Stylistics and linguistic variation in poetry [1]

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1 Introduction

In this paper I focus on the use of linguistic variation in poetry, and demonstrate the usefulness of stylistic analysis in investigating the nature and potential effects of such variation in a particular poem. The text I analyse in detail is "Poet for Our Times" by Carol Ann Duffy, which was first published in 1990. In the rest of this section I provide a brief overview of the stylistics literature on style variation in poetry. I then go on to introduce Duffy's poem and conduct a systematic linguistic analysis. My aims are (i) to show how the poem conveys the impression of different language varieties, and (ii) to explain some of the potential effects of the text as a whole.

My choice of a contemporary poem for an investigation of stylistic variation is not surprising, given that the 20th century saw a considerable rise in the poetic use of a range of language varieties not traditionally associated with poetry, including colloquial, conversational language. This tendency often goes hand-in-hand with the adoption of imaginary poetic voices, clearly separate from that of the author (Leech 1969: 49; Jeffries 1993: 31-2). The canon of English poetry does of course include many earlier poems featuring fictional voices and stylistic contrasts (such as Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"), as well as a number of artistic movements whose programme advocated a move towards "everyday language," as was the case with the Romantics. However, the influence of the notion of poetic diction and the importance of the lyric poem in the literary tradition from the Renaissance onwards, contributed to a situation where pre-20th century English poetry was typically characterised by formal, elevated and often archaic language.

It is only against this backdrop that one can begin to explain the view of poetry held by Mikhail Bakhtin, who is famously associated with the notion of heteroglossia - the internal stratification of language into many different (social) varieties. Bakhtin saw the artistic use of heteroglossia as the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre, and emphasised the necessity for stylistics to focus on heteroglossia and develop the tools to account for it (Bakhtin 1984). However, he also claimed that, in contrast to the novel, poetry is mostly detached from the living heterogeneity of language, and has no space for any varieties other than the single, homogeneous voice of the poet him/herself.

> The language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style. (Bakhtin 1981: 286)

Such claim can be partly explained by Bakhtin's own agenda, which was to identify the linguistic essence and uniqueness of the novel as opposed to other literary genres, and poetry in particular. But his views also highlight how, in the early 20th century, it was still possible for a scholar with an exceptionally wide knowledge of European literature, including English literature, to relegate the use of stylistic variation in poetry to marginal, "low" sub-genres, such as satirical and comic poetry (Bakhtin 1981: 287).

Contemporary Anglo-American stylistics has moved on since then. It has acquired the tools for investigating the linguistic heterogeneity of texts that Bakhtin was concerned with, and it has applied them to the analysis of a wide range of texts, including poetic texts.

Writing in the early days of the stylistic analysis of English literature, Leech (1969) places linguistic variation in poetry within an analytical framework based on the Formalist notion of deviation. He adopts explicit linguistic definitions of the concepts of dialect (variation according to user) and register (variation according to use), and discusses the poetic use (and mixing) of prototypically non-literary varieties in terms of the notions of "dialectal deviation" and "deviation of register" (Leech 1969: 8-12, 49). The latter includes "register borrowing," i.e. the use of non-poetic registers in poetry (as in Larkin's "Toads"), and "register mixing" i.e. the use of a range of different registers in a single text (as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*). Leech also distinguishes between "strict" and "liberal" uses of language, which differ in the extent to which they require close conformity to particular linguistic conventions, and in the amount of space they allow for originality and creativity. While legal documents, for example, are a prototypically strict genre, contemporary literature, and poetry in particular, fall at the liberal end of the scale. Leech emphasizes that, contrary to the situation in earlier historical periods, in the 20th century, "there is no such thing as a literary register, a code of accepted usage, in literature" (Leech 1969: 12).

More than thirty years on, it is particularly obvious how Leech's observation sits uncomfortably alongside notions such as deviation of register, at least as far as post-19th century poetry is concerned: if there is no such thing as a literary register, one may object, how can the choice of one register over another be described as deviant? In fact, as I will argue in the analysis of Duffy's poem, a distinction between typically poetic and typically non-poetic linguistic features and conventions is still necessary to account for the effects of even the most contemporary of poems. On the other hand, the notion of deviation as such is no longer appropriate for describing the phenomenon of register borrowing and mixing in literary texts. Short (1996) uses a similar framework to Leech in discussing the use of deviation in literature at different linguistic levels, but treats style variation separately. Carter and Nash (1990), on the other hand, take to its natural conclusion Leech's point about the lack of a typically literary register in the 20th century, and view the ability to adopt *any* linguistic register as one of the defining characteristics of literariness. They name this property "re-registration." Although they recognize that some linguistic and textual features are more literary than others, they stress that:

> [t]he notion of re-registration means that no single word or stylistic feature or register will be barred from admission to a literary context. [. . .] Re-registration recognizes that the full unrestricted resources of the language are open to exploitation for literary ends. (Carter and Nash 1990: 38-9)

While these developments highlight the anachronism of Bakhtin's distinction between poetry and novelistic prose, Bakhtin's work has had a significant influence on the stylistics of English literature subsequent to the publication of his work in the West (e.g. Fowler 1989, Geyer-Ryan 1988, Leith and Myerson 1989, Wales 1988). Wales (1988) and Geyer-Ryan (1988), in particular, demonstrate the relevance of Bakhtin's definition of heteroglossia to the analysis of poetry, with examples take from Philip Larkin, Bertolt Brecht and Tony Harrison (see also Semino 1995, 1997: 242-3, and Trengove 1989). Wales (1988) and Fowler (1989) also point out the way in which recent developments in linguistics can be used to remedy Bakhtin's abstraction and vagueness in the description of linguistic phenomena.

A concern with the investigation and significance of language variation within and across texts is currently central to many quite different areas of linguistics, including Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992) and Corpus Linguistics (e.g. Biber 1988).

