

Teaching ideas

AS/A-level English Language and Literature 7706/7707

Poetic voices: Phonoaesthetics

Introduction

These teaching ideas can be used with students when exploring how poets use sounds in poetry to achieve a range of stylistic effects. They offer students the opportunity to explore the significance of sounds, from looking at poetry as an oral tradition to using the phonetic alphabet as an analytical tool and how sound choices contribute to meaning, helping to create a sense of character, events, location and memories. They also encourage students to think about phonoaesthetics, including ideas related to euphony and cacophony. Students will also have the opportunity to compare phonological aspects across different poems from the anthology.

The suggested activities are intended to span two lessons lasting one hour each.

Learning objectives

Students will:

- consider poetry as an oral tradition
- explore examples of blended mode in their chosen poet
- consider the importance of sounds in poetry
- explore how phonological choices and patterns contribute to meaning
- evaluate the significance of sounds in their chosen set of poems.

Prior knowledge needed

Students should have some knowledge of the following:

- phonetics and phonology
- speech and writing differences
- vocal articulatory processes
- phonetic transcription and using the phonetic alphabet.

Lesson preparation

Teachers will need the following resources:

- Johnstone, B (2007), *Getting back to poetry's oral tradition*, The Guardian. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/mar/12/gettingbacktopoetrysoralt>
- a selection of openings to poems from your chosen poet
- A3 paper
- the English phonetic alphabet
- *AQA Poetic Voices Anthology*
- Crystal, D. (1995). *Phonoaesthetically speaking*. English Today (42). Available online at: www.davidcrystal.community.librios.com/?fileid=-4009

Activities

Lesson 1

- Distribute Johnson's (2007) article and discuss poetry as an oral tradition. Why is the spoken mode important in poetry? What phonological elements might be important in poetry and why? Does it still exist as an art form today? How might the spoken mode contribute to poetic voice?
- Revise knowledge of speech-writing similarities and differences, using a table for comparison.
- Take around 8-10 extracts of different poems from your chosen poet. On A3 paper, draw a speech-writing continuum. Taking one extract as an example, decide as a class where this extract would 'best fit' on the continuum, taking speech-writing components into consideration. Language elements to consider might include:
 - use of dialogue and spoken language features
 - use of accent, dialect and sociolect
 - rhythm and musicality
 - use of punctuation to indicate prosodic variation.
- Students then place the remaining extracts on the continuum, drawing up arguments and justifications for each one. These ideas can then be shared as a class. Students can discuss the reasons for their own choices, and any different placements across groups.
- What conclusions can be made about your chosen poet's distinctive style and voice? Re-introduce the concept of idiolect and how spoken language features might contribute to identity and poetic voice.
- Taking a single poem, this next activity will begin to explore sound choices in further detail. Some suggested poems that might be particularly useful/illuminating for this activity are:
 - Robert Browning: *Meeting at Night*
 - John Donne: *The Flea*
 - Seamus Heaney: *Digging*
 - Carol Ann Duffy: *Valentine*
- Distribute copies of the phonetic alphabet and refresh students' knowledge of this, in how phonemic symbols are representative of individual speech sounds.
- Ask students to transcribe particular words/phrases/lines from these poems and then reflect on the poet's phonological choices. These extracts can be displayed and annotated as students share their ideas. Why have the poets chosen the sounds they have, and how do these contribute to overall meaning? Ask students to look out for, in particular:
 - use of different articulatory processes (affricates; fricatives; nasals; plosives; vowels)
 - syllabic patterns and complexities (polysyllabic/monosyllabic patterns; consonant-vowel patterns)
 - short and long vowels/consonants
 - instances of onomatopoeia and other such sound 'effects'

Preparation for next lesson

- Students should return to their *AQA Poetic Voices Anthology* and explore sound choices in a different poem. Importance should be placed on the link between phonetics and semantics – how do the two language levels work together?

Lesson 2

- Start the lesson by asking students to elicit the meaning of 'phonoaesthetics', and use this as an opportunity to introduce the concepts of euphony and cacophony.
- Ask students to 'rate' the following words on a scale of pleasantness, focusing on sound rather than meaning (students could also contribute their own words that they think 'sound pleasant or unpleasant'):
 - *jewel, violin, gripe, throw, rasp, gravel, heart, jazz, mellow, peril, chinchilla, rasp, thicken, phlegmatic, whispers*
- Using students decisions, ask the class to spot phonological patterns in the data, using the following as prompts:
 - distribution of certain sounds (Do certain consonants/vowels usually appear in words that are deemed to be 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant'?)
 - manners of articulation
 - syllabic structure and complexity
 - stressed and unstressed syllable distribution.
- Read Crystal's (1995) article on phonoaesthetics and discuss the components he found that contributed to a sense of phonoaesthetics.
- Work on a poem from the anthology, applying knowledge learnt about phonoaesthetics. This could be the same poem that was looked at in depth in lesson one. Ask students to take a selection of words/phrases from the poem that have inherent phonoaesthetic qualities, exploring:
 - euphony and cacophony
 - how sound choices contribute to creating character, location and events
 - the association and relationship between sound and semantics. What happens if a 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant' word is replaced with something else, and does this give you an insight into the writer's conscious language choices?
- Finally, round off the learning by asking students to write up an analysis of sound choices and phonoaesthetics in an individual poem. In line with the specification requirements, this should be focused on how sound contributes to the creation of point of view, character, place, time, location or memories.

Further work

- Students could conduct a mini-investigation, using the words they have taken to be euphonic/cacophonous as stimulus material and asking others to judge them. Can they draw out phonological patterns from their own data to compare to the results found in Crystal (1995)?
- Listen to a selection of readings by your chosen poet. There are numerous recordings available via YouTube, either by the original poet (for Duffy and Heaney) or by another speaker (for Donne and Browning).

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