academic poet who was a linguist also.

His poems, like all academic and serious writings, are lexically dense most of the time. On the contrary, Ezekiel is a conversational poet who generally prefers everyday spoken language which is lexically sparse and functionally rich. However in the corpus of their poetry, there are variations in their lexical density which is a result of poetic context and poet's attitude towards it.

Sentence Complexity as Stylistic Device

Syntax and diction are closely linked aspects of language. When a poet adopts a complex diction he would automatically need to take up a complex syntactic structure and vice-versa. Generally a poet adopts long and complex sentences when he aims at examining an idea more scrupulously, creating more vivacious images, and making the readers feel an anxiety that he is obsessed with. Moreover, the length of the sentences also ascertains the feel of poetry. While a nostalgic moment can be best captured through a long, complex and relaxed structure, the feeling of exigency, stress and danger can be best portrayed in short and snappy sentences. The choice of sentence complexity also depends on the basic intentionality of the

poet. A poem written in a string of very short or minor sentences accelerates the reading pace thus exciting the reader while compound or complex sentences would render the poem more passionate and reflective.

Ramanujan's extraordinary poetic craft is exemplified in varying length and structures of his poems from a length of 14 words to over 300 words. He is a master of creating the syntax suitable to the poetic context.

The poem 'Ecology' is written through a highly parenthesized structure which forms a very long single, compound sentence comprising four complex sentence fragments yoked with three conjunctions 'for', 'and' and 'but'. Each constituting complex sentence fragment comprises a main clause connected to two or more subordinate clauses. This 156 words long poem has its central idea in just 39 words; "I would come home in a rage, for our three Red Champak trees had burst into flower and had given mother her first blinding migraine of the season but Mother would not let us cut down a flowering tree"

The remaining clauses are made just to further describe the pollen, the fragrance, the mother and the tree so as to bring out a perfect and vivid imagery.

[I would come home in a rage, (The day after the first rain, for years)] for [(I could see from a mile away) our three Red Champak trees (had done it again,) had burst into flower (with their street-long heavy-hung yellow pollen fog of a fragrance (no wind could sift, no door could shut out from our black- pillared house (whose walls had ears and eyes, scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly visiting voices, and were porous like us)))] , and [had given mother her first blinding migraine of the season] but [Mother (flashing her temper like her mother's twisted silver, grandchildren's knickers wet as the cold pack on her head) would not let us cut down a flowering tree (almost as old as her,) (seeded, she said, by a passing bird's providential droppings) (to give her gods and her daughters and daughters' daughters basketfuls of annual flower) (and for one line of cousins a dower of migraines in season.)]^{iv}

Ramanujan seems to have resorted to such a complex structure because intricacy of the domestic dealings that he was trying to portray was so intricate that it was not possible for him to articulate the annoyance caused by the mother's beliefs and her blind faith through simple sentences. He found a compound structure with elaborate internal elements more suitable for the expression.

Looking for a Cousin on a Swing is comparatively a simpler structure with two compound sentences formed with internal complex structures. These two sentences depict the two phases of the girl's life: one when she was very small and innocent about the physical touch and the other when she has grown up and cannot be innocent about it anymore. In some of his poems like 'A Wobbly Top', Breaded Fish and Still Life, Ramanujan uses very small simple sentences as the ideas are so personal that he is reticent to express them openly. In the words of Sirish V. Chindhade:

"Consequently, when it comes to communicate and comment as a poet he is on his guard, most terse, laconic, self-effacing, most unwilling to speak, lest, he is afraid, he should divulge a secret, break a confidence and thus invite public opprobrium at himself and his people. So he would rather half speak and half suppress; and so his poetry hides more than it reveals."^v

Ezekiel's *The Night of the Scorpion*^{vi} is composed in eight stanzas varying between three to eighteen lines each, summing up to 47 lines. Ezekiel chooses a free verse and simple sentences adding to the gravity and noxious nature of the theme and the incident. There are 19 small and simple sentences that form the poem unambiguous. The selection of words is also very simple, everyday, common-man's vocabulary:

"My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spend my children."

Conclusion

The poetic worlds of the poets under study, A. K. Ramanujan and Nissim Ezekiel, have fundamental differences. While Ramanujan adopts an intellectual viewpoint to articulate the evolution of his poetic self, Nissim Ezekiel is governed by a common man's philosophy and view of life. Ramanujan's poetic cosmos revolves around his memories whereas Ezekiel looks more closely at the current socio-cultural-political scenario. The former is a more impersonal and reticent writer who would not display his emotions easily, thus rendering his poems less said and more unsaid, to be understood by the readers according to their personal outlook and experiences while the latter is an obviously subjective and autobiographical writer who frequently and easily displays his emotions

Most of Ramanujan's poems are written in oblique and obscure form using lexically dense and complex sentences. On the contrary Ezekiel believes in simplicity of expression in poetry. According to him even the most enigmatic complexities of life can be powerfully articulated in simple structures.

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