2. The poem

Carol Ann Duffy was born in Scotland in 1955, but has lived in England for most of her life. She is well known for her use of the dramatic monologue, and for the inclusion, and mixing, of a range of "everyday" linguistic varieties in her poems (see Rees-Jones 1999, Kinnahan 2000). Both tendencies are brought to the fore in "Poet for Our Times," which appeared in her 1990 collection, *The Other Country*. The poem also exemplifies Duffy's preoccupation with a range of social and political issues in 1980s Britain, and particularly the rise in nationalist sentiments during Margaret Thatcher's years as Prime Minister.

Poet for Our Times

I write the headlines for a Daily Paper.
It's just a knack one's born with all-right-Squire.
You do not have to be an educator,
Just bang the words down like they're screaming *Fire!*
5   CECIL-KEAYS ROW SHOCK TELLS EYETIE WAITER.
ENGLAND FAN CALLS WHINGEING FROG A LIAR.

Cheers. Thing is, you've got to grab attention
With just one phrase as punters rush on by.
I've made mistakes too numerous to mention,
10   So now we print the buggers inches high.
TOP MP PANTIE ROMP INCREASES TENSION.
RENT BOY: ROCK STAR PAID ME WELL TO LIE.

I like to think that I'm a sort of poet
For our times. My shout. Know what I mean?
15   I've got a special talent and I show it
In punchy haikus featuring the Queen.
DIPLOMAT IN BED WITH SERBO-CROAT.
EASTENDERS' BONKING SHOCK IS WELL-OBSCENE.

Of course, these days, there's not the sense of panic
20   you got a few years back. What with the box
et cet. I wish I'd been around when the Titanic
sank. To headline that, mate, would have been the tops.
SEE PAGE 3 TODAY GENTS THEY'RE GIGANTIC.
KINNOCK-BASHER MAGGIE PULLS OUT STOPS.

25   And, yes, I have a dream – make that a scotch, ta –
That kids will know my headlines off by heart.
IMMIGRANTS FLOOD IN CLAIMS HEATHROW WATCHER.
GREEN PARTY WOMAN IS A NIGHTCLUB TART.
The poems of the decade . . . *Stuff'em! Gotcha!*
The instant tits and bottom line of art.

The poem is divided into five six-line stanzas. The first four lines of stanzas one to four (and the first two lines of the final stanza) feature the voice of a newspaper-headline writer, who talks about his work and spells out his ambition that his headlines will be regarded as poetry "for our times" (I will explain below why I treat the speaker as male). These sections of the poem are written in an informal, highly colloquial register, which includes a number of expressions suggesting that the speaker is discussing his artistic aspirations while having a drink in a pub. The last two lines of stanzas one to four (and the middle two lines of the final stanza) contain what appears to be a newspaper headline each, or, more precisely, the kind of headline typically associated with the British tabloid press. The last two lines of the poem are harder to place: on my first reading of the text, I attributed them to the main speaker in the poem. However, subsequent readings suggested that they might belong to a different voice, who is commenting ironically on the artistic pretensions of the main speaker.

I will begin the analysis by giving a detailed linguistic account of the two main language varieties used in the poem: the colloquial register of the main speaker (section 3) and the newspaper-headline register (section 4). I will discuss the last two lines of the poem separately in section 5. In section 6 I will focus on the typically poetic characteristics of the text, and highlight the tension between the two non-literary registers present in the poem and the "poetic frame" in which they are cast. I will then take a broader view of the use of stylistic variation and re-registration in the poem, particularly in order to explain their potential effects. In section 7, I discuss Duffy's use of two non-literary registers in a poem in the light of Halliday's framework for the study of context-dependent language variation (in Halliday and Hasan 1989). Here my aim will be to account for the way in which the mix of registers in the poem can be perceived as part of a contemporary trend, but also as original and innovative in its own right. In section 8 I will refer to some aspects of Bakhtin's discussion of the artistic use of heteroglossia in order to discuss what is, in my view, the main issue in the interpretation of the poem, namely the view it conveys of the artistic pretensions of the main speaker.

3. The colloquial register of the main speaker

As I mentioned earlier, the first four lines of the first four stanzas of the poem, and the first two lines of the last stanza, dramatize the voice of a speaker who introduces himself with the words "I write the headlines for a Daily Paper." This speaker, whom I refer to as "the main speaker" in the poem, claims for his work the status of contemporary poetry in an informal, conversational, highly colloquial register, which also signals that he is interacting with one or more drinking companions in a pub. In this section I will focus on the linguistic devices that are used to create the impression of a particular conversational voice in a particular setting.

The language of the main speaker contains a number of features which are typically associated with informal spoken interaction. There are eight instances of contraction, such as "one's born with" in line 2 and "there's not" in line 19, and two instances of ellipsis: "Thing is" in line 7, where the definite determiner "the" is missed out, and "Know what I mean?" in line 14, where the subject and operator ("do you") are ellipted. These phenomena are characteristic of informal speech, where they exploit the common ground and intimacy shared by interactants and have the function of saving speakers' effort in the production of utterances (see Biber *et al.* 1999: 1048; Hughes 1996: 20-1).

A number of further interactive features are in evidence, including first- and second-person pronouns, vocatives, formulaic interactive expressions and

conversational discourse markers. The speaker's almost exclusive focus on himself is suggested by the fact that the first person pronoun "I" occurs ten times, and the corresponding possessive determiner "my" is used once (line 14). There are also two instances of the first person plural pronouns. In line 10, "we" is used in its exclusive sense (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 341), presumably to refer to people who, like the speaker, work for the tabloid press industry or for his particular newspaper. In line 14 there is a generic use of "our" in "our times," where the possessive determiner refers generally to people living in the contemporary world (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 353-4). Similarly, the three occurrences of "you" (line 3, 7, and 20), are all examples of the generic use of the second person pronoun, referring to people in general. Such a use of "you," however, is usually claimed to retain some of the flavour of interactivity and addressee involvement of specific uses of second person pronouns, and therefore contributes to the conversational feel of the speaker's discourse (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 354).

