

SEMANTIC FIELDS IN SELECTED POEMS FROM *SEASON SONGS* BY TED HUGHES

LAUMA-TERĒZE LAPA

University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract. Ted Hughes (1930–1998), the Poet Laureate (1984–1998) wrote a collection entitled *Season Songs*, originally intended for child audience. Analysis of the obvious semantic fields in three selected poems from the collection shows that the poems possess more than the aspects intended for children – alongside observation of the season and nature, they point also at transcendent values and experiences beyond and outside childhood.

Key words: semantic fields, text analysis, Ted Hughes, poetry analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes (born Edward James Hughes, 1930–1998) (*Earth-Moon*, 2014), has been called one of the greatest English poets in the 20th century by a number of critics (*Ted Hughes*, n.d.). He was a prolific author, published 18 volumes of poems, translations from Greek and Spanish, anthologies, 18 volumes of books for children, plays, radio plays, essays, books about poetry (*Earth-Moon*, 2014).

He was named Poet Laureate in 1984 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2014: Hughes, Ted) and held the seat till his death. His poetry is characterised by lack of sentimentality (*ibid.*) and painful and paradoxical awareness of life and death. He received numerous awards and medals (*Earth-Moon*, 2014), including The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1974 and the Guardian Children's Fiction Award in 1985.

The poems analysed in this paper come from *Season Songs*, a collection of poems first published in 1975, then revised and updated in 1985. The original target audience of the poems is children, but the poetry definitely speaks of subjects that transcend mere experiences of childhood. The poems in the collection have been organised according to the season, starting from spring and ending with winter.

I have chosen three poems for analysis here, namely, *A March Calf* (Hughes, 1985:13), *The Harvest Moon* (*ibid.*: 50) and *A Crane fly in September* (*ibid.*: 65). Each poem represents a season, namely, Spring, Summer and Autumn and, thus, allow an insight into the whole collection.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics defines semantic field as ‘A distinct part of the lexicon defined by some general term or concept’ (Matthews, 2014), but the notion is broader than that. A number of approaches emerge from the discussion on semantic fields, and all present different advantages for analysing a text. Halliday (1977: 24) considers semantic fields as part of interpersonal function of the language, describing the levels of formality, distance and sometimes attitudes. Semantic fields also indicate relationships of things in space (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2013: 414) or time. In this study, the aspect of indicating attitudes is somewhat relevant, given that the originally intended audience (children) have limited life experience in the matters depicted in the selected poems. The semantic fields are forming attitudes and distances towards such phenomena as life and death, experience of seasons, etc.

Semantic fields also provide a way to conceptualise (and then organise the concepts) the ever-changing reality (Lyons, 1977: 253) and can be arbitrarily chosen based on the given text and conceptual keywords therein. Anna Wierzbicka (Lehrer and Kittay, 1992: 211) goes further than that, proposing that there exist ‘semantic primitives’ which underlie every language. The semantic primitives can be used to understand general concepts, such as directions, binary opposites etc., for more see (Wierzbicka, 1996).

A form of semantic field often overlooked is the rhyme. Rhyme can be considered as a structurally-phonetic device that unifies words on the basis of similarity of phonetic structure, simultaneously actualising their semantic opposition. Lotman (1976: 58) considers rhyme

one of the most conflictive dialectical levels of poetic structure. It fulfills the function performed by semantic parallelisms in unrhymed popular and psalmic poetry. It juxtaposes lines in pairs, forcing us to perceive them not as a conjunction of two separate utterances, but as two modes of saying the same thing. Rhyme on the morphological-lexical level parallels the function of anaphora on the syntactic level.

A study of rhyme alone in Ted Hughes’ poetry would be rather voluminous; therefore, in this paper I will only outline the possibilities such study opens by discussing some exemplary rhymes in the selected poems as a variant of the semantic field.

In this paper I will follow the conceptual and somewhat arbitrary organisation of the semantic fields, as the semantic primitives approach would require a different angle and much wider scope to return meaningful results.

DISCUSSION

Every poem besides fields that are characteristic only to itself contains semantic fields related to the season represented, the subject mentioned in the title, observer, nature (also represented in the title), doom and colour. In case rhyme is present, an additional field is created. I will discuss the semantic fields in the poems separately, in order of appearance in the collection.

1 A MARCH CALF

The poem describes a calf's first days in the stable and out in the field. The unique semantic fields are: CALF {March calf, half of him legs, standing in dunged straw, shining-eyed, required nothing more/but that mother's milk come back often, blue-reddish/purple muzzle, plunge out, glistens, to moo}; ANTHROPOMORPHISM {he is dressed in his best – his blacks and his whites, Little Fauntleroy quiffed and glossy, a Sunday suit, a wedding natty get-up, Little fellow, elbowing push of his plans, dapper profile}; INNOCENCE {suck, he just wobbles his tail and glistens, hopes bustling, Little Fauntleroy, a Sunday suit, mother's milk, to be free, he shivers for the world licking his side, to moo}; OBSERVER {he is dressed in his best Little Fauntleroy quiffed and glossy, little syllogism, what did cattle ever find here, when I block the light, a bulk from space}.

