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## The emotional and aesthetic powers of parallelistic diction

Winfried Menninghaus<sup>a,\*</sup>, Valentin Wagner<sup>a</sup>, Eugen Wassiliwizky<sup>a</sup>,  
Thomas Jacobsen<sup>b</sup>, Christine A. Knoop<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Language and Literature, Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Grüneburgweg 14, 60322 Frankfurt am Main, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Experimental Psychology Unit, Helmut Schmidt University, University of the Federal Armed Forces, Holstenhofweg 85, 22043 Hamburg, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

Parallelistic features of poetic and rhetorical language use comprise a great variety of linguistically optional patterns of phonological, prosodic, syntactic, and semantic recurrence. Going beyond studies on cognitive facilitation effects of individual parallelistic features (most notably rhyme, alliteration, and meter), the present study shows that the joint employment of multiple such features in 40 sad and joyful poems intensifies all emotional response dimensions (joy, sadness, being moved, intensity, and positive affect) and all aesthetic appreciation dimensions (beauty, liking, and melodiousness) that we measured. Given that parallelistic diction is also used, to different degrees, in ritual language, commercial ads, political slogans, and everyday conversations, the implications of these findings are potentially far-reaching.

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### 1. Parallelistic diction: definition and known functions

Roman Jakobson (1960) programmatically suggested that rhetorical and poetic language use implements multiple linguistically optional ‘parallelisms’ at all levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) of an utterance or text. For instance, Shakespeare’s verse “All days are nights to see till I see thee” not only features ongoing iambic meter (and rhyme with a subsequent verse), but also consistent morphological parallelism (all words are monosyllabic), repetition of entire words (see-see), homoioteleuta (i.e., words with equal/identical endings: see-see-thee), alliteration (to-till), and (paradoxical) semantic parallelism, or *coincidentia oppositorum* (all days are nights).

Importantly, linguistic structures of this type are by no means limited to poetry. Parallelistic diction has also been shown to be employed routinely in infant-directed speech (Dissanayake, 2000; Falk, 2004; Trehub, 2000; Trehub, Schellenberg, & Kamenetsky, 1999; Unyk, Trehub, Trainor, & Schellenberg, 1992), ritual language (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Bauman, 1975; Fox, 2006; Severi, 2002), proverbs (Menninghaus, Bohrn et al., 2015), non-ritual songs, slogans, ads (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996), as well as ordinary language (Bohn, Knaus, Wiese, & Domahs, 2013; Kentner, 2012, 2015; Rothermich, Schmidt-Kassow, Schwartz, & Kotz, 2010; Wiese & Speyer, 2015).

In its original meaning, the term ‘parallelism’ was, and partly still is, specifically used to designate entire sentences or phrases that feature syntactically, morphologically and mostly also semantically parallel members. The repetitive sentence patterns in several parts of the Old Testament are key examples of parallelism that received much attention in 18th-century

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [w.m@aesthetics.mpg.de](mailto:w.m@aesthetics.mpg.de) (W. Menninghaus).

literary criticism (Czoik & Lauer, 2003; Lowth, 1787; for a survey, see Menninghaus, 1987). However, already in this context, the term came to be used far beyond full-sentence parallelisms, or, as classical rhetoric called these structures, 'isokola' (cf. Lausberg, 1998; § 719–754). Following this lead, Jakobson extended the concept so as to comprise essentially *all features of linguistically non-mandatory recurrence* across all levels of language processing. In this understanding, "ongoing parallelism" can be distinctive of texts even in the absence of full-blown parallelistic phrase structures. Regardless of whether it is alliteration, anaphora, assonance, consonance, epistrophe, meter, repetition, rhyme, or any of the numerous other parallelistic features which have not been assigned a special technical term, their shared linguistic property is always similarity-driven self-reference. In their entirety, such features superimpose a dense web of perceptually salient patterns of recurrence on sentences, stanzas/paragraphs, and entire texts (cf. Fabb, 2015). The present study uses the concept of parallelistic diction only in this general modern meaning in which it designates not just particular parallelistic figures and tropes, but an entire factor of poetic diction.