Although there are no occurrences of the specific use of "you" to refer to the addressee, the main speaker's language contains many expressions that suggest the presence and involvement of at least one specific interlocutor. In line 14, as I mentioned earlier, the pronoun "you" is elliptent from the expression "Know what I mean?," which can be described as a "response elicitor" typical of interactive speech (Biber *et al.* 1999: 1089). In addition, the main speaker uses the vocatives "mate" (line 22), and "Squire" (in "all-right-Squire," line 2), which are typically associated with informal communication between males from similar social groups. There are also several expressions which can be described as part of the formulae used by drinking companions in British pubs: "Cheers" (line 7) is conventionally uttered as one takes the first sip of a new drink, and is often directed to the person who has bought the drink; "My shout" (line 14) expresses the speaker's intention to pay for the next round of drink, and "make that a scotch, ta" (line 25) is a response to someone else's offer to buy a drink, where "ta" is an informal variant of "thank you."

The opening lines of stanzas two, four and five contain expressions that can be classified as conversational discourse markers: "Thing is" (line 7), "Of course," (line 19), and "And, yes," (line 25). Discourse markers have been defined as

> inserts which tend to occur at the beginning of a turn or utterance, and to combine two roles: (a) to signal a transition in the evolving progress of the conversation, and (b) to signal an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer, and message. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 1086)

As such, they play an important role in highlighting the coherence of the discourse (see Schiffrin 1987: 49). In Duffy's poem, they could also be seen as traces of the speaker's reaction to responses from his interlocutor/s, whose voices are not represented in the text.

In addition to all these features which are typical of interactive speech, the main speaker's discourse is characterised by an abundance of colloquial expressions: "just a knack" (line 2), "Just bang the words down" (line 4), "grab attention" (line 7), "as punters rush on by" (line 8), "the buggers" (line 10), "you got" (line 20), "a few years back" (line 20), "what with the box" (line 20), "been around" (line 21), "the tops" (line 22), "kids" (line 26). In some cases the structures and/or lexical items involved have very wide and general currency in British English, such as "the box" for 'television' and "kids" for 'children'. In other cases, they are more restricted: "punters" is often associated with gamblers/betters, but it can also be applied to the anonymous public one is trying to attract, including the readers of newspapers; "buggers," on the other hand, is a (relatively mild) swearword, which in this case is used in reference to the letters making up the headlines themselves. The grammatical structure of some of the

speaker's sentences is also, in some cases, reminiscent of speech. In line 2, for example, the vocative "all-right-Squire" is appended to the end of a statement without punctuation, which may suggest the seamless flow of speech. Similarly, "What with the box/ et cet." in lines 20-1 is a verbless structure which sounds like an afterthought on the statement made in the previous sentence.

It is important to remember, however, that all the features I have identified so far contribute to an *impression* of interactive, colloquial speech, but do not result in an accurate representation of *real* interactive speech. A number of studies in stylistics have shown that fictional conversations differ in significant ways from real-life conversations (Leech and Short 1981: 159-73, Hughes 1996; Short 1996: 173-86). Like many other literary renditions of conversational discourse, Duffy's poem does not contain the normal non-fluency features which are typical of real, informal speech, such as needless repetitions and false starts. Similarly, the main speaker's words are organised in sentences, which are a characteristic of *written* texts. Moreover, in this particular case, we do not have a representation, however, minimal, of any other voices in the interaction, and the speaker's discourse is divided into stanzas and broken up into metrical lines with alternate rhymes. I will return to these "poetic" features in section 6.

As well as creating the impression of a spoken voice, the words Duffy attributes to the main speaker also evoke a particular stereotype relating to journalists, i.e. that of career-minded, rather ruthless, heavy-drinking males. The suggestion that the discourse takes place during a drinking session in a pub plays on the association of Fleet Street journalism with the consumption of large quantities of alcohol. The speaker's constant focus on himself, his grand ambitions and his insensitive view of the tragedy of the Titanic as an opportunity for a memorable headline, all contribute to suggest a rather egocentric and conceited character. In addition, vocatives such as "mate" and "squire" tend to be associated with communication between males, while some other less clearly gender-specific linguistic choices may contribute to the impression that the speaker is a man. This could apply to "buggers" in line 10, and also to the metaphors used in relation to communication via the printed media ("bang the words down like they're screaming *Fire!*" in line 4, "grab attention" in line 7), which describe the whole process in terms of forceful physical actions. Indeed, as Rees-Jones points out, a number of Duffy's poems feature speakers who are explicitly constructed as male (see Rees-Jones 1999: 20).

The main speaker's discourse does not, however, consist entirely of highly informal and colloquial language. There are some formal, even Latinate vocabulary items ("educator" in line 3, "numerous" in line 9), and a rather sophisticated, if partly cliched, grammatical structure in "mistakes too numerous to mention" (line 9). In addition, "I have a dream" (line 25) is a potential intertextual reference to a famous speech by Martin Luther King, and the speaker likens his headlines, however improperly, to a particular genre of Japanese poetry, the haiku, in line 16. Finally, the speaker also shows some ability to put his own self-aggrandizing aspirations in perspective: in line 2 his ability to write headlines is described as "just a knack one's born with," and in lines 13-14 the claim that his work can be seen as poetry is heavily hedged ("I like to think," "a sort of poet"), and applied to "our times" only. I will return to the significance of these aspects of the speaker's voice in section 8.

4. The newspaper headlines register

The last two lines of the first four stanzas of the poem, and the middle two lines of the final stanza, are presented as newspaper headlines of the kind typically associated with the British tabloid press. I will begin by pointing out the features of these lines which

suggest the register of newspaper headlines in general, and then focus on the specific characteristics that relate to the tabloid press.

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of the newspaper headline register is the use of capital letters. This foregrounds the relevant lines against the rest of the text and is suggestive of the large capitalised print often used in (tabloid) headlines. The main speaker in the poem also specifically mentions large font size as a strategy to attract the public's attention in line 10, "So now we print the buggers inches high." Another less noticeable graphological feature typical of headlines is the scant use of punctuation. In line 23 ("SEE PAGE 3 TODAY GENTS THEY'RE GIGANTIC."), no comma is used to mark out the vocative "GENTS," or to signal the clause boundary between "GENTS" and "THEY'RE GIGANTIC." In line 12 no quotation marks are used for what appear to be an instance of direct speech presentation: "ROCK STAR PAID ME WELL TO LIE." And in line 23 no comma or quotation marks separate the first clause "IMMIGRANTS FLOOD IN" from the rest of the sentence.

