

Juncture as a Poetic Device

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The investigation of juncture, as a poetic device, involves an area of study that straddles the boundary between linguistics and literary studies and in each of which juncture plays a distinct role. Juncture serves as a suprasegmental phonemic cue, being a means to signal the borders of most words and groups of words in speech. In literary language, it contributes in creating a type of ambiguity that enriches texts with multiple meanings and thus poetic effects. While considerable work has been done to explore the significance of juncture in speech, very poor attention has been given to its role in literature. This study, therefore, takes this role by probing the poetic aspects of juncture that govern its use in literary texts. It also analyses some texts to show its mechanism to produce poetic effects. The study concludes that juncture serves as a device of style to create phonological ambiguity necessary for wordplay.

Key words: *Juncture, ambiguity, homophonic phrases, poetic device, humor and pun.*

Introduction

Juncture is a term used in phonology to indicate “any phonetic feature whose presence signals a grammatical boundary” (Trask, 1996: 189). As Crystal (1980: 188) points out, it helps to demarcate grammatical units such as morphemes, words or clauses. The demarcation of such units in speech is essential since word boundaries are seldom marked and therefore it is difficult to identify where one word ends and the next begins. This may be more crucial in some words or word sequences with boundary ambiguities (as in *nitrate* and *a name*). Juncture, here, makes the word boundary perceptible and helps listeners recognise the sequence as either *nitrate* or *night rate* for the first and *a name* or *an aim* for the second. Nicolosi et al. (2004: 166) underscores this by defining juncture as “a suprasegmental phonemic cue, a means by which a listener can distinguish between otherwise identical sequences of sounds that have different meanings”. On this basis, juncture serves as those phonetic features that not only signal the borderlines between or among words but also differentiate dozens of minimal pairs which “contain the same sequence of phonemes but differ in their prosody, meaning and orthography” (Karn and Yeni-Komshian, 1995: 1).

Hence, a lot of minimal pairs which are distinguishable in this way explain the significant nature of juncture in speech and communication (Gimson, 1970: 300; Crystal, 1980: 188; Roach, 1983: 110 and Brown, 2014: 94).

As noted, juncture has another significance which has not been mentioned and discussed in most phonetics and phonology books. It concerns the role of juncture in literary language particularly the language of humour. The confusion about the boundaries between words has been exploited by some literary men and joke makers to produce a form of speech play which involves identical sequences of phonemes with different meanings. In this vein, juncture serves to create a certain type of phonological ambiguity (Shultz and Pilon, 1973: 728) through playful shifting of word boundaries which gives rise to different meanings and thus to wordplay (Thaler, 2016: 59). For instance, an advertiser plays upon word boundaries in the idiom “Have a nice day” to produce an utterance with different nuances “Have an Ice Day” referring to the cigarette brand West Ice. This wordplay shows the vital role of juncture in such use of language which relies heavily on different resources of ambiguity. In spite of the fact that there are many examples of playing upon words through juncture they have not been tackled with any reference to juncture but they have been analysed and discussed as a joke, pun or homophony as in (Lederer, 1981; Nash, 1985; Attardo et al. (1994); Ross, 1998; Bucaria, 2004; Seewoester, 2011; Thaler, 2016; Żyśko, 2017). This matter has made most researchers ignorant of the importance of juncture in the literary language, particularly, the language of humour, and disregarded its role as a device to create the type of ambiguity required to play upon words.

The problem of this study stems from the fact that although considerable work has been done to explore the phenomenon of juncture and its significance in speech, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, no research has studied the role of juncture in the literary language except for some scattered references in few books on the language of humour such as Ermida (2008) and Chiaro (1992, 2011). The study, therefore, strives to project this role and explore the poetic aspects of juncture that govern its use in literary texts. It also tries hard to analyse some of these texts to show the mechanism of this phenomenon to produce poetic effects. Moreover, it clarifies the reasons behind disregarding the significance of juncture as a poetic device in most linguistic and stylistic research.

