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Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose
Mick Short

# Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose

Mick Short

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**For**
**Hilary, Hiroko and Ben,**
**both my Mums and Dads,**
**and Tom and Floozie**

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## 3.7 An extended example of style variation

We have already dealt with language variation according to domain inside a text without noting it explicitly, when we examined 'Adlestrop' in 3.5. The reason that lexical items to do with trains and the countryside respectively occur in the two stanzas is because Thomas has chosen to write about the subject matters with which those items are associated. The grouping of lexical items into associated areas of vocabulary are referred to by linguists as **lexical** or **associative fields**. In 'Naming of Parts', Henry Reed, a World War II poet, produces a systematic series of contrasts between the lexical fields associated with war and the natural world. In so doing he also exploits our intuitive knowledge of military language and the language of instruction:

**Example 9**

To–day we have naming of parts. Yesterday, (1)
We had daily cleaning. And to–morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to–day,
To–day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens, (5)
And to–day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches (10)
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety–catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy (15)
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it (20)
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.



They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy (25)
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking–piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards
and forwards, (30)
For today we have naming of parts.

(Henry Reed, 'Naming of Parts')

If we look at the first four verses of this poem we can see that there is a systematic division which takes place in the middle of the fourth line of each stanza. Up to that point in each verse the speaker is a weapons instructor in the army, probably a sergeant or a corporal, giving instructions on the use of a rifle to some assembled recruits. However, the remaining part of each stanza appears to be the unspoken thoughts of one of those recruits. Alternatively, the recruit could be directly addressing us, the readers. Often, when the poem is performed it is read by two people, the first with a working–class 'sergeant major' voice, and the other with voice properties like those I have already suggested for the second half of 'Adlestrop'.

The most obvious features of the language of instruction are the use of commands. *And please do not let me/See anyone using his finger* (14/15) is an imperative command and *and to–morrow morning,/We shall have what to do after firing* (2/3) can be interpreted as a combined statement and command. Other, less obvious features of the language of instruction, are sentences where the speaker tells the hearers what they must already know (*e.g. And this is the piling swivel,/Which in your case you have not got* (9/10) or where he tells them what they are capable of doing (*e.g. You can do it quite easy/If you have any strength in your thumb* (15/16)).

These instructions assume an audience which has the rifles referred to in their possession. We know this for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there are a number of words or phrases which refer to items present in the immediate situational context and code those items in terms of distance from the speaker. Such expressions are usually called **deictic.**[3] Examples are *this* (indicating that the item is close to the speaker; *cf.* 'that') in stanzas 2, 3 and 4 and the close time deictics *to–day, yesterday* and *to–morrow* in stanza 1 (compare 'that day', 'the day before' and 'the day after'). In this case, of course, there is no real situational context; instead we, the readers, have to imagine an

appropriate situation. The use of **deixis** is thus one of the ways in which writers persuade readers to imagine a fictional world when they read poems, novels and plays.

The second reason that we know that the instructor is addressing a set of people present with him is his use of pronouns (*I/me; you* and *we*) referring to himself and his listeners. There is also some verbal indication that he is **monitoring** the reactions of his hearers as he speaks to them (*cf. as you see* in line 20).[4]

The fact that it is military weapon training that the men are being instructed in is made clear by use of the relevant technical terminology, and the status of the instructor as a non–commissioned officer is indicated by the use of the adjective *easy* as an adverb in line 15. This is a grammatical feature associated with various working–class dialects of English, and in World War II the commissioned officers would have been from the middle–classes and above, and the 'lower ranks' would have comprised working–class soldiers.

The poetic description of the natural world in the gardens surrounding the soldiers will not need such detailed examination as we have already covered similar ground in our examination of 'Adlestrop'. In the last two and a half lines of each stanza, starting with the new sentence in the fourth line in each case, the rifle terminology, short sentences and instructional language are replaced by words and phrases referring to the natural world, longer sentences and poetic tropes like simile and metaphor (*e.g. Japonica/Glistens like coral* and *The branches/Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures*).

The result of all of this is a comparison between war and its accompanying death and destruction on the one hand, and, on the other, the peace of the gardens and the generative qualities of the natural world (*e.g. The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:/They call it easing the Spring*. This contrast is made more ironic and direct by a complex pattern of lexical repetition. The last line of each of the stanzas, which is thus in the 'natural world' part of the poem in each case, constitutes a repetition of phraseology found in the 'weapon training' section of that stanza. The war world thus appears at first sight to invade the natural world.

I have made a point so far of talking only about the first four stanzas of the poem. This is because the last stanza constitutes a significant and interesting *internal deviation* from the pattern so far described. At first sight its juncture in line 4



also reflects the war/nature division seen in the rest of the poem. But this time the line 4 syntactic division is *not* a sentence division. Indeed, despite a number of major syntactic junctures, the last stanza is one complete sentence. Moreover, this time *the whole stanza* is made up of an amalgam of repetitive echoes from earlier stanzas. Most of the echoes in the first three and a half lines of the stanza come from the war sections of previous stanzas, but not all of them do. In particular, the first clause *They call it easing the Spring* is a repetition from the last line of the previous stanza. We know this must be a nature reference, not a military one because the word *Spring* is capitalised, as it was in the nature section of stanza 4, but *not* in the war section of the stanza where it first appears.

Once we have noticed the point about *Spring* it is easier to see that *Which in our case we have not got* in line 28 is a more exact repetition of the natural world version of line 12 than the war world version in line 10. The 'garden' section of the last stanza, on the other hand, repeats items exclusively from the natural world sections of previous verses, except for the very last line of the poem, which repeats the clause in the first stanza which occurred in both the war and nature parts of the stanza.

What are we to make of these internally deviant features of the last stanza of 'Naming of Parts'? In the first four stanzas it seemed that the pattern of repetition represented the invasion of the natural world by the world of war. But in the last stanza it is the opposite which happens, suggesting a triumph of life over death or at least a hopeful resolution in the 'double' repetition of the poem's last line. Henry Reed thus manipulates style variation in a particularly sophisticated way in order to guide us in interpreting his poem.

## 3.8 How finicky can you get?

The analysis of Henry Reed's 'Naming of Parts' may well have raised in your mind an issue concerning how much linguistic detail a reader can be expected to pick up. Is it really plausible that readers will notice such a small thing as a capital versus a small 's' and then treat it as interpretatively significant in the way I have just suggested? Surely real readers aren't like that?