The omission of a range of relatively dispensable linguistic items is a feature that newspaper headlines share with other types of "block language," such as notices, labels, telegrams, and so on (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 845-6; Biber *et al.* 1999: 263). In block language, space constraints on the length of the text result in a range of strategies for "strip[ping] language of all but the most information-bearing forms" (Biber *et al.* 1999: 263). Apart from the frequent omission of punctuation marks, the most obvious examples of this are to do with grammar. In two cases verbs are ellipted, where the meanings they would have conveyed are easily recoverable from the context. In line 12 ("RENT BOY: ROCK STAR PAID ME WELL TO LIE.") there is no reporting verb (e.g. "says") to introduce the claim made by the person referred to as "RENT BOY," but the use of the colon is sufficient to indicate a change in voice from the reporter to one of the main characters in the story. In line 17 ("DIPLOMAT IN BED WITH SERBO-CROAT."), no verb is, strictly speaking, necessary to reinforce the sense of political scandal and impropriety suggested by the line.

Further "space-saving" devices to do with the verb phrase include contraction ("THEY'RE" in line 23), and the tendency to use tenses which do not require auxiliary verbs, i.e. the simple past tense ("PAID" in line 12) and, more frequently, the simple present tense (e.g. "TELLS" in line 5). The latter, which occurs in eight of the headlines, is a particularly noticeable feature of this type of register, given that in most cases it is used in place of the present perfective to refer to past events (see Quirk *et al.* 1985: 846). For example, in line 11 ("TOP MP PANTIE ROMP INCREASES TENSION."), the simple present verb "INCREASES" works as a kind of shorthand for 'has increased'. In addition, the headlines in lines 5, 11 and 18 feature heavily pre-modified noun phrases, respectively "CECIL-KEAYS ROW SHOCK," "TOP MP PANTIE ROMP," and "EASTENDERS' BONKING SHOCK." In such cases pre-modification is used to convey information which, in the body of the text, is more likely to be expressed in longer clausal structures, such as 'the row involving Cecil (Parkinson) and (Sarah) Keays has caused considerable shock'.

Another characteristic feature of headlines which is reflected in the poem is the fact that they tend to assume a considerable amount of knowledge and information, which is either likely to be already available to readers (e.g. the identification of "MAGGIE" in line 24 as Margaret Thatcher), or provided in the text of the article (e.g. what was shocking about the row mentioned in line 5). This brings me to a consideration of the range of topics and subject-matter that are suggested by the headlines. While the references to current affairs, politics, and scandals can be taken as typical of newspapers generally, the particular selection of topics and the vocabulary used in reference to them is clearly reminiscent of the British tabloid press. More

specifically, Duffy seems to rely on some of the most stereotypical characteristics of the British tabloids, including a negative attitude towards foreigners, a right-wing orientation, the focus on sexual scandals, and the inclusion of photographs of partially nude women.

Some of the headlines appear to be concerned with political issues and general current affairs (lines 24 and 27). More specifically, in line 24 the use of the familiar nickname "MAGGIE" for Margaret Thatcher and her description as "KINNOCK-BASHER" suggests support for Thatcher as Conservative Prime Minister against the then leader of the Labour opposition, Neil Kinnock. Interestingly, there are no references to international affairs or foreign news. When foreigners are mentioned, they are presented as a threat ("IMMIGRANTS FLOOD IN" in line 27) or a source of scandal ("DIPLOMAT IN BED WITH SERBO-CROAT" in line 17), or referred to by means of stereotyping and derogatory expressions ("EYETIE" in line 5 stands for 'Italian', and "FROG" in "WHINGEING FROG" (line 6) is a reference to a French person). As Kinnahan observes, many of Duffy's poems explore "the discursive constructions surrounding the issues of immigration, ethnicity, and nationalism" (Kinnahan 2000: 209). The poems collected in *The Other Country*, in particular, contain a range of voices providing different perspectives on racial and ethnic conflicts in Britain in the 1980s (Kinnahan 2000).

Most of the headlines are concerned with sexual scandals, whether in politics, show-business or the media (lines 5, 11, 12, 17, 18, 28), and make use of colloquial and rather crude sexual vocabulary (e.g. "PANTIE ROMP" in line 11, "BONKING SHOCK" in line 18). Line 23, on the other hand, explicitly draws the readers' attention to page 3, which is where the best-known British tabloid newspaper – *The Sun*, normally features photographs of partially naked women ("THEY" is presumably meant to refer to the breasts displayed on that page). Here the address is specifically restricted to a male audience ("GENTS"), while in line 28 an offensive lexical item, "TART" is used in reference to a woman. In line 5, "CECIL-KEAYS ROW SHOCK" refers to a much publicised dispute between Conservative politician Cecil Parkinson and his former secretary Sarah Keays over the child born from their extra-marital relationship. Interestingly, the two people involved are referred to by means of expressions which suggest greater closeness to Parkinson (who is referred to by means of his first name) than to Keays (who is referred to by means of her last name). Apart from the colloquial and rather explicit sexual vocabulary mentioned above, the headlines in the poem contain several examples of colloquial lexis (e.g. "WHINGEING" in line 6) and one example of non-standard grammatical structure in the compound "WELL-OBSCENE" (line 18). In addition, there are some instances of hyperbolic language, such as "GIGANTIC" in line 23, "PULLS OUT STOPS" in line 24, and "FLOOD IN" in line 27.

Overall, therefore, Duffy exploits the stereotypical image of the tabloids as xenophobic, sexist, and predominantly right-wing newspapers, with a preference for sensational reports of sexual scandals. As a consequence, there is a potential ironic contrast between the particular selection of headlines included in the poem, and the main speaker's ambition that the headlines he produces will be regarded as poetry for the times he lives in.

