

A Study on Deviations in the Poem 'Reported Missing'

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Abstract

In literary stylistics, "deviation" is a crucial technique in poetic creation, where breaking linguistic norms can produce a foregrounding effect, thereby highlighting a poem's theme. Barry Cole's "Reported Missing" is a narrative poem abundant with deviations. It tells the story of an unsuccessful dialogue between a police officer and a man searching for his missing lover. Since the language used by the two men is disparate, their conversation ends in vain. The woman remains missing as a result of their communication breakdown. This paper aims to uncover the sources of the failure by examining the deviations in this unsuccessful dialogue, including deviation in the domain, deviation in the medium of transmission, and deviation in the tenor of discourse. These linguistic deviations represent the dramatic conflicts between the objective and subjective world, sparking reflection on the subjective beauty of one's emotions and the harsh objective reality.

Keywords: Barry Cole; Deviation; Foregrounding

1. Introduction

"Deviation" is an essential concept in literary stylistics. It primarily refers to the unconventional use of language that deviates from traditional grammatical rules or norms, standing in contrast to the "norm" (Wales, 2001, p. 103). "Given that poetry often incorporates a significant amount of deviation, studying such deviations is considered key to comprehending poetry." (Short, 1996, p. 10). Levi (1965) categorizes deviations into two main types: external deviation and internal deviation (Short, 1996, p. 59). The former refers to deviations from a norm external to the text, such as lexical or grammatical norms, while the latter refers to deviations from a norm within the text, such as style.

Leech, in his *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969), categorizes deviations into eight types: lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, geographical deviation, semantic deviation, dialectal deviation, discursal deviation, and diachronic deviation (Leech, 2001, p. 42 & Guragain, 2022). This classification has been extensively utilized in literary criticism, particularly in analyzing and appreciating poetic language. Later, Short (1996) reorganizes the deviation categories and discusses internal deviation. He suggests that at the linguistic level, deviations can occur in phonology, geography, meter, syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, pragmatics, and others (Short, 1996, p. 34). In terms of internal deviation, Short discusses text style changes as an essential example of internal deviation. Changes in text style encompass four aspects: dialect, medium, tenor, and domain (Short, 1996, pp. 82 - 97). The second and third types of changes often intertwine, blurring their boundaries. Internal deviation is an inherent feature of a text and is not easily recognized by readers. Short's discussion on this part makes readers more sensitive to changes in text style, opening a broader space for poetry analysis.

In literature, particularly in poetry, deviations often achieve the effect of "foregrounding" (Abadi, 2022). The term "foregrounding" originates from art criticism, referring to placing important images at the front of a painting to highlight key points. Foregrounding is the outcome of various diversions from linguistic norms" (Short, 1996, p. 12). Deviation and foregrounding have a causal relationship (Fatima, 2021). Writers use deviations to achieve foregrounding in their work, making it innovative, refreshing, and eye-catching (Samandarov, 2022).

"Reported Missing", a poem by British poet Barry Cole (1936-2014), is a vivid example of a work that uses numerous deviations to accentuate its theme. After publication, it has received widespread praise, with critics deeming the poem "imaginative, satirical, and insightful" (Peter, 1983, p. 234). This paper will analyze various deviations in the poem to explore its creativity, satire, and wisdom and investigate its unique charm.

2. Various Deviations in "Reported Missing"

"Reported Missing" is a narrative poem consisting of 178 English words. It comprises eight question-and-answer exchanges and a summary, narrating a dialogue between a police officer and a man reporting a missing woman. The poem takes the form of a dialogue, a deviation from conventional poetry in style. Readers can easily recognize this internal deviation.

However, within this apparent stylistic change, other deviations are worth further exploration.