Recent linguistic research on parallelistic structures makes reference neither to Jakobson nor to the tradition in poetics. It is largely about syntactic priming regarding verb or noun phrases in coordinated ordinary sentences such as "The tall gangster hit John and the short thug [hit] Sam" (Knoeferle & Crocker, 2009; see also Frazier, Taft, Roeper, Clifton, & Ehrlich, 1984; Poirier, Walenski, Shapiro, 2012). In such contexts, individual parallelistic structures were found to facilitate cognitive processing as measured by lower reading times. Importantly, studies of this type show preferences for parallelistic patterns already in ordinary language use, i.e. far below a threshold of being perceived as stylistically conspicuous, let alone "poetic". Moreover, sensitivity to and priming through repetition is a general and highly important mechanism of human perception and learning (Pickering & Ferreira, 2008). Given these premises and that the human arts in general can be understood as making special, hypertrophied uses of general communicative capabilities (Dissanayake, 1988; Fabb, 2010), we surmise that parallelistic diction as a characteristic of rhetorical and poetic language use relies on general preferences in language use, while pushing them to extraordinary levels.

Recent studies on some key features of poetic parallelism – specifically, alliteration, meter and rhyme – revealed enhancing effects on memory (Hanauer, 1996, 1998; Lea, Rapp, Elfenbein, Mitchel, & Romine, 2008; Tillmann & Dowling, 2007), on overall intensity of processing (Obermeier et al., 2013), on truth attribution (McGlone & Tofghbakhsh, 2000), on beauty and succinctness (*praegnantz*) ratings as well as on humor and power of persuasion ratings (Menninghaus, Bohrn, Altmann, Lubrich, & Jacobs, 2014; Menninghaus, Bohrn et al., 2015). An EEG-study on meter and rhyme (Obermeier et al., 2016) showed that the presence of meter, in part also of rhyme, facilitates processing as reflected in the N 400 and P 600 components. Since this applied across a great variety of initial stanzas of poems – and hence regardless of substantial differences in content, style, and time of origin – the finding suggests that parallelistic features of diction may in general enhance ease of processing (McGlone & Tofghbakhsh, 2000; Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). Studies that measured reading times reported shorter reading times for more parallelistic variants of verses, thus providing another 'objective' indication for fluency-enhancing effects of parallelism (Lea et al., 2008; Menninghaus, Bohrn et al., 2015).

## 2. Aim and hypotheses of the present study

The primary aim of the present study is to introduce a variable into the study of poetic parallelism that has gone largely untreated in studies informed by the strongly cognitively oriented ease-of-processing hypothesis: namely, the *emotional effects* of parallelistic patterning and the correlation of these effects with aesthetic appreciation.

### 2.1. Emotional effects: the case of being (emotionally) moved by poetry

Guided by assumptions widely held in classical theories of poetic and rhetorical diction (Lausberg, 1998; Quintilian, 1920), we hypothesized that parallelistic patterns of diction should increase the levels of affective and emotional responses that are targeted by a given text/speech (Hypothesis 1). Specifically, we investigated feelings of being (emotionally) moved. Moving an audience has been a well-established goal of verbal art ever since the ancient rhetoric and poetics of *movere* (Cicero, 1962; Quintilian, 1920). Contemporary ads for films ('a deeply moving film') and books continue to use the term. Recent research (Menninghaus, Wagner et al., 2015) has shown that "being moved" is a full-blown discrete emotion featuring cognitive, physiological, expressive, subjective feeling and motivational components (cf. Koelsch et al., 2015; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994; Russell, 2003; Scherer, 2005); it also showed that episodes of being moved are often of a mixed affective nature.

Two prototypes account for a large share of emotional responses readily labeled as emotionally moving (Kuehnast, Wagner, Wassiliwizky, Jacobsen, & Menninghaus, 2014; Menninghaus, Wagner et al., 2015; Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Tokaji, 2003; Wassiliwizky, Wagner, Jacobsen, & Menninghaus, 2015). The first is the *sadly moving* prototype in which experiences of loss (separation, death) or acts of sacrifice are blended with a positive appreciation of the value and the memory of a beloved one and/or with feelings of empathy on the part of bystanders and onlookers. The second prototype is of a *joyfully moving* nature. Eliciting events include nostalgic memories as well as births, marriages, reunions, and reconciliations. In these cases, the positive feelings are blended with some (often fairly discrete) negative counterparts, such as an awareness that a happy reunion was preceded by a painful period of separation or that the happy times of childhood are forever gone. Thus, the antithetical variants of being moved allow to test whether parallelistic patterning drives both sad and joyful feelings to higher levels.

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