5. The last two lines of the poem

As I mentioned earlier, on my first reading of the poem I attributed the last two lines to the main speaker in the poem. Indeed, these two lines could be seen as the main speaker's summary of his earlier claims ("The poems of the decade"), with two further examples of tabloid headlines in italics ("*Stuff'em! Gotcha!*"), and more sexual references ("tits" and, potentially, "bottom line"). On the other hand, a closer analysis

reveals some important differences between these lines and the earlier stretches of text attributed to the headline writer, which cast some doubts on my initial reading.

Structurally, the last stanza does not fit the pattern of the previous stanzas, which all end with two capitalised lines representing newspaper headlines. As a consequence, the last two lines are foregrounded, in that they have no parallel in the first four stanzas of the poem. They are also different in terms of grammar and interpersonal features. There are no instances of "I," no personal pronouns generally and no interactive features (vocatives, imperatives, and so on). The non-italicised parts of these two lines contain no verbs or clauses, but consist entirely of two noun phrases with parallel structures: both have a plural head noun, and both have a post-modifying prepositional phrase beginning with "of." In addition, line 29 contains three dots - the only potential graphological marker of a pause or hesitation in the whole poem, and two items which can be identified as tabloid headlines "*Stuff'em!*" and "*Gotcha!*." Unlike the headlines discussed in the previous section, however, these two headlines are not quoted in separate lines; they are italicised rather than capitalised; they both involve the use of non-standard spellings to suggest non-standard, informal pronunciation; and they may be identified as quotations of real tabloid headlines from the 1980s – the decade in which the poem was written. "*Gotcha!*" famously occurred as a headline in *The Sun* at the time of the Falklands war between Britain and Argentina in 1982. It was used to announce the first sinking of an Argentine ship, the Belgrano, on the part of the British, and it can be seen as the epitome of the narrowly nationalistic and insensitive attitude to other countries which is often associated with the tabloids. Although my attempts to verify the origin of *Stuff'em!* have proved fruitless, it too sounds like a potential tabloid headline, expressing a negative and defiant attitude towards foreigners (indeed, it may also date from the time of the Falklands war). Finally, the last line uses sexual innuendoes, as opposed to the more openly sexual vocabulary which occurs in the rest of the poem. "The instant tits" puns on 'instant hits', and includes a colloquial term for breasts - one of the tabloid's prime obsessions; similarly "bottom" in "bottom line" puns on the body part, which also occurs alongside "tits" in the colloquial expression "tits and bums."[2]

For all these reasons it is possible to attribute the last two lines to a different voice, and more specifically to an ironic, or even sarcastic voice, which could potentially be identified with that of the author. Indeed, the introduction of a different voice within a dramatic monologue is not unusual in Duffy's poetry. As Rees-Jones points out,

> in Duffy's monologues there is often a slippage between the voice of the monologist and the voice of another presence which interferes or seeps into the narrative. (Rees-Jones 1999: 45)

In "Poet for Our Times," this "other" voice reflects on the consequences of the main speaker's ambition, namely that headlines such as "*Stuff'em!*" and "*Gotcha!*" would be seen as "The poems of the decade," and sarcastically dismisses such "poems" as "The instant tits and bottom line of art." I will return in section 8 to the interaction between this and the main voice in the poem.

6. The poetic frame

The non-literary registers described in the previous sections are cast by Duffy into a typically poetic form. The poem is divided into five six-line stanzas, and each stanza has an ABABAB pattern of alternate rhymes, where the B lines have feminine endings. In addition, the poem is written in a broadly pentameter meter. Throughout the poem, the relationship between the main speaker's discourse and the capitalised headlines on

the one hand, and the regular poetic form on the other, is one that alternates between harmony and tension.

Most lines are end-stopped (e.g. 1 and 2), or have relatively low run-on effects (e.g. line 7, where the line break separates two adverbials from the rest of the clause). A high foregrounding effect is therefore likely to be associated with the few instances of strong enjambement (see Fowler 1966: 88 and Leech 1969: 125). At the beginning of the third stanza, a line breaks occurs in the middle of the noun phrase "a sort of poet/ for our times" resulting in what has been called an "extension" (see Sinclair 1972 and Short 1996: 157). Because the post-modifying prepositional phrase is not grammatically necessary, first-time readers may experience a surprise effect, whereby what initially appears to be a grander claim "I like to think that I'm a sort of poet" is then relativised to a particular historical period only. A different foregrounding effect occurs at the boundary between lines 21 and 22, which separates the grammatical subject (the Titanic) from the main verb. Here line 21 is obviously grammatically incomplete, but the shortness of the verb and the fact that it is immediately followed by a sentence boundary potentially reinforce the finality of "sank," and highlight the contrast between the tragedy of the Titanic's loss and the relatively casual attitude of the speaker. This is the converse of the extension-type enjambement, and has been described as an "arrest-release" structure (see Sinclair 1972 and Short 1996: 156).

The alternate rhyming pattern is sustained throughout the poem with only relatively minor instances of irregularity (e.g. the difference in consonant sounds in lines 20 and 22). On the other hand, the contrast in the topics dealt with by the main speaker and by the capitalised headlines sometimes results in humorous, irreverent rhymes. In the third stanza "poet" rhymes with "show it" and "CROAT," while "Queen" rhymes with "OBSCENE." Similarly, the fifth stanza features a rhyme between "TART" and "art."

Much more tension is generated by the presence of an underlying metrical pattern throughout the poem. The syllable count is usually compatible with a pentameter rhythm: the range of variation is between nine and thirteen syllables per line, but most lines have between nine and eleven syllables. In addition, several of the "spoken" lines and some of the capitalised headlines can be fairly easily read as iambic pentameters (e.g. lines 1, 3, 13, 11 and 18). On the other hand, multiple sentence boundaries occasionally interfere with the potential metrical "flow" of the line (e.g. lines 14 and 20), and many lines begin with a trochaic foot (e.g. 5, 6, 7, 17, 24, 27). More importantly, there is often a marked tension between the prosodic stressing of the lines and the pentameter beat (e.g. line 4), while some lines are clearly hexameters (notably, lines 21 and 22).

