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Language ‘heard as sung or spoken’: Robert Frost’s sound of sense in “Mending Wall” and “The Death of the Hired Man”

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Abstract: A poem ‘begins in delight and ends in wisdom’ (Frost 1969, 18). Robert Frost’s aphoristic definition of poetry indicates the ‘myriad gradations of color’ (Thompson xii) that exist under the simple and easy-flowing lines of his lyrics and dramatic narratives. Beneath the layer of simplicity lies the poet’s profound experience of life and command over form and metrical composition. Frost recommends a poetic diction that has the living quality of spoken language. The conversational rhythm of colloquial language, when used with the required modifications in poetry, can produce the sound-effect of talking. Poetry does not remain to be read alone but heard as well. The living language produces an audio-visual effect that takes poetry as close as possible to drama.

Frost formulates his concept of ‘sound of sense’ to systematize the application of colloquial language in poetry and produce the conversational rhythm not in disregard of the poetic form. The men-talking effect in his poems does not work haphazardly, unlike the conversations of real life. It follows the parameter of sound of sense. Frost deserves credit in that his system of sound of sense never cripples the natural flow of conversational rhythm. Nor does it let the ‘language of the soil’ disregard the formal poetic norms and make poetry look like prose. The present paper endeavors to understand the formulation of sound of sense and its application in two of his famous poems – “Mending Wall” and “The Death of the Hired Man”, both of which belong to the early phase of his poetic career (1913-23) rich in experiments on the spoken sound of language. It remains to see how Frost creates the audio-visual ambience of a drama through the combined effect of denotation and connotation of the poetic language.

Keywords: Robert Frost, sound of sense, lyric, dramatic poem, iambic, meter.

Robert Frost is primarily a subjective lyric poet. But his forte lies in the field of dramatic narrative and dramatic monologue. The day to day rural life of New Hampshire becomes alive in its pristine form in his poetic lines that store profound thought on life, while looking deceptively simple and easy-flowing. What enriches his lyrics and develops them into poem-as-drama is his preoccupation with the sound of spoken-words. He is a master lyric poet, but he flies high as a poet only when he fully realizes the dramatic potentials of poetry and formulates his poetic language, known as the ‘sound of sense’. Skilful exploits of the denotation and connotation of word/s vis-à-vis their sound, in a context and independent of it, configure the essence of Frost’s dramatic poetry. The lines begin to ‘talk’ and the effect of ‘talking’ builds up the drama that involves dialogue, character and setting.

Robert Frost is essentially a twentieth-century poet, but on many a count he stands aside from the prevailing literary mood of the century. He remains least impressed by the contemporary craze for ‘new ways to be new’ (Frost 1966b, 59) in poetry. Poets have become scientists, as it were, to create something new by dismissing everything of the past. This wild desire for ‘new ways’ has sometimes strained the limits of poetry, rendering it bizarre. Frost, on the contrary, prefers to stick to the basics of poetry that involve, most importantly, the discipline of form. Form is of equal importance vis-à-vis the subject, whose freedom should not be allowed to dissipate form. Of the formless poets of his generation he said, “When they give up form, they are in danger of giving up the whole thing” (qtd. in Isaacs 83). He therefore resolves to explore form, already held dispensable in poetry, in order to create a new poetic idiom. This is what he calls “old-fashioned way to be new” (Frost 1966b, 60). And the most important of his ‘old-fashioned way’(s) is the sound of sense, which he develops from his commitment to the formal structure of poetry. The sound of sense transforms his traditional verse forms into a strikingly communicative poetry in that poetry goes

as close as possible to drama, while simultaneously remaining deeply insightful. For this reason, Frost remains the most popular poet in America and hence modern as well.