This study hypothesizes that juncture is a phonological device for creating phonological ambiguity to bring about poetic effects on the literary language. This study is divided into seven sections. The first section is an introduction. The second presents a theoretical account of juncture as a phonological phenomenon. The third one shows types of juncture and identifies the one that arouses ambiguity. The fourth illustrates the significance of juncture in speech opening the door to illuminate its role in literature. The fifth discusses juncture as a latent resource of ambiguity which represents a crucial factor in some of the poetic devices.

In the sixth section, examples were analysed to show the poetic effects of juncture. In the seventh section, the study arrives at some conclusions that pave the way for further in English and other languages.

Juncture: What, how and why?

The word “juncture” is derived from the Latin word *iunctura* which means “joint”. In linguistics, it refers to “the relationship between one sound and the sounds that immediately precede or follow it” (Roach, 1983: 110). In other words, it is the label given to a number of features that may occur at the boundary between words in connected speech such that, even though the two words may be fully linked together, the boundary between them is nevertheless unambiguous and clear” (Underhill, 1994: 68). This phenomenon was first recognized by Henry Sweet (1906) as early as 1906 without labelling it as juncture. In 1931, Trager and Bloch (1941) first used the name “open juncture” and gave it a phonemic status. Later on, Harris (1951) introduced “juncture” to replace “syllabification” to signal the difference between “a name” and “an aim” or “I scream” and “ice cream” (For further details see Jones, 1956; Trager and Smith, 1951; Bloomfield, 1933).

In phonology, juncture has been viewed differently by different scholars. For Brosnahan and Malmberg (1970: 192); Crystal (1980: 188) and Trask (1996:189), juncture is a phonetic feature that can demarcate grammatical units such as morpheme, word, or clause. A similar view is that of Brown and Millers (2013: 245) in which juncture “corresponds to the phonetic features linking successive speech segments where there is a grammatical boundary”. Matthews (1997:209) defines it as the degree of linkage between successive sounds in speech. Other linguists like Gimson (1970: 300); Botha (1973: 221) Chomsky and Halle (1968: 12); Katamba (1989: 189) and Gussenhoven and Jacobs (1998: 77) prefer to use the term boundary instead to refer to such phonetic features which may be retained in the speech continuum that marks word or morpheme boundaries. Their views assert Lehiste’s claim (1964: 172) that juncture is a phonologically manifested boundary between linguistic units.

Juncture can be realised in several ways. Gimson (1970:300); West (1975:104); Crystal (1980:188) and Skandera and Burleigh (2005: 61) show that the most obvious realisation of a junctural feature is pause or silence, but in connected speech this feature is not as common as the use of various modifications to the beginnings and endings of grammatical units. It is “primarily a lengthening of a sound after which it, i.e. a boundary, occurs” as Hill (1955: 534) confirms. Lehiste (1964: 196-200) and Hughes (1969: 254), on their parts, refer to these modifications in terms of a dependency on other correlates to identify word-boundaries. These correlations are of segmental and supra-segmental nature. They include the occurrence of certain phonemes adjacent to word-boundaries, which abide by the phonotactics of the language, and modifications of phonatory patterns such as the insertion of glottal stops,

modifications of suprasegmental patterns of fundamental frequency, duration, intensity, lengthening of phonemes in onsets and coda and other modifications (For further details see: Weber, 2000; Keating et al., 1999: 171).

Skandera and Burleigh (2005: 61) opine that there are principally four different ways of realizing juncture. For them, the most reliable boundary signals are the rule governed phonetic processes that take place when phonemes occur at the beginning or end of linguistic units, such as the partial devoicing of some lenis consonants in word-initial position and the devoicing of these consonants in word-final position. In other words, “maybe the most reliable clues as to how to distinguish the separate words of an utterance come from allophones in complementary distribution”. Hence, juncture through allophones can be exemplified by the sequence /ðætstʌf/. It is the allophonic realisation of the phonemes preceding and following the word boundary which makes that the word boundary perceptible and helps us recognise the sequence as either *that stuff* or *that’s tough*. In *that stuff* the word-final /t/ is not aspirated and the word-initial /s/ is articulated with its usual fortis intensity, whereas in *that’s tough* the word-final /s/ with less intensity and the word-initial /t/ is aspirated.