The last two lines, however, appear to be foregrounded against the rest of the text also from a metrical point of view: both have an iambic pattern and the final line is a perfect iambic pentameter – the only line in the poem where the pentameter pattern does not involve the placing of a beat on a grammatical word. This reinforces my earlier suggestion that these two lines may belong to a different voice, which is presented as more compatible with the metrical pattern in the poem.

Overall, the attempt to fit prototypically non-poetic language into prototypically poetic patterns can have a twofold effect. On the one hand, it highlights a tension between everyday language and poetic regularity, and therefore potentially emphasizes the distance between the language used by the main speaker and what is traditionally regarded as poetry. On the other hand, it shows how the boundary between literary and non-literary language is indeed fuzzy, considering that it is possible to give a fairly authentic rendition of two non-literary registers while at the same time sustaining a regular rhyme scheme and a fairly regular metrical pattern.

7. Registers and contexts

In the course of the analysis so far, I have used the term "register" rather loosely, without providing an explicit account of the relationship between linguistic variation and different aspects of contexts of language use. In this section, I will aim to provide such an account, particularly in order to explain some of the potential effects of the poem. On the one hand, the use of typically non-literary varieties in a poem is likely to be perceived by many readers as not, in itself, especially innovative, due to the linguistic freedom that has come to be associated with contemporary poetry. On the other hand, Duffy's specific choices of speaker(s) and registers may be perceived as striking and effective, due to a systematic set of contrasts between the context of literary communication and the contexts set up by the poem itself. In order to explain such contrasts, I will briefly outline the framework for the study of registers and contexts of use proposed by Halliday in Halliday and Hasan (1989) (see also Leech 1969: 9-10 and Short (1996)).

Halliday describes contexts of situation in terms of three main features: the "field," the "tenor" and the "mode" of discourse. The field of discourse "refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action taking place" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12). The tenor of discourse "refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12). The mode of discourse "refers to what part the language is playing" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12). This includes the channel of communication (e.g. spoken or written), the function of the text in context, and the "rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 12). Halliday relates each of the three features of context to one of his functions of language, and defines register as a "kind of variation in language that goes with variation in the context of situation" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 38).

Halliday's exemplification of his framework includes a detailed analysis of a line from Ben Jonson's poem "To Celia" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 18-23). In discussing the tenor of the poem, he points out that "in the broadest terms it is man to woman, and more specifically lover to beloved," but also that "it has a secondary tenor, that of a poet addressing his contemporaries" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 24). As for the mode of discourse, Halliday characterises the poem as "spoken/written," on the grounds that it involves spoken communication but is also a written document (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 24).

Short (1996: 80-105) adopts a tripartite framework for the analysis of contexts of communication similar to Halliday's, and uses this framework to analyse literary extracts which feature contrasts between the language actually used and the language normally associated with the relevant contextual configuration. In particular, Short points out that

> literature is prototypically written language, but writers often create special effects by writing in ways which borrow characteristics associated with speech. (Short 1996: 91)

In discussing poetry, he makes the following points:

> [I]n terms of tenor, poetry prototypically uses formal language. This is partly because it is expected to be serious, and so a fairly formal tenor is appropriate. But poetry (particularly short lyric poetry) is also characteristically a *written* form which does not attempt to evoke characters and this fact about medium also pushes poetry towards formality. This does not mean, of course, that all

> poems, or all parts of poems, will exhibit only writing characteristics. (Short 1996: 93)

Short's analyses include various poems which set up subtle contrasts between the written medium of poetry and spoken, informal situations, such as Edward Thomas's "Adlestrop" and Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts" (Short 1996: 93-101).

Clearly, Halliday's and Short's work is relevant to my discussion of Duffy's poem. However, a further basic distinction is necessary, particularly in order to avoid awkward characterisations of the channel of the poem as "spoken/written" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 24), and to clarify an opposition implicit in Halliday's description of a poet addressing his contemporaries as a "secondary tenor" (Halliday and Hasan 1989: 24). I will distinguish between the *context of communication of which the poem itself is part*, and the *context(s) of communication set up by the language of the poem*. This corresponds to Fowler's distinction between "context of utterance" and "context of reference" (Fowler 1986: 86-90; see also Semino 1995 and 1997), and Werth's distinction between "discourse worlds" and "text worlds" (Werth 2000: 17 *et passim*). As far as Duffy's poem is concerned, the context of utterance, or discourse world, is the context of literary communication where Duffy, as a poet, produces a poem to be published and read by an unspecified number of readers. On the other hand, the context of reference or text world set up by the poem itself includes some further and quite separate (secondary) contexts of utterance/discourse worlds, which involve (a) the main speaker in the poem talking about his work in a pub; (b) journalists writing newspapers headlines for the general public, and (c) the voice speaking in the last two lines of the poem (if we assume that this is a separate voice).

I will begin by considering the contrast between the context of literary communication (what I will call the "primary context of utterance") and the main context of utterance *within the context of reference of the poem*, i.e. that involving the headline writer (what I will call the "main secondary context of utterance"). Table 1 provides an outline of these two contexts in terms of Halliday's framework.

Table 1

Halliday's contextual features	Primary context of utterance	Main secondary context of utterance
Field	Artistic discussion concerning the nature of art/ literature/ poetry, the relationship between poetry and press language, the popular press, etc.	Informal discussion about the job of writing newspaper headlines, the status of newspaper headlines as poetry, etc.
Tenor	(Female) poet addressing readers; no shared physical context; formal relationship; part of poetic tradition.	(Male) journalist addressing drinking companion(s) in a pub; shared physical context; informal relationship.
Mode	written channel, artistic/aesthetic function	spoken channel, persuasive function

My characterisation of the field in the table clearly does not do justice to the many different themes that can be identified in Duffy's poem. However, the most relevant contrasts here relate to tenor and mode. On the one hand, as I have repeatedly mentioned, contemporary poetic communication, as a tenor, does not impose strong or clear constraints on the variety of language used. On the other hand, readers' perception

of contemporary texts is likely to be influenced by the poetic tradition of the past. This affects what could be regarded as the default associations of the contextual configuration of the poetic mode of communication, i.e. that a written mode of communication involving a prestigious poet and an anonymous audience will typically express the subjectivity of the poem in relatively formal, elevated language. In "Poet of our Times," Duffy does not simply break that default association as other (mainly contemporary) poets have done, but *maximises* the contrast between the primary context of utterance and the main secondary context of utterance.

