

ASPECTS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN INTONATION AND THE INTERPRETATION OF POEMS

Johann Z. Uys

University of Fort Hare*

ABSTRACT

Two hypotheses concerning the relation between intonation and the interpretation of poems were tested: firstly, that appropriate renderings of poems could contribute to a closer indication of 'possible' (and probable) meanings, and secondly, that instances of diverse interpretations could occur when individuals (including the poets themselves), render poems in accordance with their own personal opinions.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended as a contribution towards the illumination of the relationship between the intonation of poems and their interpretation.

Poets and literary critics alike generally claim that the sound structure of poetry is important. Too often, however, interpreters of poems only pay lip-service to this fact. Although some attention is paid to sound phenomena such as alliteration, assonance and rhyme, these are static aspects that are determined by the lexical structure. The author is not aware that the dynamic aspects of poetry have been investigated systematically with a view to establishing their contribution towards the overall meaning and impact of poems.

The hypothesis presented here is that an exhaustive interpretation of a poem requires all possible renderings of the

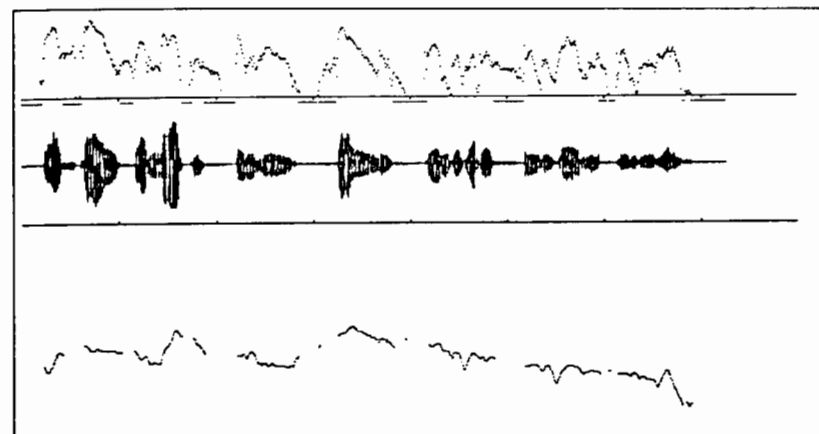
poem to be taken into consideration. The reduced hypothesis is that any one interpretation rests to an appreciable extent, on the intonational dynamics of a particular rendering. In general the particular rendering is in the mind of the interpreter and he/she does not make explicit its particular structure. Thus, the contribution of the particular dynamic structure of the intonation remains hidden, and the difference in interpretation between two persons' 'imagined' rendering remains unexplainable.

2. METHOD

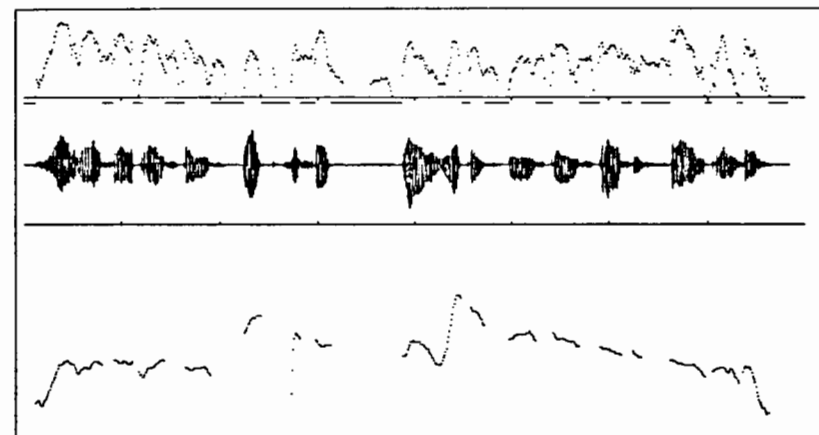
Several mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans were asked to recite a number of Afrikaans poems. These were recorded on tape in a professional recording studio.

A group of 20 mother-tongue listeners was then asked to determine the acceptability of these renderings of the poems on a ten point scale. This procedure led to two poems being selected by all subjects as having been rendered adequately in all respects. These two poems, "Skuiling" and "Sproeireën", are both by D.J. Opperman.

The two poems were then analysed acoustically, focussing on the extraction of the Fo contours. Of the one poem, a recording by the poet himself was available on cassette tape, but because the



[jəi skœyl fuərliuapəx ʔənfɑ:r fəiləx tiəndi vudəs fani viərləx ʔeniriən]



[mɑ:r jəi sal ʔɑ:nstəns ʔuək bəse f hu nitəxʔɔ:s kləin stroisis fəl ʔen biən]

Fig. 1 The four lines of the poem "Skuiling" compressed into two run-on lines because of enjambment.

