Post-Publication Version of Margaret Ferguson's article on poetic syntax from the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.

SYNTAX, POETIC (Greek, *syntaxis*, "a putting together in order"). All oral and written language uses that fall under culturally specific definitions of poetry have *syntax*, if that term is defined as a meaning-making arrangement of words in a sequence. But not all poetries, oral or written, are distinguished from other discourses in ways that would allow us to say that they have poetic syntax, as opposed to syntax in general; nor is there scholarly consensus about what that latter phrase might mean across different times, places, and languages. Modern linguists have, for instance, noted parallels between ancient Greek, Arabic, and Indian (Sanskrit) concepts of the *proposition* or *sentence*, a unit that Aristotle defined in his *Rhetoric* as expressing a "complete" thought and that has been foundational to many theories of syntax. But cross-cultural generalizations about syntax are difficult: problems of translation arise not only between what linguists call *natural* languages but between competing professional metalanguages for describing syntactic features in relation to sometimes overlapping ones assigned to related areas such as grammar, morphology, phonemics, *semantics, and *rhetoric, with its many rules aimed at classifying and controlling the use of tropes. *Tropes in some taxonomic systems include a specific category of syntactic figures (figures of speech) recognized as such by virtue of their alleged deviation from what is thought to be ordinary or normal language use.

As a term that denotes both an object and a field of study, *syntax* has been decisively marked by the origins of the word itself in ancient Greece. The earliest uses of *syntaxis* have to do not with words or mathematical symbols but with soldiers. But many scholars have seen issues of hierarchy, governance, and obedience as no less critical to the workings of linguistic syntax than they are to the workings of armies and of the societies that armies are thought to serve. Deutscher compares sentences to military maneuvers;

in both, "chaos would prevail" without a chain of command subordinating some elements to others through rules that can be specified.

Metaphysically and socially charged debates about order are at the center of a Greco-European-English tradition of thinking about syntax in relation to poetry, a tradition that this article constructs provisionally and, of necessity, by relying in part on a terminology for syntax that some modern theorists have critiqued as fundamentally inadequate to the understanding of linguistic phenomena. The critiques come chiefly from those associated with the structuralist movement in linguistics led by Ferdinand de Saussure (see STRUCTURALISM); this movement turns away—in conjunction with similar turns in many areas of modernist thought—from a mimetic or "substantialist" theory of language inscribed into the very notion of the noun as a "substantive." Structuralism directs us to a view of language as a fluid system constituted by differential relations among various elements. Acknowledging the philosophical problems in the substantialist tradition but acknowledging at the same time the continuing importance of that tradition for those who write, read, recite, hear, and reflect on poetry, this entry attempts a dialectical approach to the topic. The differential relations of "poetic syntax" are here considered as arising not only from a system of discourse that can be analyzed synchronically in terms of key binary oppositions (between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" word order, or poetry and prose, or poetry and science, or poetry and "not poetry"); the relations also arise along vectors of time, space, and translation among some of the world's more than 6,000 (now extant) languages We cannot know in how many of these languages "syntax" and "poetry" exist as loci of historical influence, current practice, and reflection. The present entry assumes that what linguists call a "natural" language is not a unified entity; differently positioned and differently educated practitioners within a certain language field have construed and indeed encountered poetic syntax differently.

In the Greco-European-English tradition discussed here, "appropriate" syntactic arrangements have typically been seen as imitating an order given by nature or by logic. The latter is sometimes conceived as a

subset of the former, but sometimes these two key strands of a "mimetic" tradition diverge, with interesting consequences for views of syntax. Those who see syntax primarily as reflecting an external reality have tended to focus on an *iconic* dimension of syntax, i.e., on ways in which the placement of words, phrases, clauses, and other units can be interpreted as imitating—and indeed as being determined by—a real sequence of events in "Nature" or in history. Deutscher invokes Caesar's famous series of parallel clauses, "veni, vidi, vici" (I came, I saw, I conquered), to illustrate the principle that "the order in which events are expressed in language mirrors the order in which they occur in reality." (For Deutscher, it is only a joke, not a threat to Caesar's principle, that the first clause, in Latin or in English, has a bawdy figurative meaning that allows the premise of single natural order to expand into nine possibilities for ostensibly mimetic clause arrangement.)