As far as the tenor is concerned, there are contrasts between the two speakers and contexts in terms of gender (female vs. male), role and status of the speaker as a producer of texts (recognized poet vs. tabloid journalist), setting (literary communication vs. chat in a pub), relationship with the addressee (anonymous audience vs. specific person), formality of the relationship (distant/formal vs. close/informal), the part played by language (constitutive in literary communication vs. accompaniment to convivial drinking), and so on. As far as mode is concerned, there is a contrast between speech and writing, and between the self-centred persuasive objectives of the headline writer on the one hand, and the broader, less easily identifiable literary and rhetorical aims of the poet. These contrasts are reflected linguistically in the juxtaposition and the tensions between the poetic features of the text (which relate directly to the primary context of utterance), and the colloquial register described in section 3 (which relates to the main secondary context of utterance).

Further contrasts are created by the inclusion of the capitalised headlines, which evoke the contextual configuration of press language.[3] Here the field is generally to do with the presentation and discussion current affairs, but with the specific focus and ideological slant I highlighted in section 4. The tenor involves journalists addressing the general public, particularly, as far as the headlines are concerned, in order to attract their attention and entice them to buy the newspaper. The mode involves the written channel, and a rhetorical slant that can be characterised as informative, persuasive, and, to some extent, entertaining. There are therefore manifold contrasts with the primary context of utterance of the poem. As far as the field is concerned, there is a contrast between the subject-matters typically associated with poetry and those typically associated with the tabloid press. As far as the tenor is concerned, there is a contrast in the role and status of the producers of the text (poet vs. journalists), the relationship with the audience, and so on. As far as the mode is concerned, both contexts involve the written channel, but the functions typically associated with the two contexts are different. This is precisely the crux of the main speaker's argument, who claims that newspaper headlines can also perform the aesthetic function which is normally associated with verbal art.

It is in the range and nature of all the contrasts I have identified in the last two paragraphs that lies the uniqueness, originality, and strikingness of this particular poem against the background of other poems that make use of style variation and non-literary registers.

Finally, if the last two lines are attributed to a different voice, they could be seen as evoking a third secondary context of utterance, which, unlike the other two, is not developed into a fully-fledged situation with its own separate contextual configuration. This, together with the attitude expressed in those lines, could justify an analysis which assimilates it to the primary context of utterance, so that it would be seen as involving the voice of the poet herself commenting ironically on the claims and language of the rest of the poem. In the next section, I will conclude my analysis by addressing the issue of the interaction between this voice and that of the main speaker in the poem.

8. A Bakhtinian perspective

The characteristics of "Poet for Our Times" I have discussed so far correspond to a number of phenomena that Bakhtin subsumes under his complex concept of "dialogism." I will focus particularly on the notions of "hidden dialogue," "internal dialogism," "heteroglossia," and "double-voicedness" (Bakhtin 1981, 1984).

The fact that the poem consists of the voice of a single speaker in what appears to be a conversation in a pub, can be captured by Bakhtin's notion of "hidden dialogue":

> Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. (Bakhtin 1984: 197)

Indeed, some lines of Duffy's poem can be read as direct responses to conversational moves from other participants whose words are not represented: line 25, for example, (And, yes, I have a dream) can be seen as a response to questions such as "What are you hoping for?", or "Do you have a dream, then?"

More importantly, the main speaker's expressed views about his work and its relationship with verbal art give rise to the kind of phenomena that Bakhtin captures by means of the notion of "internal dialogism" (Bakhtin 1981: 276). This includes two related phenomena: (i) the way in which any text/utterance about a particular subject-matter relates to other texts/utterances about the same subject-matter; and (ii) the way in which any text/utterance anticipates and responds to potential objections from others with different views (Bakhtin 1981: 282-3 *et passim*). In the case of "Poet for Our Times," the main speaker's claims can be seen as part of a debate about the nature of poetry, and, more specifically, about the distinction between genres that are perceived as non-literary, popular and low in prestige, and genres that are perceived as literary, "cultured" and prestigious. In this context, the main speaker's discourse does seem to anticipate potential objections to his claims. As I mentioned earlier, his claim that he thinks of himself as a contemporary poet is heavily hedged, and is followed, in lines 15-16, by an explicit statement of what his "poetic" talent consists of.

The most important question that a Bakhtinian perspective enables me to ask, however, relates to the overall effect of the mixing of registers in the poem. From a linguistic point of view, "Poet for Our Times" is an example of what Bakhtin sees as the artistic exploitation of heteroglossia, i.e. the use, in a literary text, of some of the many different socially marked varieties that make up the English language as a whole (e.g. Bakhtin 1981: 262-3). More specifically, there is the projection of a prototypically "oral" voice by means of some of the devices that Bakhtin associates with *skaz* (Bakhtin 1984: 190 *et passim*), and the use of what he calls an "incorporated genre" in the inclusion of lines written in the style of newspaper headlines (Bakhtin 1981: 320). Bakhtin crucially points out, however, that the use of different linguistic varieties does not automatically result in what he calls "double-voiced discourse," i.e. discourse which involves a truly dialectical relationship between different voices expressing different views of the world. In particular, when a particular character/voice is attributed a clearly identifiable linguistic identity, as in the case of our main speaker, there is a danger that that particular character/voice may be reduced to a caricature, whose views are simply presented as an object of ridicule.[4] In his discussion of this particular issue, Fowler paraphrases Bakhtin thus:

> speech styles need not be just caricaturing oddities, but to transcend caricature they must encode characters' world-views as dialectical alternatives to the

world-view of the author and/or, I would suggest, other characters. (Fowler 1989: 80)

This issue is particularly relevant to the overall interpretation of "Poet for Our Times." On the one hand, it could be argued that the words attributed to the main speaker characterise him as superficial and conceited, and that the capitalised headlines expose his work as reinforcing xenophobic stereotypes and oppressive views of women. Within this interpretation, his artistic pretension would be totally dismissed as arrogant and ridiculous by the author, whose voice may be directly heard in the last two lines. Within such a reading, the poem would be single-voiced in a Bakhtian sense: although we are presented with the words of an individualised speaker, and with a specific non-literary register, the poem uses them simply to present the single world-view of the author. As my analysis has shown, Duffy does play with some of the most noticeable and extreme aspects of existing stereotypes of journalists and the tabloid press, so that such an interpretation of the poem may well be frequent, or even prevalent, among readers of the poem.