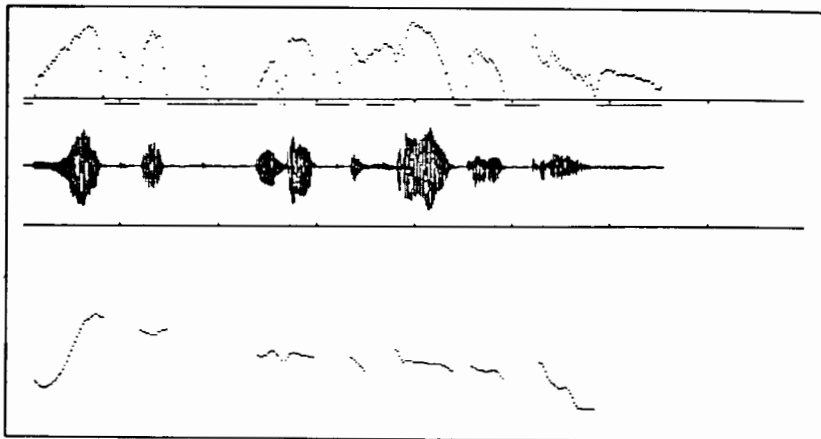
quality of the sound-track was poor, the mother-tongue speaker who had recited the other two poems, was requested to imitate the poet's own rendering as closely as possible. This was analysed in the same way as the other two, utilizing the equipment and Fo extraction programme of the Institute of Perception Research of the University of Technology, Eindhoven (Netherlands). (Cf. Hermes 1988).

3. RESULTS

A print-out of the Fo contour of the four lines of poem no. 1 ("Skuiling"), clearly revealing which words are receiving prominence through increased pitch, is provided in Fig. 1.

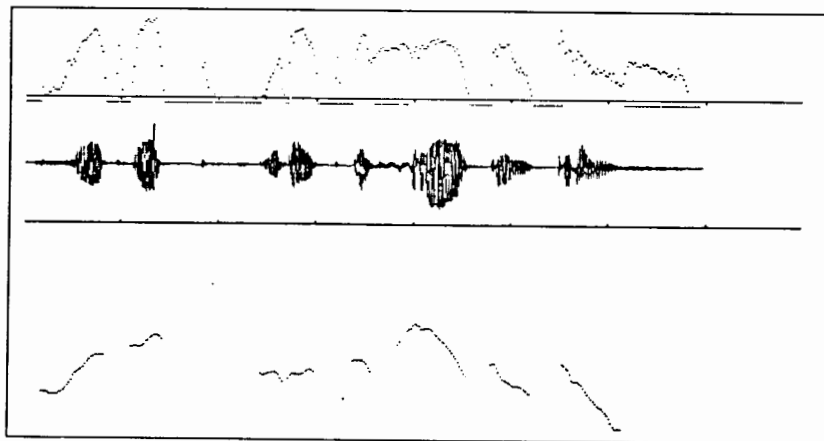
Fig. 2 and 3 represent the versions by a mother-tongue speaker and by the poet himself of the particular line indicated, viz. "...weet ek hoe dat 'n vrou kan troos"

* Guest researcher at the Institute of Perception Research, University of Technology, Eindhoven and guest co-worker at the Institute of Phonetic Sciences, University of Groningen as well.



[viət ʔek hʊdat ʔə frœu kan truəs]

Fig. 2 The realization of the line "...weet ek hoe dat 'n vrou kan troos" by a mother-tongue speaker.



[viət ʔek hʊdat ʔə frœu kan truəs]

Fig. 3 The realization of the line "...weet ek hoe dat 'n vrou kan troos" by the poet himself.

(".. do I know how a woman can comfort"). This line has been selected, because it exemplifies a marked difference in accentuation and intonation.

4. DISCUSSION

The poem "Skuiling" (Eng. "Shelter") has been selected because the interpretation of this quatrain has been outlined clearly in literary criticisms (cf. Scholtz 1978:102). According to these views, the unborn child is addressed and advised that, although it still finds safe shelter in its mother's womb *provisionally*, it will realize soon that we human-beings of skin and bone, are very fragile.

Now, the acoustic realization of this poem does not alter the overall meaning of the poem as such, but it does seem to focus particular attention to certain "propositions". These propositions all happen to be words loaded with modality, viz. the adverbs "voorlopig" ("provisionally"), "veilig" ("safely") and "ook" ("also") and the adjective "nietig" ("fragile").

The relatively "simple" interpretation of the poem should, therefore, be relativized. The strong reliance on adverbs and adjectives lend a particular modal 'colour' to the otherwise straight-forward interpretation. (Cf. Oakeshott-Taylor, 1984.)

Turning to the second poem, the selected portion illustrates the dependence of one interpretation rather than another on a particular realization and underlines how extremely useful it is to have a rendering by the poet himself. Figs. 2 and 3 show the interesting contrasts that can be created by comparing the mother-tongue speaker with the poet himself.

Within the same rhythmic structure, different locations of tonal accent shift the focus of the line from "weet" (Eng. "know") (mother-tongue speaker) to "vrou" (Eng. "woman") (poet) (cf. Cruttenden, 1986: 89).

From the orthographic form of the poem, both interpretations are latent,

but the realization dynamics make only one *or* the other possible.

5. CONCLUSION

Both hypotheses tested were confirmed, viz.

- 1) that the specific realizations of the poems at hand, focussed special attention to certain key propositions, thereby providing more concrete substance to the illocutionary force of the message, and narrowing the field of alternative interpretations;
- 2) that two different renderings of a poem reveal ever so slight, but highly interesting differences in emphases.

The overall conclusion that seems warranted by the result, is that the intonation pattern of a poem does have important implications for the interpretation of such literary works.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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7. REFERENCES

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