2.1 Deviation in the Domain

Deviation in the domain refers to using different languages, resulting in communication barriers. The police officer uses objective language to describe factual information, while the man uses poetic language. The police officer uses objective language; in other words, precise, concrete, descriptive, fact-based, and emotionless language. He asks eight questions about the missing woman:

- 1) Can you give me a precise description?
- 2) Could you give me a metaphor?
- 3) Were there any noticeable peculiarities?
- 4) Any particular color?
- 5) What do you mean by distinctive?
- 6) Where were you?
- 7) Her eyes? What about her eyes?
- 8) Are you implying that violence was used? (Peter, 1983, p. 234)

His first question "can you give me a precise description" embodies the principle of precision, a necessity for his professional role. Subsequent questions are also precise, such as the third, fourth, and fifth questions, which focus on particular details. In the eighth question "are you implying that violence was used", the police officer adheres to the principle of factuality, desiring to know the truth. However, the man reporting the missing woman does not cooperate in language and does not provide precise, concrete, or factual answers. Instead, his description is subjective, filled with poetic elements. It is like a poetic text in which the man expresses his passion for the missing woman. According to Hu (2001), "Language defines our identity" (Hu, 2001, p. 13). In this context, the man reporting is considered a poet because his language is filled with features typical of poetry." (Hu, 2001, p. 13). For example, in response to the sixth question, the man's reply is quite poetic. "Level with her mouth, level with her eyes" is a lexical repetition, a language feature typical of poetry. Repetition can also achieve a foregrounding effect, highlighting the intimate distance between the man and the woman at that time. In response to the eighth question, the man uses a memorable metaphor: "Only the gentle hammer blow of her kisses." Metaphor is a typical figure of speech in poetic creation.

The man's answers are poetic, enabling the reader to imagine the intimate moments between the man and the woman., which is the effect literary language aims to achieve, to awaken people from an indifferent state of mind (Qin, 2001, p. vii). Unfortunately, these beautiful poetic words of the man do not awaken the diligent police officer. They continue to follow their respective linguistic tracks. Since they belong to different language domains; they never meet from beginning to end.

2.2 Deviation in the Medium of Transmission

Deviation in the Medium of Transmission refers to the man's monologue-style answers, breaking the norm of the police officer's dialogue-style communication. The police officer begins his dialogue with a question and continues the dialogue with interactive questions. He asks eight consecutive questions, but since the man reporting deviates from the topic, the police officer cannot obtain sufficient information and declares that he cannot find the missing woman, ending the dialogue. From beginning to end, the police officer never forgets his role as a speaker in the dialogue. He expects the participation of the man every time he speaks. He initiates the topic, continues the topic, and ends the topic. However, to his dismay, he cannot complete a simple report for a missing person.

In conversation, "we strive to express statements that are true, relevant, sufficiently informative, and conveyed clearly" (Hu, 2001, p. 253). This accurately encapsulates Grice's famous "Cooperative Principle" (Hu, 2001, p. 253). The man reporting the missing woman responds in a monologue style, unable to answer the police officer's questions, clearly violating the cooperative principle of dialogue. Firstly, regarding the quality principle, the man does not provide as much information as is required. When asked to describe the woman's appearance precisely, he says that the woman's lips are soft. This information is not helpful for the report of a missing person. He should have answered with useful information such as the lips' shape, thickness, and color. Secondly, regarding the relation principle, he does not directly answer the police officer's questions but talks about unrelated topics. For example, he does not answer whether the woman has been subjected to violence but talks about memorable kisses. Finally, his answer to "where were you" violates the principle of manner. He says: "Closer than I am to anyone at present." The answer completely deviates from the question.

Although the man's responses violate most of the principles of the cooperative principle in dialogue, if his words are viewed as personal monologues, then his unconventional responses can be explained. These words do not annoy the listeners; instead they touch people in the heart. When the police officer's questions are removed, the man's off-topic responses are transformed into passionate monologues:

"Her lips were soft, soft as an open mouth. Her hair hung heavily. I could recall little but its distinctive scent, the smell of a woman's hair. (I was) closer than I am to anyone at present, level with her mouth, level with her eyes. There were two (eyes), both black. (I can recall) only the gentle hammer blow of her kisses, the scent of her breath, the..." (Peter, 1983, p. 18)

This monologue beautifully describes the woman and the man's love for her. If it were not interrupted by the police officer, this poet-like man would continue to express his emotions, immersed in beautiful memories. When people need to express their feelings in a monologue, the wording tends to be subjective, emphasizing sensual pleasure, which contrasts sharply with the police officer's question-based expression. One party in the dialogue uses a two-way dialogue communication method, but the other party does not cooperate and focuses on a one-way emotional monologue, which makes the dialogue impossible.

2.3 Deviation in the Tenor of Discourse

Conversations usually have specific communication goals or tenors. On the surface, the police officer and the man reporting have a common goal: to find the missing woman. That is why the dialogue took place. Usually, a dialogue with a common purpose should be smooth. However, the man's deviation in the domain and the medium of transmission creates a challenging dialogue, prompting the reader to re-examine the tenor of the dialogue.