I would argue, however, that the language of the poem also allows a double-voiced reading. This does not deny that the main speaker in the poem is partly made to condemn himself with his brash, egocentric claims, nor that the capitalised headlines are meant to expose what the author sees as negative and potentially pernicious aspects of the tabloid press. Nevertheless, the main speaker in the poem is not, in my view, simply a caricature. He is given a large amount of "space" in the poem, part of which is used, in lines 7-8, to spell out the difficult constraints that he operates under as a text-producer (which, one could argue, sharply contrast with the more leisurely situation of the literary writer). As I showed at the end of section 3, his claims are heavily hedged, and they are prefaced by a rather dismissive description of his "talent" in lines 2 and 3. In line 9, the speaker also admits that he has, in the past, made many mistakes. In addition, there are potential clues that he might in fact be better educated than his adoption of a highly colloquial register may suggest. The reference to "haikus" in line 16 allows more than one interpretation. On the one hand, the speaker may be unaware that his headlines do no fulfil the strict conventions of this particular poetic genre. On the other hand, he may be deliberately misusing the word, in a tongue-in-cheek kind of way, to attribute to his headlines the status of highly intense short poems. Finally, the intertextual reference to Martin Luther King's speech in line 25 may or may not be seen as deliberate, and if it is, the speaker may or may not be perceived to be aware of the contrast between his own self-aggrandizing dream and the vision expressed in King's famous speech.

Similarly, the (presumably fake) capitalised headlines do not simply expose some of the basest aspects of the tabloid press, but could also be perceived as exemplifying the headline writer's effectiveness in achieving what the main speaker mentions in lines 7-8. They demonstrate the ability to use colloquial, sexual and hyperbolic vocabulary to attract the public's attention and to titillate their curiosity, and to pack a large amount of meaning in relatively little space. In addition, the use of metre and rhyme throughout shows how no language variety, however non-literary, is in principle incompatible with traditional poetic forms.

For these reasons, my favourite reading of the poem is a double-voiced one. In this reading, Duffy does of course expose the phoney artistic pretensions of a journalist who partly makes a living by appealing to people's prejudices and attraction to soft pornography, and she does lament a situation where nationalistic headlines such as "*Stuff'em*" and "*Gotcha*" could be some of the most significant and memorable "lines" of the 1980s. On the other hand, she also makes readers aware that many genres, and

particularly headline writing, involve the ability to use language creatively and ingenuously (and under pressure), and she demonstrates the linguistic and cultural fuzziness of the boundary between what are normally regarded as "high" and "low" culture, and between literary and non-literary language.[5] Interestingly, although this particular poem has not been discussed by the critics, it has been pointed out that Duffy's dramatic monologues tend to project complex views of the speakers, and often allow some possibility of redemption even for stereotypically negative characters, such as the "macho man" of "You Jane" and the psychopath in the eponymous poem (Rees-Jones 1999: 20-22).

8. Conclusion

My analysis of "Poet for Our Times" has focused in detail on the way in which the language of the poem conveys the impression of (i) a particular speaking voice in a specific setting, (ii) a particular non-literary written register, and, potentially, (iii) an ironic voice in the last two lines of the poem. I have also tried to show how a stylistic analysis can account for a range of potential effects of the poem, and I have focused specifically on the linguistic basis for my claim that the poem is double-voiced in a Bakhtinian sense.

Although stylistics has not traditionally been (explicitly) concerned with issues of artistic value (but see Short and van Peer 1989), readers may have noticed throughout the discussion some more or less implicit acknowledgements of Duffy's achievement in the poem. Indeed, I would claim that my systematic analysis has highlighted Duffy's skill in realistically conveying the impression of non-literary varieties within a prototypically poetic form, and of projecting a speaker who is implicitly criticised but not reduced to a caricature. More generally, the text has amply rewarded the effort involved in close linguistic analysis, thanks to its richness in terms of the range of linguistic features Duffy exploits and of the complexity of the interaction between different linguistic levels.

Notes

[1] I am grateful to Rich Cureton, John Heywood and Mick Short for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] The use of puns also potentially associates the last line with the title of the poem, which, by definition is likely to be associated with the author rather than with a fictional speaker. The title appears to be a quotation of the main speaker's main claim, but the use of capital letters for some of the words included in it, highlights a potential pun on "Times" as 'historical period', and "(The) Times" as the name of one of the best known British newspapers.

[3] These lines could potentially be seen as embedded within the main speaker's voice, who would quote them as examples of his linguistic abilities. However, they also function as the author's attempt to expose the morbid, xenophobic and sexist components of what the main speaker presents as poetry. In any case, their inclusion evokes the context of communication associated with the press.

[4] It is important to note that two different meanings of "voice" are involved in this discussion. On the one hand, "voice" can be used to refer to the attribution of (some of) the words in a text to a particular individual or entity, whether imaginary or not. On the other hand, "voice" in Bakhtin's notion of "double-voicedness" involves the use of different styles/language varieties to project different views of the world which stand in a dialectical relationship with one another. The point here is that the existence of different voices in the first sense does not necessarily produce "double-" or "multi-voicedness."

[5] Indeed, much recent work in stylistics has emphasized that the problematic nature of the distinction between literary and non-literary language (e.g. Short and Candlin 1989: 200-3; Carter and Nash 1992: 29-50).

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