The present study seeks to look into the way the sound of sense as formulated in his poetry and its application in two of his famous poems – “Mending Wall” and “The Death of the Hired Man”, both of which belong to the early phase of his poetic career (1913-23) rich in experiments on the spoken sound of language. It remains to be seen how Frost creates the audio-visual ambience of a drama through the combined effect of denotation and connotation of the poetic language. Poetry becomes as dramatic as possible in that the language becomes ‘audible’ and ‘living’. A study of this ‘dramatic language’ would be useful for a fuller appreciation of Frost’s poetry.

Frost’s prime concern in poetry seems to establish a perfect correspondence between the poet and the reader. He believes that a poem becomes great when it successfully corresponds with or ‘talks’ to its reader. He comments,

It has been said that recognition in art is all. Better say correspondence is all. Mind must convince mind that it can unfurl and wave the same filaments of subtlety, soul convince soul that it can give off the same shimmers of eternity. At no point would anyone but a brute fool want to break off this correspondence. It is all there is to satisfaction; and it is salutary to live in the fear of its being broken off. (Frost 1966b, 61)

Mere lyrical simplicity is not enough to serve the purpose of correspondence. Lyric ensures the smoothness and easy flow of lines but they (lines) should also be alive or lively in order to have the ‘talking effect’. It is the dramatic quality that can make poetry talking to its readers, that is to say, appealing to a curious reader and enlarge the scope of its meaning and interpretation. Frost claimed,

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing. A

least lyric alone may have a hard time, but it can make a beginning, and lyric will be piled on lyric till all are easily heard as sung or spoken by a person in a scene – in character, in a setting. (Frost 1966a, 13)

Therefore, the dramatic quality becomes a necessary condition for poetry. And this “dramatic necessity” (Frost 1966a, 13) remains to be the chief motivation behind Frost’s sound of sense. The diction of poetry has to be dramatic. Otherwise their scope of meaning will be limited. “Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic” (Frost 1966a, 13). So there comes the need for sound of sense to make sentences dramatic, “living” (Frost qtd. in Barry 48) and “convey their own tone” (Frost qtd. in Barry 52). Sentences will carry their own voice-tones and thus widen the scope of meaning through the combination of denotation and connotation. In addition to the fixed denoted meanings of words in sentences, the connotative meanings will also be suggested on the basis of their voice-tones and vocal gestures. Frost formulates the sound of sense as a disciplined exercise of meter, rhyme, rhythm and phonetic accent of word in order to produce the voice-tones and vocal gestures of sentences. By this, he takes the reading of poetry to a different level of audio-visual exercise where the combined effect of denotation and connotation makes it as vivid and living as a conversation in real life or dialogues in drama.

“The recognized importance of sound in poetry”, observes Lawrance Thompson, “is as old as poetry itself” (42). Frost’s credit lies in that he developed his own formulation of the sound of poetic diction and shown its applied success. His love for the sound of word/s is not without a background. Frost’s brief stay at Harvard College (1895) made him familiar with the colloquial, rural language of New England. He felt immensely impressed by the common speech-rhythms of the rural people. There he came to meet a local grass-root philosopher named Charley Hall, whose common speeches seemed to stimulate him more than the ‘artificial’ lectures of the correct college instructors. He wondered why a good listener cannot write poetry like this, recording in his mind the natural rhythms and sounds of this man’s speech (Isaacs 86). During this time, he began to discover the literary confirmation of his belief in the importance of sound and voice-tone of language. The

printed pages of Virgilian *Eclogue*, Homer’s *Odyssey* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* began to talk to him through their voice-tones. Coleridge, Wordsworth and Emerson appealed to him for the reason of the sound of ‘living’ language. He appreciated Coleridge’s ‘sense of musical delight’ in poetry. On the other hand, he fully agreed with Wordsworth and Emerson, who “stressed the inherent poetic quality of conversational rhythms close to the soil” (Isaacs 86).