This role of juncture helps a listener to distinguish between phrases that have the same phonemic representation but different patterns in allophonic variation across the word boundary as the example above and other phrases such as *keep sticking/ keeps ticking; all that I’m after today/ all the time after today* and *I scream/ ice cream* (Skandera and Burleigh, 2005: 61; Nicolosi et al., 2004: 166; Crystal, 1980: 188).

Types of Juncture

In modern English, there have been several attempts to establish a typology of junctures. The most common one is that based on the notions of “close” and “open” (Roach, 1983; Crystal, 1980; Gimson, 1970). Close juncture refers to unperceived space between the sounds within unbroken segmental phoneme. That is, in close juncture, the syllables follow one upon the other closely with no perceptual pause between them. Crystal (1980: 188) also describes it as “the normal transitions between sounds within a word”. Close juncture, thus, expresses continuity in the articulation of two successive sounds, as if there is a movement from sound to sound without intervening pauses or delay. For example, in the “my turn” /maɪ tɜ:n/, the relationship between /m/ and /aɪ/ in “my”, /t/ and /ɜ:/, /ɜ:/ and /n/ in “turn” is said to be one of close juncture.

Junctural features at a word boundary are referred to as open juncture (also known as plus juncture). Open juncture is subdivided into external open juncture and internal open juncture (Skandera and Burleigh, 2005; Roach, 1983). If the word boundary is preceded or followed

by a pause, i. e. if that word boundary occurs at the beginning or at the end of an utterance, it is an external open juncture. In the sequence “my turn”, /m/ is preceded by a pause and /n/ is followed by a pause, and so /m/ and /n/ are said to be in a position of external open juncture. On the other hand, if the word boundary is not preceded or followed by a pause, i. e. if the words on both sides of the boundary run together, it is the case of the internal open juncture. Thus, this type of juncture is a manner of transition that occurs at word boundaries. For Roberts (1956: 231), internal open juncture is a “special kind of break between phonemes, thus it breaks up the phonemic flow and makes words”. It is the transition between successive sounds marked by a break in articulatory continuity, as by a pause or the modification of a preceding or following sound, and often indicating a division between words (Monteron, 2011). For example, the same sequence “my turn” has an internal open juncture between /a/ and /t/, that distinguishes “my turn” from “might earn”. Roach (1983: 110) refers to internal open juncture in his claim “what makes perceptible the difference between /maɪ tʒ:n/ and /maɪ t ʒ:n/ is the position of the word boundary that has some effect on the realisation of the /t/ phoneme”. This kind of juncture, therefore, represents those phonetic features that differentiate dozens of minimal pairs “which contain the same sequence of phonemes but differ in their prosody, meaning and orthography” (Karn and Yeni-Komshian, 1995:1). In English there are a lot of minimal pairs that can be distinguishable in this way, for example “peace talks”/ “pie stalks”, “that stuff”/ “that’s tough”, “he lies”/ “heal eyes” and others (Roach, 1983: 110-11; Gimson, 1970:300). Thus, the internal open juncture by means of which we can invent such ingenious minimal pairs will be the focus of this study.

The Significance of Juncture

In the flow of speech, the word boundaries are seldom marked and therefore it is impossible to tell where one word ends and the next begins. Juncture, here, plays a key role since it allows intentional pauses in between words to break the flow of speech and enable hearers understand better while digesting the words. On this basis, it serves in determining and expressing the intended meaning to the audience more clearly, accurately and intelligibly (Redford, 2012; Butler, 2005; Paterno, 2003; Pickering, 2002; Cutler and Butterfield, 1992).

The importance of juncture also lies in the fact that it is “a suprasegmental phonemic cue, a means by which a listener can distinguish between otherwise identical sequences of sounds that have different meanings” as Nicolosi et al. (2004: 166) points out. Therefore, it allows speakers and listeners of a given language to produce and hear differences between words and phrases each comprise the same sequence of phonemes. Juncture, for instance, allows English speakers to produce and hear the distinction between “see Mill” and “seem ill” in “Did he see Mill? / Did he seem ill?”