The semantic fields shared in the whole collection are: SEASON (spring) {March calf, grass, surface of such a wideness, plunges out}; TIME {eager to prepare himself, when I/a bulk from space/ block the light, hungry people are getting hungrier}; DOOM {block the light, a bulk from space; ready for the worst, shut up in his hopeful religion; a little at a time, of each new thing; too much and too sudden is too frightening; hungry people/butchers developing expertise and markets}; COLOUR {block the light; a bulk from space; he glistens; his blacks and his whites; glossy; a Sunday suit; blue-reddish/purple muzzle; dunged straw; shining-eyed; grass}.

The semantic fields intersect: ANTHROPOMORPHISM through COLOUR with INNOCENCE and DOOM {blacks and whites; glistens; Sunday suit; block the light}, thus creating tension between the field of INNOCENCE and the field of DOOM. The shared allusions to F. H. Burnett's novel (Little Fauntleroy, a Sunday suit, glossy) in the fields of OBSERVER, INNOCENCE and ANTHROPOMORPHISM impose a feeling that the animal is a noble creature; further intersections between the field of OBSERVER and the field of TIME {when I/a bulk from space block the light, hungry people are getting hungrier} bring about a simultaneous realisation of the fragility of life as observed and the imminence of death for the noble creature.

However transient (intersection/opposition of the fields of DOOM, TIME, COLOUR), life is to be enjoyed (intersection of the fields of CALF and COLOUR).

2 HARVEST MOON

The poem presents a picture of the *harvest moon* – full moon in late August, when it is known to be close to the earth and shine well into the night.

At least four semantic fields can be distinguished here: COLOUR {the flame-red moon; gold doubloon; the bottom of the sky; all the moonlit cows and all the sheep; as if red hot; the gold fields of stiff wheat}, this field also includes the field of SEASON; DOOM (Doomsday){flame-red harvest moon; takes off; sinks upward; a bassoon; deep drum; so people cannot sleep; a kneeling vigil; in a religious hush; stare up at her petrified; while she swells; filling heaven; red hot; the end of the world; reap us; rivers sweat; the melting hills}; MOMENTUM {rolls along; gently bouncing; takes off; sinks upward; to lie in the bottom of the sky; the harvest moon has come; booming softly like a bassoon; she swells; filling heaven; sailing closer and closer} and IMMOBILITY {earth replies at night; like a deep drum; elms and oak trees keep a kneeling vigil; religious hush; stare up at her petrified; the end of the world; stiff wheat cry}. The field of RHYME is present as well {a/harvest moon; vast balloon; gold doubloon; a bassoon; deep drum;/ b/cannot sleep; oak trees keep; all the sheep;/ c/red hot; end of the world;/ d/wheat; reap us/}

The very notion of harvest contains the allusion (in the Western world) and overtones of death and final judgement, thus, of doom. The field of COLOUR overlaps with the field of DOOM {red, red-hot, harvest; fields of wheat}, and supports it. The fields of MOMENTUM and IMMOBILITY stand in contrast, which is supported and furthered by the subfields of RHYME (c, d). The other parts of the field of RHYME (see above) (a, b, c) deepen the presence of the field of DOOM both in assonance and semantically (moon and doubloon being solid objects vs. balloon which is technically air and drum and bassoon which are not quite solid either; moon/balloon also being quiet, while bassoon and drum definitely are used to make noise).

The interaction of the fields creates a picture of the nature forces on the move, and the people only recipients of the riches and momentum of nature. The parallels between the people and wheat through the field of IMMOBILITY contribute to a feeling of the final harvest, the judgement day, which is certain, but not immediate.

3 A CRANEFLY IN SEPTEMBER

The poem paints a picture of a fragile insect living out its last days in autumn grass.