Frost was surely influenced by many a poet, but his use of language bears the mark of originality. He uses the colloquial language in his own style and achieves a complete mastery over them. “He delights to play with words until they take nicely varied patterns of sound and shape and thought” (Thompson xi). And this play with words is always guided by the principles of sound of sense. It is not an invention in that many others before Frost acknowledged the importance of sound in poetry and worked on meter and rhyme to set their examples. But it is surely unique in that Frost applied his sound of sense consistently in order to create the dramatic atmosphere in his poems and make poetry living and talking to the readers.

As to the reason of writing poetry, Frost’s answer always is, “To see if I can make them sound different” (qtd. in Isaacs 83). His concern for how the poem sounds like led him to explore the psychology of sound in words. He seems extremely conscious about the two planes of meaning of each word. One is the denotation – the accepted meaning in dictionary regardless of whether it is a written word or spoken. The other is the connotation – the meaning derived or suggested when the word is spoken. Lawrence Thompson illustrates it beautifully in his *Fire and Ice* (1942). He takes a simple monosyllabic word, ‘oh’. It literally means an exclamation. But its spoken sound can determine whether it is spoken to convey doubt, surprise, amusement or scorn. Even a sentence such as ‘I’ll go’ can say a lot through its connotation. It may be an affirmation or request or query, depending on its voice-tone. Thus, the acknowledgement of the two levels of meaning of a word or a sentence widens the scope of meaning itself.

In his poem “The Mountain” Frost says, “... the fun’s in how you say a thing” (Frost 1969, 44). The sound which comes up when the

word or sentence is spoken determines the meaning. Frost illustrates how the sound or voice-tone contributes to the meaning of a conversation of two persons in a closed room. Their voice is heard from outside, but the words cannot be properly distinguished and understood. Now the question is, can we understand the meaning of what they are saying? Frost says, yes. “You hear talk in the next room; you cannot make out the actual words; but you hear the tone of voice, and you have the essential meaning of what is said” (Frost qtd. in Isaacs 86). Even if one does not understand the words spoken, their sound is crucial in conveying the meaning or the idea of it. Frost wants his readers to ask themselves “how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied” (qtd. in Barry 49). The sound of the sentences will make the meaning almost clear for the listener. Frost clarifies,

... every meaning has a particular sound-posture, or to put it another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with, and, without being conscious of the exact words that are being used, is able to understand the thought, idea or emotion that is being conveyed. (qtd. in Braithwaite 4)

He is most interested in “the sentence of sound, because to me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying meaning of words; it must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound” (Frost, qtd. in Braithwaite 4).

Sound is not arbitrary in Frost’s poems. He reconciles three separate levels of sound to produce his sound of sense. The first level is the sound coming from the accent of the meter, chiefly the strict or loose iambic. The second level is the sound of the words as they are usually pronounced, regardless of their denoted meaning. The final level is the sound derived from the words as they are spoken in a particular context. For example, let us take a sentence of four identical words from the poem “Home Burial” – “Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t” (Frost 1969, 52). A reading, in disregard of the sound of sense, will give a meaning limited in scope and implication. But if we consider the three planes of sound,

reading the line will be a whole new experience of intellectual pleasure. The above line can be divided into two iambic feet, and the metrical structure creates a particular sound-posture of the line. Then the pronunciation of the words gives a forceful sound, as if, somebody is saying something with great force and excitement. The meaning becomes fully clear when we come to the third plane of sound. We read the words or the sentence in a particular context. We find that the speaker is a wife who has lost her child and as soon as the husband mentions about their child she bursts out with the above words. She does not want to hear anything of her child from her husband due to some reason, not known to us for the time being. The three planes of sound considered together, the sentence gives us a psychologically disturbed woman’s words spoken out of sheer pain, anger and desperation.