Crystal (1980); Butler (2005) and Redford (2012) illustrate that juncture also helps to identify grammatical units in a way that affects the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. For example, “a name” and “an aim” are phonemically the same /əneim/ but the position of juncture converts the meaning and causes a perceptible difference. Another example is “nitrate” and “night rate” which are both phonemically the same /naitreit/ but have different juncture. They fall into different grammatical categories- the first is a noun and the second is a phrase- since they have different types of juncture a close juncture in the first and an open internal juncture in the second. Those examples highlight the significance of juncture in speech and assert its role in expressing and understanding the intended meanings. They also indicate that the incorrect use of juncture can easily be a cause to misunderstanding and potential breakdowns in communication.

Far from its contribution in speech intelligibility and better communication, juncture may have more significance when it is deliberately used in the literary language especially the language of humour. In this type of language, it is exploited as a device to create ambiguity rather than a means to resolve it. For instance, in joke making, juncture yields ambiguity via playful shifting of word boundaries which gives rise to different meanings for the same phonemic sequence, or in other words, ambiguous sequences that have identical pronunciation with two unrelated meanings. Those sequences represent a key component for playing upon words which is required in different kinds of humour. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, juncture in this vein, has received very poor attention, if any, in most circles of linguistic and stylistic studies and analysis. This has made many researchers to be ignorant of its importance and role in literary language. Thus, the following section is to shed light on juncture as a latent resource for ambiguity to illustrate its uses as a poetic device in literary texts.

Juncture as a Source of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is generally taken to be a property enjoyed by signs that bear multiple (legitimate) interpretations. In linguistics, it refers to a word, phrase or sentence that expresses more than one meaning (Richard et al, 1985; Leech, 1981; Crystal, 1980; Falk, 1978). It operates at all linguistic analysis levels, “characterized by the association of a single orthographic or phonological string with more than one meaning” as Kennedy (2011: 510) points out. According to Ullmann (1962), there are three types of linguistic ambiguity; phonological, grammatical and lexical.

The type of ambiguity associated with juncture is phonological ambiguity¹ which “may result in spoken language, from the phonetic structure of the sentence” (ibid: 156). In his attempt to illustrate phonological ambiguity, Ullmann makes an implicit reference to juncture. He states that, in connected speech, individual words rarely stand out as separate phonological units. Two or more words may combine to make a breath-group in which words may lose their stress and even become mutilated and run together. The process of telescoping and loss of stress sometimes make the breath groups homophonic and then potentially ambiguous. This is exactly what happens when there is a syllable break at internal open juncture that distinguishes otherwise homophonic phrases and results in phonological ambiguity (Rajimwale, 2006: 119; Skandera and Burleigh, 2005: 62; Nasr, 1997: 45).

According to Schultz and Pilon (1973: 728), phonological ambiguity “occurs when a given phonological sequence can be interpreted in more than one way”. They identify two resources of ambiguity, juncture or homophony. In the case of juncture, phonological ambiguity occurs when there is confusion about the boundaries between words as in /jə stʌfɪnəʊz kən lɪ:d tə prɒbləm/ heard and interpreted in two different ways:

The stuffy nose can lead to problems.
The stuff he knows can lead to problems.

In this example, phonological ambiguity stems from the sequence /stʌfɪnəʊz/ where the confusion about the position of internal open juncture gives rise to the minimal pairs “stuffy nose” and “stuff he knows” also regarded as homophonic phrases. For Schultz and Pilon (ibid), phonological ambiguity also occurs in the condition of homophony where two historically distinct words happen to have similar pronunciations. An example to this phenomenon could be the homophones “through” and “threw” clearly distinct in written context, but when given orally, both are pronounced as /θru:/. They argue that as homophony is closely linked to both sounds and lexical items, this sub- category can be considered a component of phonological and lexical ambiguity as well.

