

Phonological Characteristics of Vowel Phonemes in French Poetry

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Abstract:

This article is devoted to the phonological characteristics of vowel phonemes in French poetry. The phonological properties of vowel phonemes in French poetry play a key role in musicality, rhythm, and sound effects. These properties can be analyzed according to several criteria. Nasal vowels are unique to the French language and are often used in poetry to create certain sound effects.

There is also the phenomenon of vowel harmony in poetry, where the vowels of a line or couplet harmonize with each other, creating a certain resonance or flow.

The use of vowels in French poetry goes far beyond their phonetic role. Poets use their properties to enhance the musicality, tone, and atmosphere of a poem.

Keywords: bards, buffoon-acrobats, jongleurs, poetry, squares, sonority, orfluidity, assonance, musicality, rhythm, longue, ralenti, le vers.

INTRODUCTION

The great value of French literature of the Middle Ages comes precisely from the close relationship between this written literature and folklore. Popular poetry of the Middle Ages had performers who sometimes reworked entire passages as they pleased. They were professionals: bards, musicians and a sort of buffoon-acrobats, called jongleurs. They sang epic poems or sacred canticles in castles or in public squares, accompanying themselves on the viol. These jongleurs, bards and musicians were for the most part illiterate. They had learned the songs they performed from others. They considered

their pieces as collective works, composed in a traditional style and devoid of traits specific to the author's personality.

The phonological characteristics of vowel phonemes in French poetry play a key role in musicality, rhythm, and sound effects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

These characteristics can be analyzed through several criteria. Here are some important elements to consider:

1. Oral and nasal vowels

In French, vowels can be oral (e.g., [a], [e], [o]) or nasal (e.g., [ã], [ẽ], [õ]).

Nasal vowels are quite specific to the French language and are often used to create particular sound effects in poetry. Poets can play on nasality to accentuate phonetic effects, creating a specific atmosphere.

2. Vowel length

In standard French, vowel length does not have a very marked phonemic role (unlike in languages like Italian or Finnish), but poetry can exploit vowel length to work on the rhythm and musicality of the verse. For example, a longer vowel can add a sense of slowness or lengthening of a moment.

3. Vowel harmony

There is also a phenomenon of vowel harmony in poetry, where the vowels of a verse or stanza agree with each other to create a certain sonority or fluidity. For example, the repetition of open vowels like [a] or [ɔ] can give a sense of sound coherence.

Vocal harmony can also be manifested through the repetition of the same phonemes in verses, forming assonances (repetition of vowels) or alliterations (repetition of consonants).

4. Open and Closed Vowels

Vowels can be classified as open (such as [a], [ɔ]) or closed (such as [i], [u]). The choice between open and closed vowels in a line can influence the tone of the poetry. Open vowels are often perceived as richer, while closed vowels are more incisive and can express more intense or more closed feelings.

5. The Importance of Vowel Rhymes

Vowel rhymes play a central role in French poetry. The richness of vowels and their relationship in rhymes can create a sound structure that supports the rhythm of the poem. Perfect rhymes (such as "chant" / "enfant") and imperfect or rich rhymes, which share the same vowel or a combination of vowels, are poetic techniques used to emphasize musicality.

6. Diphthongs and Triphthongs

Although diphthongs and triphthongs are more common in other languages, in French they sometimes appear, especially in words of foreign origin or regional variations. Diphthongs (two vowels pronounced as a single unit, such as [wa] or [ɛi]) can be used to diversify the phonetic effects in a poem.

7. Assonance and Consonance Play

Assonance, which is the repetition of vowels, and consonance, which concerns the repetition of consonants, are phonological devices widely used in poetry to accentuate the musicality of the text. Assonance plays particularly with vowel phonemes to add fluidity or rhythm to the reading.

8. Effects on Rhythm and Cadence

The rhythm of poetry depends largely on the alternation between vowels and consonants, and the arrangement of these vowels can create effects such as elision, caesura, or cadence. For example, a poem with an abundance of open vowels may have a slower, more solemn rhythm, while more closed, more dynamic vowels may accelerate the rhythm of the verse.

DISCUSSION

Examples to illustrate the phonological characteristics of vowel phonemes in French poetry.

a) Oral and nasal vowels

Nasal vowels, often used in poetry, create distinct sounds that add richness to the reading.

Example of nasal assonance:

"Un sang d'azur, qui sous l'air d'un matin pur..." (Paul Valéry, *La Jeune Parque*). Here, the nasal vowel [ã] in "sang" and "azur" produces a particular sound that reinforces the idea of depth and mystery.

b) Vowel length

Long vowels can be used to lengthen a line, making it more solemn or contemplative.

Example with long vowels:

"O solitude! O nature!" (Alphonse de Lamartine, *Le Lac*). The length of the vowel [o] in "solitude" and "nature" gives a slower rhythm, accentuating the melancholy of the poem.

c) Vowel harmony

Vowel harmony, through the repetition of similar vowels, creates a fluidity and sound harmony in the verse.

Example of vowel harmony:

"The sea is more beautiful than the soul of a child." (Guillaume Apollinaire, *La Chanson du Mal-Aimé*). Here, the harmony of the open vowels [ɛ] and [a] in "sea" and "soul" reinforces the softness and beauty of the picture described.

d) Open and closed vowels

The choice between open and closed vowels can change the tone of poetry. Closed vowels are often more intense and impactful.