Frost’s sound of sense does wonder on the dramatic aspect of his poetry. The sentences become ‘living’ because of their skillfully created voice-tones. Readers witness a monologue or dialogue delivered by certain character/s in a well thought-out setting. An audio-visual effect has been created by the sound of sense. Far from only reading the poem, the readers most often visualize the entire situation and listen to the character/s talking. The setting and character-traits need no extra description, since the voice-tones do most of the work. Regarding the dramatic quality in his poetry, Frost once said,

I have three characters speaking in one poem, and I was not satisfied with what they said until I got them to speak so true to their own characters that no mistake could be made as to who was speaking. I would never put the names of the speakers in front of what they said. (qtd. in Isaacs 90)

A skillful combination of the formal meter, phonetic sound of words and the informal rhythmic cadence of conversational language makes possible the above effect. The day-to-day language of the rustic New Englanders falls in the bowl of metrical experiment to create a poetic language with clear speech-idiom and tone. This language immensely helps Frost’s style of talking simply yet in a deceptively epigrammatic

manner. He plain-speaks in a conversational style but often with hidden layers of meaning that enriches the overall poetic quality of his language. Reading poetry becomes an intellectual joy as well as a simple delight, all owing to the effect of the sound of sense.

Frost’s poetry displays the highest proximity to drama in the early part of his career, when he excelled in his sound of sense. Roughly, the period from 1913-1923 seems to be the phase when he produced his finest dramatic poems. His first volume *A Boy’s Will* (1913) shows great potentials of dramatic poetry, but it is in *North of Boston* (1914) where he seems to have given shape to his dramatic narrative. Dramatic style on the basis of the exuberance of sound of sense reaches its peak in this volume. In the later part of his career, particularly after *New Hampshire* (1923), the purely dramatic poems of early years cease to come, but the lyrics, which replace them and dominate his volumes, are memorable because Frost has already learned the importance of the dramatic style and experimented with the voice-tone of language (Doyle 71).

“Mending Wall” is one among the numerous famous poems of the volume *North of Boston* and can be taken up to understand how the sound of sense works in Frost’s dramatic poems. The poem begins with two men involved in a debate over a wall situated between their lands. The wall breaks down, despite the yearly repair, for reason unknown to both of them. The point of the conflict is whether the wall should be repaired again or left to its fate. Typical of a powerful drama, the poem begins at the middle of the tension.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. (Frost 1969, 33)

The speaker directs our attention deliberately to some unknown force by the abrupt first line. The iambic first line begins with a trochaic foot, ‘Something’. This stress on the mysterious force adds to the thrill and holds it as the main force that pulls down the wall. The sudden combination of so many accented syllables in the second line holds up

the picture. The iambic meter aptly stresses the important words such as ‘spills’, ‘gaps’, ‘two’, ‘pass’ and makes the porosity of the wall, alongside the force that does not love it, the main concern. The speaker’s sense of surprise and annoyance is clear in the voice-tone of the lines.

After the brief prologue, the speaker speculates if the hunters could damage the wall to find the rabbits hiding in it. His tone of seriousness gradually gives way to a different tone as he refers to his neighbor and the act of repairing the wall.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance
‘Stay where you are until our backs are turned!’
We wear our fingers rough with handling them
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. (Frost 1969, 33)

He seems to be not interested at all in the proper repair of the wall. His words, ‘loaves’, ‘balls’, ‘spell’, ‘outdoor game’, ‘One on a side’ indicate his half-serious and half-comic mood. The iambic meter stresses these words and goes perfectly with his serio-comic tone. His humor comes out when he pretends to use a spell in the fourth line. The iambic tone suddenly gives way to the trochaic in the first foot of the line and returns again in the remaining feet only to suggest the speaker’s pseudo-seriousness in repairing the wall. He points out the impossibility of keeping the wall erect to his neighbor, while assuring him of their mutual privacy and security. The trees of his apple garden will never encroach upon the neighbor’s garden of pine trees. But his request goes in vain as the neighbor is adamant with his words, “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost 1969, 33).