In this poem, the field of NATURE includes the field of SEASON {grass-mesh; basket-work of limbs; mountain summits; water; ginger-glistening wings; the grass forest; the mystery of this forest; bamboo fuselage; lobster shoulders; pinhead dragon; the frayed apple leaves; the raven; in nettles; other galaxies; sky's Northward September procession}, the field of COMBAT includes the field

of DEATH and TIME in the adjectives {struggling not flying; stiff weightless basket-work of limbs; antique wain ceremonial cart; blundering from collision to collision; exerting her last; she rests long minutes; only a marvel can help her; she cannot be helped in any way; jointed bamboo fuselage; colourless church window of her wings; will come to an end; already superfluous; monstrous excess; frayed apple leaves; the raven; the defunct tractor; the vast soft armistice; abandons her; tinily embattled}; the field of OBSERVER {She is struggling – not flying; rocking not planing over water; not dipping her tail but blundering; long collision; aimless; exerting her last to escape of whatever it is; she rests; only a marvel can help her; this giant watches; the giant who knows; she cannot be helped in any way; like; will come to an end; in mid-search; quite soon is already superfluous; everything a problem beyond her; her cumbering limbs and cumbered brain} includes the field of GENERALISATION and TIME. The field of COLOUR simultaneously is also a field of TEXTURES {grass-mesh; mountain summits; water; ginger-glistening wings; the garden; bamboo; frayed apple leaves; the raven; in nettles; colourless church window of her wings}. By far one of the largest here, the field of DOOM which also includes some elements of the field of DEATH {antique; blundering collision; no particular direction; overwhelming; exerting; whatever it is; long minutes; long strides, long reachings, reelings; colourless church window; will come to an end, in mid-search, quite soon; everything is already superfluous; monstrous excess; are a problem beyond her; the calculus of glucose and chitin inadequate; infinities; raven; defunct; vast armistice; an Empire on the move; abandons; embattled} includes also the field of TIME and MOMENTUM.

The field of COMBAT besides the idea of struggle {struggling; blundering; collision; exerting; embattled} contains also the fields of futility {blundering, aimless, no particular direction, superfluous etc.} and so points to the field of DOOM and inevitable destruction of the insect. This is further augmented by the field of OBSERVER.

The obvious intersection points are the field of COLOUR which intersects with practically all the fields in the poem either through seasonal words, such as *grass, wings, bamboo*, or textures (*mesh, wings, frayed leaves, nettles, church window, chitin*) and the field of TIME {long, blundering, antique, will come to an end, infinities, etc.}. The presence of TIME in the fields of COMBAT, DOOM and OBSERVER creates an effect of transience and desperate struggle.

The exaggerations {long minutes, everything is already superfluous, monstrous excess, vast armistice} in the field of DOOM and COMBAT work towards creating a tension between life (which is a battle) and death (which is part of the cycle of life and thus unavoidable). The field of COMBAT intersects with the field of DOOM also at the point of DEATH {raven, defunct, will come to an end, already superfluous} creating the image of an epic last stand of a hero against unsurmountable foe. Being an allusion to common European mythology, *raven* functions both as an indicator of battle and the future death, thus pointing to DOOM. The field of DOOM itself contains contrasting notions of

MOMENTUM and STOPPING, where the notions connected with the crane-fly are connected with futile and therefore stopping activity, whilst the cycles of nature are pictured as simultaneously blind and unstoppable.

CONCLUSIONS

Having looked at the semantic fields in three poems from the collection, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions.

First of all, in all poems the field of the main image (calf, moon, crane) intersects with the field of DOOM.

In all poems various aspects of the field of NATURE are strongly present, intersecting with the fields of DOOM and the main image.

The field of the OBSERVER adds an overtone of storytelling and objectivity, also contributing to the tensions between the concepts of life and death.

In the *March Calf*, the field of COLOUR creates a tension with the field of DOOM via the field of INNOCENCE, thus creating an ironic picture of the innocent animal doomed to slaughter. The contrast is deepened by references to the 'hungrier' people who are also 'butchers' on the one hand and the 'race to win' that the calf enters on behalf of the cattle on the other hand.

In *The Harvest Moon*, the field of COLOUR supports the field of DOOM, whilst the tension between the moving sky and the immobile earth furthers the life-death opposition.

In *A Crane-fly in September*, the field of COLOUR is part of the fields of NATURE and COMBAT, and allows perceiving the first two as related and in opposition. This opposition is furthered in the relationship of the field of CRANE-FLY and NATURE through the opposites futility-momentum and fragility-momentum. *Season Songs* create a feeling of experiencing an event (seeing a newborn calf, watching the moon in August, observing a fragile insect caught in grass) through the semantic field of the OBSERVER. The experience is split into the observation and naming (registering nuances, emotionally coloured words) and expectation (which in all cases has an overtone of do). The intensity of observation is achieved (partially) through the interaction/intersection of the fields of doom and the main image in the poems.

The intended audience of the collection is children. These poems then could be perceived as not 'writing down' to the child reader, but rather telling fascinating stories, a little sad, a little ironic, taking into account all the acuteness of perception of new things. To the adult reader, *Season Songs* remind of the passing of all things and the endless cycles of nature which include also the human observer.

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Lauma Tereze Lapa currently works at the University of Latvia, Faculty of Humanities. Her research interests include Old English, poetry, hermeneutics and text analysis. Email: dialogic.hermeneutics@gmail.com.