In this narrative poem, the speakers' domain and mode of language are determined by the purpose (i.e., tenor) of the dialogue. So what are the real tenors of the police officer and the man reporting? The police officer needs to complete a report for a missing person. The objective is to find the missing person, so objective information about the person, such as age, height, appearance, and place of last appearance, is necessary. His job is to conduct a dialogue to obtain adequate information to achieve his communication objective. The man's description, however, uses literary language to express emotion. According to the famous statement by English poet William Wordsworth: "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The man's language is also the overflow of his intense feelings, a moving love poem. In other words, his purpose in using language is to express emotion. "Completely personal, with no implications of communication with others" (Hu, 2001, p. 14). Perhaps the man reporting already knows he can no longer find his lover but cannot extricate himself from that past relationship. Therefore, when communicating with the police officer, he does not enter the role of communication but delivers a monologue, aiming to express personal feelings and his infinite longing for his lover.

It is worth mentioning that the man reporting ignores essential information such as the woman's name, height, appearance, and place of last appearance. The ignored information is a strong hint, sometimes more important than explicit information. In this poem, the information that has been ignored may imply that the man's fundamental purpose of coming to the police station is not to find the missing woman, but to confide, recall, and self-reflect. The departure of his lover and the disappearance of love make the man unable to accept it for a while. Hoping to find the missing lover and to regain the feelings of the time is human nature.

Nevertheless, why did the lover who used to be so close to him suddenly disappear? The man was puzzled, so he fell into memory, hoping to find the crux of the failure of this relationship through introspection. In the police station, the man is embarking on a journey of emotional exploration and self-finding, living in the inner world.

In this journey of self-reflection of emotions, if the man himself cannot find the reason for the departure of his lover, then it is almost impossible for the police officer to complete this task. The man reporting concludes: "I regret we know of no one answering to such a description." A conversation with different purposes of the participants is doomed to fail.

2.4 Semantic Deviation: The Power of Metaphor

How deep are the feelings that the man reporting has for the woman that he would continue to recall and reflect even while being recorded by the police? The metaphor "the gentle

hammer blow of her kisses" answers this question. In the metaphor "the gentle hammer blow of her kisses", "kisses" is the tenor, and "hammer blow" is the vehicle. At first glance, these two seem irrelevant, but upon careful consideration, their similarities can easily be found. The poet gives "kisses" a new sensory experience through this expression, adding the finishing touch to the poem.

First, "hammer blow" reflects the power of "kisses". The brutal imagery of "hammer blow" and the powerful sound make readers instantly feel a strong force. "Kisses" also contain power, but a gentle power, so "hammer blow" needs to be modified by "gentle" to connect the similarities between the two subtly.

Second, "hammer blow" expresses the sensory pleasure of "kisses". Regular, gentle tapping, like a massage, makes people feel comfortable, enjoyable, and intoxicated. "Kisses", used in the plural form, implies intense affection. These passionate kisses also bring people similar sensory stimulation and mental pleasure. Even though the man is in the police station, he is still immersed in the beautiful time of being entwined.

Finally, "hammer blow" and "kisses" leave a deep impression on the man in the poem and the readers of the poem. "Hammer blow" usually makes people think of toughness, pain, and violence, but what kind of experience is "gentle hammer blow"? The word "gentle" significantly weakens the negative associations. The impression left is a unique taste. The lover's kisses and love, aren't they similar? It is memorable, enduring, and a mix of pain and joy.

The use of metaphor, a rhetorical figure, "can make abstract things tangible" (Leech, 2001, p. 158) and can "make the day-to-day seem wonderful and unusual" (Hu, 2001, p. 289). Through this metaphor, the man makes kisses between him and the woman tangible, releasing his intense emotion and expressing his infinite longing for his lover. At the same time, this metaphor perfectly portrays the man's current emotion of mixed joy and pain. The lover is missing, love has disappeared, the dialogue has failed, and no one understands - this is the cruel reality. In contrast, the world of inner memories is so beautiful that it makes people linger. This particular metaphor showcases the poet's "innovative imagination" in poetic creation.