The neighbor stands opposed to the principal speaker. His one sentence brings out his character. His reticence, preference for monosyllabic words, directness of expression presents him as an old guy who is not ready to leave his ground at any cost. The speaker continues to tease him with his characteristic humor. Regarding the

power that brings down the wall, he pokes, “I could say ‘Elves’ to him” (Frost 1969, 34). The stress falls on the two words, ‘could’ and ‘Elves’, thanks to the mischievous character of the Yankee drawl. He humorously describes the old man,

I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me
Not of woods only and the shades of trees,
He will not go behind his father’s saying. (Frost 1969, 34)

The choice of words is very important here. The image of a savage of the Stone Age, moving in darkness, without the light of reason and progress is sardonically created to laugh at the rigid old man who is determined to keep the wall erect under any circumstances. His unwillingness to subscribe to the young neighbor’s argument makes him an object of ridicule. His orthodox character has been built up both by the young speaker’s humorous description of him and his terse reply to his pleading, “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost 1969, 34). Two distinctive voice-tones have been created. One is the fluent, full of humor and argumentative tone of an open-minded young man; the other is the unemotional and cold tone of an ossified traditionalist. These tonal voices become clear when one takes note of the loose iambic structure of the lines, particular words and the overall context of the poem in which the incident happens.

The subject-matter of “Mending Wall” talks about the significant issues of individualism and social kinship, regionalism and universalism, border and trans-border. But what remains equally significant is the way he talks about them in his poem. Two characters have been created. They talk to each other in a way that tells all about their persona. The main speaker sounds young through what and how he talks. He loves to argue in favor of an open space not restrained by boundaries. His language is elaborative, tinged with an unmistakable sense of humor. His youth excites him to question the necessity of a wall between two neighbors, if the two are ready to respect each other’s privacy. His sense of humor sometimes gives way to his frustration over

the older man. His effort to make the man understand and consequent helplessness is obvious in his colloquial style and choice of simple words. But all come to naught at the old man’s short and blunt reply. The reply shows his love for order and norm. It creates a rhythm by the repetition of the word ‘good’ and its economy of syllables. It perfectly goes with his love for a wall, which is traditionally built to avoid any misunderstanding between neighbors. Thus, the two voice-tones become distinctively clear, rendering the debate over the wall lively, vivid and dramatic.

“The Death of the Hired Man” is another beautiful application of the sound of sense. The entire poem stands on the debate between a wife and her husband over the return of their servant. The simple subject-matter has been presented in the simplest language possible, and what makes such an issue interesting is the audio-visual effect that the ‘living language’ generates. The poem begins with the image of a woman anxiously waiting for her husband to give him some news. When his steps are heard, she rushes to him to tell that “Silas is back.” Her anxiety tells that the man called ‘Silas’ is unwanted to her husband. Then follow a tug-of-war between the husband and the wife over the arrival of the man and a sudden closure of the scene with the discovery that the man has died, ending all confusion and debate.

The image of the woman waiting for her husband, at the outset, has been presented with the long thirteen-syllable first line. The slowness of the line visualizes the slow and anxious passage of time. When she hears her husband coming, she rushes to him with her breath held to unload herself. The long, yet fast, sentence suggests her physical and psychological action.

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table,
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. “Silas is back.” (Frost 1969, 34)

The loose iambic with short vowels and monosyllables accelerates the pace from the third line onwards. The movement rushes till the end

of the fifth line, where Mary pours out the news, ‘Silas is back’, which is an abrupt trochaic accent of the revelation. She tries to make her husband kind to the man, and the lines also move smoothly with her delicate and sensitive approach.

Importantly, the husband’s voice-tone is different from that of his wife. Frost does not have to write the name of the characters to show ‘who is saying what.’ Mere voice-tone identifies a particular character with his/her likes and dislikes. Warren, the husband, is greatly annoyed at the news of Silas’s return. His annoyance comes out vividly through the lines.

Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won’t have to beg and be beholden.
‘All right’, I say, ‘I can’t afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.’
‘Someone else can.’ ‘Then someone else will have to.’
(Frost 1969, 35)

The trochaic beginning of the iambic first line shows his disgust for Silas. The iambic lines, with variations, put stress on some particular words such as ‘Off’, ‘need’, ‘most’, ‘pay’. The alliteration of ‘t’ in the third line and ‘b’ in the fourth heightens the sense of anger and ridicule. The use of terse monosyllabic words and short sentences shows how upset the speaker is over Silas. His speech is also marked by the excessive sound of ‘I’, which shows his authority in his house and his consciousness of it. From his position of power, he finds Silas’s casual and carefree response incorrigible and teases it sardonically.

Warren appears less sensitive than Mary whose voice-tone is smooth, soft and caring. The following lines show the difference.

He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe’s I found him here,
Huddled against the barn door fast asleep,
A miserable sight and frightening, too – (Frost 1969, 35)

Her sentences are longer and have less monosyllabic word. They move smoothly according to her emotional and affectionate nature. They show her concern more for Silas than for herself. Words such as 'worn out', 'asleep', 'Huddled', 'miserable' and 'frightening' tell her anxiety for the man. The iambic meter makes her concern vivid.

He's worn' / out. He's' / a-sleep' / be-side' / the stove'.
When I' / came' up/ from Rowe's' / I found' / him here',
Huddle'-d/ ag-ainst' / the barn' / door fast' / a-sleep',
A mis' /-er-able' / sight' and/ fright'-en-/ing, too' –
(Frost 1969, 35)

The iambic meter, with some variations, stresses those parts of her speech that hold the key to her concern for Silas. Thus the denoted meaning comes to attain the connotative implication, and the speaker's voice-tone is clearly built up.

Frost often manipulates the meter to achieve what he intends to achieve through the denoted meaning of his language. Mary is always sympathetic towards Silas, and to make her sound more so than ever the iambic meter has often to be varied. For example, her sentence "Poor' Sil' /-as, so' / con-cern' /-ed for' / o'-ther/ folk'," (Frost 1969, 37) explains such purposeful variations. It begins with a spondee foot to state how miserable Silas appears to Mary. The line also has a trochaic foot and ends with a catalectic foot. When read keeping in mind the individual words, the meter and the context, the character of Silas becomes as vivid as the speaker of the line. Immediately after it, Mary describes Silas again, "And nothing to look backward to with pride,/ And nothing to look forward to with hope," (Frost 1969, 37). The devices of repetition and juxtaposition of words create the image of a pathetic life without meaning and purpose. Mary appears kind and insightful enough to understand the pathos of the man and stands clearly opposed in every respect to her husband.

The poem ends with a note of silence. Silas is found dead. The sudden and unforeseen discovery upsets both Mary and Warren. They become speechless. Their physical gestures imply the mood of the scene. Frost remains exactly economic in expression as he uses only

two words from the two characters – Mary’s question, ‘Warren?’ and Warren’s response, ‘Dead’. The two words seem to reverberate as the curtain falls over the frozen moment of shock, sorrow and silence.

Reading Frost’s poetry requires a coordination of careful mind, eye and ear on the part of the readers. The poems can surely be enjoyed for their lyrical simplicity and charm, but their simplicity often proves deceptive. A careful reader can always discover the multi-layered world of thought and style that elevates his poems to a level of intellectual excitement along with simple joy. However, an awareness of the sound of sense in his poetry may always not be possible for a reader, and it does not wholly undermine the pleasure of reading them. But its awareness opens up a whole new world that provides the joy of a drama within the poetic frame. The rustic, colloquial language is used with a flexible metrical system, and the result is a language that is not only read but also heard – a language that ‘talks’ and even ‘bleeds’, as it were. His main concern is always the sound of spoken words, and the metrical application remains ancillary to this concern to make the sound effective within a poetic framework. It is surely Frost’s credit that he manages to mix the informal language of New England with the formal metrical pattern in order to make poetry dramatic.

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