Example with closed vowels:

"I am the dark, the widower, the inconsolable." (Paul Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles*). The closed vowel [i] in "ténébreux" and "veuf" produces a contraction effect, which intensifies the dark and desperate tone of the poem.

Example with open vowels:

"Sous le ciel immense, la mer infini" (Victor Hugo, *Les Contemplations*). The use of the open vowels [a] and [ɛ] in "ciel" and "mer" gives a feeling of openness, grandeur and freedom.

e) Vowel rhymes

Vowel rhymes unite two lines with similar or identical vowels.

Example of a rich rhyme:

"The long sobs of the violins of autumn / Wound my heart with a monotonous languor." (Paul Verlaine, *Chanson d'automne*). The vowels [ɔ] and [o] in "automne" and "monotone" create a perfect rhyme, reinforcing the monotony and sadness expressed in the poem.

f) Diphthongs and triphthongs

Although less common in standard French, diphthongs can appear in words of foreign origin or in specific poems, creating interesting effects.

Example of a diphthong:

"Voyageur, les ciels te sont ouverts" (Arthur Rimbaud, *Le Bateau Ivre*). The diphthong [wa] in "voyageur" produces a fluid and dreamlike sound, adding to the imagery of the journey.

g) Assonance and Consonance Play

Assonance, which focuses on the repetition of vowels, and consonance, which involves consonants, are important poetic techniques.

Example of assonance:

"The wind in the reeds / Of the evening is soft and warm." (Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin*). The repetition of the vowel [o] in "reeds," "evening," and "warm" creates a fluidity and a sense of calm.

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Example of assonance:

"The wind in the reeds / of the evening is soft and warm." (Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetière marin*). The repetition of the vowel [o] in "reeds," "evening," and "chaud" creates a fluidity and a sense of calm.

i) Effects on rhythm and cadence

The distribution of vowels directly affects the rhythm of a poem. For example, a preponderance of long vowels slows down the line; while more closed vowels can energize a passage.

Example with a long vowel:

"A golden silence." (Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le Poète meurtre*). The vowel [o] in "silence" and "or" produces a length that slows down the rhythm, evoking the stillness of silence.

RESULTS

In short, the use of vowels in French poetry goes far beyond their phonetic role. Poets exploit their characteristics to reinforce the musicality, tone, and atmosphere of the poem, while playing with sonorities to capture the attention of the reader or viewer.

They were professionals: bards, musicians and a sort of buffoon-acrobats, called jongleurs. They sang epic poems or hymns in castles or public squares, accompanying themselves on the viol. These jugglers, bards and musicians were mostly illiterate. They had learned the songs they performed from others. They considered their pieces to be collective works, composed in a traditional style and devoid of any traits specific to the author's personality.

Of all the genres of popular poetry reworked by the jongleurs, it is the heroic period that has been best preserved. Today we have about a hundred poems, the oldest of which date back to the beginning of the XIIth century and the most recent from the XIIIth century. These poems are known under the name of *chansons de jete*. They each contain from a thousand to twenty thousand verses grouped in stanzas of unequal length, from 5 to 40 decasyllabic verses linked together by means of

simple assonances. Later these assonances were replaced by correct rhymes. These poems were composed to be sung from one end to the other to a single melody and their execution must have resembled somewhat the manner of reciting Russian bylines, in use among our bards until recent times.

In fact, the subject of the chansons de geste was based on a real historical event, but overloaded with fantastic elements. The original source of the chansons de geste was the war epic of the Merovingian kings and the first kings of the Carolingian dynasty. The stories of that time had passed into oral tradition, then, later, written down in French and reworked in the 10th-11th centuries by jongleurs, they have come down to us under the name of chansons de geste.

The chansons de geste form, according to their content, three cycles: geste du roi, geste de Garin de Montglane and geste de Doon de Mayence.

The poems of the first cycle are a popular heroic epic. The central character is always the king who unites in his person the idea of justice and popular strength. He also personifies the idea of the fatherland by defending it against external and internal enemies. The most remarkable work of this cycle is the Chanson de Roland. It is the oldest and most famous monument of French epic poetry.

CONCLUSION

Si l'épopée de ce cycle est surtout empreinte d'héroïsme patriotique, la place d'honneur dans les poèmes du second cycle est réservée à l'image d'un vassal parfait, qui sert avec désintéressement son roi et sa patrie. Par contre, le roi y apparaît plutôt faible, indécis, incapable de maintenir l'intégrité de la patrie son royaume-sans l'aide de ses vassaux entreprenants et énergiques. La figure centrale de ce cycle est Guillaume d'Orange, Le poème le plus célèbre en est le Couronnement de Louis.

Finally, in the poems of the third cycle, we find most often represented internal conflicts. Sometimes they are feudal lords struggling with other feudal lords, sometimes rebellious vassals who join forces against their king. The interpretation of these conflicts is not the same everywhere. In some poems the author invites us to deplore the infamous conduct of the vassals. There are others, on the other hand, where sympathy is expressed for the rebellious vassals while the king is represented in an unfavorable light. The most striking poem of this cycle is Raoul de Cambrai.

What characterizes the French epic as a whole is the great variety of situations and feelings. We see, alongside high character achievements and heroic exploits, the minute details of daily life. All this - characters and action - is very characteristic for the period.

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