A second major mimetic principle of syntax has been adduced—also debatably—to explain why grammatical subjects precede verbs and objects in a "majority" of the world's languages (Dirven and Verspoor, Deutscher). A natural hierarchy in which the human actor and particularly the self is of supreme importance is said to be recognized by "most" speakers' preferences for arrangements in which the subject precedes the verb and object; linguists writing in English term these "SVO" or "SOV" patterns and find them predominating in all but a handful of languages: Deutcher mentions Welsh, biblical Hebrew, and Maori as exceptions to this rule of (human) subject-first. But many other exceptions can and have been adduced in ways that do not accept the premise of exceptionality. Some scholars of written Arabic consider a "verb-subject-object" pattern typical, for instance, while other scholars see case endings as more important than word order for understanding this language. Peled observes that, among students of written Arabic, sentence types and word order have been a focus for debate since medieval times. Inflected languages such as Latin, German, and Greek do not exhibit a clear tendency toward subject-first syntactic arrangements in declarative sentences, at least if one considers the partial evidence about language use

provided by the written record. A sentence pattern that puts the "object" or predicate first, followed by a subject and verb—which may well be expressed in one rather than two words—is clearly familiar to poets working in many languages; it was known to poets writing in English for centuries from their grammar-school study of Latin. classics, including Virgil's *Aeneid*, which begins, "Arma virumque cano" (arms and the man I sing). We need not accept foundationalist claims for the relation between syntax and the world to recognize that many poets have experimented with syntactic patterns in ways that might be called "mimetic" but that might also be called "thematic": interpreters have found syntactic patterns mimicking both natural spaces (dells, for instance) and culturally charged objects (Christ's cross can be evoked by a "chiastic" pattern in a line or couplet; see CHIASMUS).

Poetic theories and practices also cluster around a second major strand of thought about mimetic syntax that stretches back to the ancient Greeks: this is the theory that sees syntax "following" logic or reason (the Greek term *logos*, which becomes central to Christian theological discourses). On this view, syntax illuminates the workings of a rational order assumed to precede language and to have universal qualities. Although this line of thought is sometimes expressed as a corollary to the first, the two strands of the mimetic theory at times diverge in consequential ways. Both Land and Cohen have traced one historical instance of divergence in 17th- and 18th-c. English writing about language, a movement from a "grammar of things" focused on relations among signs and their referents to a "grammar of the mind" focused on "bundles" of words and on those parts of speech that have no obvious analogues in the world. John Locke illustrates this tendency in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which holds that knowledge "consists in propositions." For Locke, as for the Port-Royal group of language philosophers in 17th-c. Paris, the verb takes priority over the noun because it is seen as critical to acts of judgment; moreover, there is a marked interest in the "syntax of connectives" (Cohen). Locke argues that the humble particle has been unjustly neglected; he approaches syntactic relations as windows into the way in which

the mind pursues "connexion, restriction, distinction, opposition, emphasis, etc." (*Essay* 3.7.2). A number of scholars have found a significant correlation between such a philosophical view of syntax and features of neoclassical poetry, particularly the use of parallel and antithetical clauses in the rhymed *couplets of John Dryden, Jean Racine, Pierre Corneille, and Alexander Pope (see NEOCLASSICAL POETICS).