This research adopts Ullmann’s view that attributes phonological ambiguity to juncture and deals with homophony as “a sub-category of lexical ambiguity” (For more details see Persson, 1990; Panman, 1982; Ullmann, 1962 and others). Another point is that homophony is a reason behind overlooking the study of phonological ambiguity and the role of juncture in the literary language. This may be due to the stance of some authors who regard homophony as the only phonological aspect of ambiguity and categorize it as a sub-category of lexical ambiguity (Bussman, 1998; Richard et al., 1985). As a result, they neglect

¹ Phonological ambiguity is the less defined and discussed type of ambiguity because it has been regarded by some authors (Bussman, 1998; Richard et al., 1985) as a subcategory of lexical ambiguity, such as homophony.

phonological ambiguity and its sources such as juncture. Therefore, phonological ambiguity is the less defined and discussed type of ambiguity.

Poetic Aspects of Juncture

The potential to yield ambiguous sequences that permit more than one meaning makes juncture a latent resource for ambiguity. This may be the poetic aspect of juncture that contributes inventively in the literary language, specifically, the language of humour. As noted, it has been cleverly exploited by literary men and joke makers to play upon words producing certain types of puns and jokes. Thus, phonological ambiguity arose from the confusion about the boundaries between words has been the linguistic mechanism adopted to create some rhetorical devices mainly based on ambiguity and play upon words such as pun and paronomasia².

Jackobson (1960: 371) asserts the relationship between those devices and ambiguity in his claim that “two similar phonemic sequences near to each other are prone to assume a paronomastic function”. That is when two phonemic sequences sound alike, there is a tendency to postulate a relationship between them and think of pun. This is also indicated by Sherzer (1978: 336) who views these devices as “a form of speech play in which a word or a phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings”. Before deciding that a speaker intends only one of its meanings, a receiver should carefully examine the possibility that he/she intends more than one. A good example of such speech play is shown in the “The Four Candles” sketch below. The setting is a hardware shop. Ronnie Corbett is behind the counter. Ronnie Baker is the customer:

Baker: Four candles.

Corbett: places four candles on the counter.

Barker: No, four candles!

Corbett: Well, there you are four candles!

Barker: No, fork 'andles! 'andles for forks!

In this sketch, there is a playful shifting of word boundaries which gives rise to different meanings and thus to pun. The ambiguous sequence /fɔ:kændl/ has two different interpretations /fɔ: kændl/ and /fɔ:k ændl/ according to the position of the internal open juncture whether between “four” and “candles” or “fork” and “handles”. This example clarifies how the phenomenon of “juncture” can be used to make phonological ambiguity arise for poetic purposes.

² In rhetorical tradition, the pun is called “paronomasia” meaning “a play on word similar to pun” (Shaw, 1972: 277; Harvey, 1967: 619; Barenhart, 1967: 854). For more details see (Alkawwaz, 2013).

In their attempts to examine the features of language that make people laugh, many scholars shed light on the phonological ambiguity and its role in the language of humour. They clarify that the possibility for two meanings understood from one utterance represents a good source for jokes and other forms of humour based on saying many unrelated things simultaneously to mislead the hearer or reader and give him a surprise (Ross 1998; Chiaro 1992; Pepicello, 1987; Raskin, 1985, 1987; Nash, 1985 and others). Ross (1998: 10) confirms the role of phonological ambiguity in jokes- via homophones, stress and intonation. Though the term “juncture” does not appear in Ross’s work, it has been indicated in his claim that, “in spoken language, individual words run together. Only the context tells the listener how the stream of sounds should be divided” as in “some others I’ve seen versus some mothers I’ve seen”. For him, this type of ambiguity is used to produce sequences of popular jokes formulas as shown in the following pun-based joke from Michael (1982: 53). A drunken man to people repairing their car:

- Hey fellas, what’s wrong with this car?
- Piston broke.
- That’s funny. So am I.