3. Foregrounded Characters and Themes

In literary creation, deviation is an essential creative technique, and "deviation is meaningful, and the author always has his own intentions when choosing a certain deviation." (Qin, 2001, p. 1969). In the narrative poem "Reported Missing", the poet uses various deviations to create a foregrounding effect, highlighting the characters and theme of the poem.

The parts that use deviation in the poem are precisely what the poet wishes the reader to focus on. In "Reported Missing", the image and discourse of the police officer represent the "norm," while those of the man reporting deviate from the police officer. Consequently, this foregrounds the character image of the man reporting, implying he is a more significant figure than the police officer. Judging from the standpoint of identity and frequency of questions, the police officer holds discourse control. However, when evaluated in terms of

speech length and topic control power, the true wielder of discourse power rests with the man reporting. This control over discourse power is manifested in two areas: the speech of the man reporting averages eight words, while the speech of the police officer averages six, although the police officer is always the one to pose questions. As police officers have to adhere to specific standards when handling cases, his language is formulaic and unchanging. Police officers are allowed to have personal characteristics; they are merely general representatives of authority.

In contrast, the man reporting is not constrained: he is eloquent and expressive; his language changes according to his thought process, with parallelism and metaphor; his language is beautiful; his thought process is smooth; his emotions are naturally revealed, which is profoundly moving. He violates the cooperative principle of dialogue to express his emotions. Ordinarily, people in society need to "cooperate with others; to establish social relationships, people must respect others' 'face.'" (Cook, 1999, p. 43). However, the man in the poem does not give the police officer "face". As a result, he holds the practical dominance in the dialogue.

"Sometimes writers directly transmit what they think to the reader, and other times they transmit information through the dialogue of characters." (Leech, 2001, p. 302). Poet Barry Cole uses the characters' dialogue in the poem to convey his inner thoughts to readers. The man reporting repeatedly deviates from the police officer, who represents authority, objectivity, and standards, bravely voicing his inner truth and releasing personal emotions, which is similar to poet Barry Cole himself: possessing imagination and courage to deviate from the mainstream and norms. Barry Cole dropped out of school at 15 but educated himself through extensive reading and began writing poetry and novels. He published his first poetry collection at the age of 32 and was renowned by critics and fellow poets (Lucas, 2014). "Although he did not receive formal education, Barry Cole has always maintained contact with the academic community." (Peter, 1983, p. 320). After his works were published, he got a job teaching post-war British literature at a university. He had never received formal higher education, but he was teaching literature at a university. Such an experience allowed him to think from the perspective of both an "outsider and insider" of the academic circle, thus making his creation unique and somewhat satirical. Later, he became a freelance writer. At the same time, he served as a senior editor at the government's Central Information Office. These two positions, seemingly similar but fundamentally different, troubled Barry Cole; he was unable to balance the two, "his government work and his creative work were completely separate" (Peter, 1983, p. 320).

Poet Barry Cole is an "outsider and insider" of the academic circle. He works for the government while also being a freelance writer. Such a dual identity and dual work sharply contrast the multiple deviations in reality: the "insider" of the academic circle's is the norm, the poet's self-taught "outsider" identity is a deviation; the objective, standard-focused government work is the norm, while the imaginative and emotionally expressive freelance writer is a deviation from the norm. This life with deviations created a narrative poem with deviations. The failed dialogue and the sharp contrast between the two character images in the poem ultimately reflect the conflict between the objective world and the subjective world.

The two exist in two different parallel spaces with no intersection. Barry Cole always maintained a distance from his university and government work, and both jobs were temporary. He eventually resigned from the university and government jobs, became a novelist and poet, and embarked on a journey to find himself again. The man reporting in the poem is speaking on behalf of the poet: in this standardized objective world, through various discourse deviations, the subjective inner world is foregrounded, emotions are released, and imagination is given full play.

4. Conclusion

The poem "Reported Missing" presents the process of a dialogue between a police officer and a man reporting like a story. The different communication purposes of the two lead to various deviations: deviation in the domain, deviation in the medium of transmission, semantic deviation, and deviation in the tenor of discourse. These deviations foreground the characters and theme of the poem, presenting the characters' dramatic conflict and the poet's unique creative conception. The man's lack of cooperation in the dialogue poses a challenge to the world's objective reality; his "nonsense" is a monologue of the inner world from the heart. In this standardized objective world, people can release their emotions and let their imagination fly through various deviations in their dialogue.

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