The joke, here, is built on the phonological ambiguity caused by confusion about the boundaries between words where the phonemic sequence /pɪstənbrəʊk/ conjures two morphemic structures “piston broke” and “pissed and broke” according to the placement of internal open juncture.

Ross has not been the only scholar who tackles jokes based on phonological ambiguity, or more precisely, based on playful shifting of word boundaries without referring to the phenomenon of “juncture”. Nash (1985), in his classification of pun-based jokes, distinguishes homophones from homophonic phrases puns. The first involves homophones which are pairs of words having the same sound but different meanings whereas the second depends on the homophonic phrases that “sound alike but the sum of meaning is different” (ibid: 139). According to Nash, homophonic phrases are very rare since they are not readily available in the stock of language, as shown below:

- Where did Humpty Dumpty leave his hat?
- Humpty dumped ’is ’at on the wall.

The homophonic phrasal pun occurs in the answer of this joke which puns with elaborate homophony on the nursery-rhyme line (Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall). Although juncture plays a great role in distinguishing such homophonic phrases it was not accounted by Nash as a device for making this type of puns.

This matter is differently viewed by Ermida (2008) who obviously makes a direct reference to juncture as one of the linguistic resources employed to create puns. In her book, *the language of Comic Narratives: Humor Construction in Short Stories*, Ermida deals with sound as the most prolific source of verbal humour and discusses the different forms that a sound takes e.g. homophony, juncture, sound symbolism, assonance, alliteration, rhyme and rhythm. For her, puns based on sounds can be either homophonic or phonetic. While homophonic puns involve words with similar pronunciation but different spelling and meaning, phonetic puns can be “constructed on the basis of juncture, according to which the same segmental elements form more than one morphemic structure (as in a name/ an aim)” (ibid: 42). She cites a good example of phonetic pun as a linguistic basis for a joke or a riddle³:

- Why can you not starve in the desert?
- Because of the sandwiches there.

Pepicello (1989: 209)

Playing upon the word boundaries produces the complex homophony of the answer which establishes a convoluted parallel between ingenious homophonic phrases viz. the word “sandwiches” and a fragment of a relative clause that involves three words (sand which is). This example clarifies how salient the poetic function of juncture is in literary texts, such as jokes and riddles, where confused boundary between words contributes in making homophonic phrases.

Instances of phrasal homophony are rare since they are not readily available in stock of the language, but they are forced as shown in the above examples. Nash (1985: 193) and Ermida (2008: 42) confirm that homophonic phrases are much rarer than homophonic words, and they require a greater degree of imagination to be created and of attention to be detected. Ermida (ibid: 42) adds that the rhythm and stress assignment patterns of English language impose a timing that does not yield easily a type of inter-lexical manipulation. These might be some extra reasons added to the ones stated above that justify why the poetic aspects of juncture have not been examined despite the considerable work done on juncture since the beginning of the last century.

Conclusion

To understand the role of juncture in literary language, the study reveals that juncture is a phonological phenomenon that goes beyond expressing and understanding the intended

³ According to Augarde (1984: 1), a riddle is a form of guessing language game that has been a part of the folklore of most cultures from ancient times. It often appears as a deliberately ambiguous question requiring a thoughtful and witty answer.



meanings by marking the boundaries between or among words. It is sometimes used as a device to arouse phonological ambiguity through witty shifting of word boundaries, assigning various meanings to the same phonemic sequence. The potentiality to yield such ambiguous sequences makes juncture a resource of ambiguity that has been cleverly exploited in literary language, especially that of humour. Consequently, juncture acts as a poetic device to create rather than a means to resolve phonological ambiguity.

This study also recognises that internal open juncture is the only type of juncture that can be used as a device to create ambiguity. This is because a syllable break at an internal open juncture sometimes distinguishes homophonic phrases which contain the same sequence of phonemes but differ in meaning and spelling. Accordingly, juncture-based wordplay accounts for the mechanism of this poetic device. The potential of internal open juncture to create ambiguity has been skilfully manipulated by writers and joke makers to produce juncture-based puns, jokes, and rhymes as proven by this study.

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