For the major strands of Occidental speculation that conceive of syntax as imitating an extant order of reality, tropes are anomalous; paradoxically, they are also typical of poetry perceived as a form of discourse granted "license" to deviate from ordinary language "Aside from figurative speech," as Chomsky states the central idea of the Port-Royal grammarians, "the sequence of words follows an 'ordre naturel,' which conforms ''à l'expression naturelle de nos pensées' [to the natural expression of our thoughts]." It can be argued, however, that poetic syntax, which stresses questions of figurative language, is constitutive of, rather than marginal to, syntax as an object of multicultural knowledge with Greek roots. This is so partly because theorists from Aristotle on define the basic units of syntax as phenomena that, when correctly performed in speech or writing, reflect reality in ways that reveal both completeness of thought (*dianoia*) and elegance of expression (*lexis,* sometimes translated as *"diction"). Moreover, as Basset has shown, when Aristotle discusses syntactic units such as the *colon or the *period in terms of such qualities as elegance and completeness, it is hard to know whether he is judging such units for their rhythmic, grammatical, or logical properties, or for a combination of these in which "appropriateness" of tropes plays a role.

By the 1st c. BCE, *syntaxis* began to be used by Greek grammarians and philosophers in ways that encompassed discussions of "parts" of speech and relations of "agreement" among forms of words signaling such concepts as gender, tense, mood, number, and grammatical case. The first extant Greek treatise on syntax, *Peri Syntaxeôs* (2d c. CE), sees syntactic irregularities as corruptions of a rule that reflects reason and that can be traced back to a pristine natural past. Written by Apollonios Dyskolos (the

"surly"), who worked as a teacher of grammar in Alexandria, the treatise analyzes examples of "ungrammaticality" (*akatallēlia*) drawn both from ordinary usage and from poetry, especially the Homeric epics. As Blank shows, Apollonios oscillates between correcting errors and explaining them (away) when they occur in Homer. Deeply influenced by Stoic logic, which distinguished between "complete" and "deficient" propositions and which saw the former as demonstrating an ethical ideal of "self sufficiency" (*autoteleia*), Apollonios repeatedly discusses syntactic issues by contrasting arrangements of words that are morphologically, syntactically, and semantically akin.

The subject of syntax as Apollonios constructs it is dependent on comparative judgments; it becomes even more complexly comparative when Greek discourses on syntax are appropriated by Roman poets and educators and, subsequently, by later European and English writers extensively educated in Lat. grammar, poetry, and rhet. In treatises that variously transliterate the Greek word *syntaxis* into Roman letters or render it in the Lat. words *constructio*, *dispositio*, or *ordinatio*, the subject of syntax retains its focus on the illustration and discussion of errors in language whether these occur in single words or in larger signifying units. Though the names for these errors are legion and the category distinctions among them are often perplexing—especially as the examples begin to appear in both Greek and Latin forms— there is considerable continuity in this discursive tradition focused on right and wrong syntax. The tradition mingles poetical examples with pedagogical and philosophical precepts. Priscian, whose influential 6th-century discussion of syntax in the final two books of his *Institutionem Grammaticorum* appropriates many points from Apollonios, repeatedly asks his readers "whether a phrase is right or wrong" ("recta sit an non," 17:14). Prisician's analysis of "irregularities" (*incongruae* or *inconcinnae*), however, conceives language as a phenomenon with a past. This may complicate present judgments of correct usage. Priscian cites many poetic lines illustrating "uncommon" usages that are, he acknowledges, "preferred by old communities" (2:122). His use of ancient Greek examples along with his awareness of linguistic "preferences" among old

Latin-speaking communities highlight how history impinges on a theory or practice of syntax considered primarily as a set of rules.

Moreover, Priscian's *Institutio* contributes to a continuing question about the place of syntax in a course of study: is it a subset of grammar, as Joseph Aiken indicated in his *British Grammar* (1693), where the subject is divided into orthography, prosody, etymology, and syntax? Or is syntax a step above grammar in a hierarchy that points further up toward the study of poetry or *bonae literae* (good letters, a humanist ideal) in Latin and in those vernacular languages lexically and syntactically indebted to Latin? In many 16th-century English grammar schools, syntax was studied by boys in the third form after basic Latin grammar and before poetry approached as matter to be translated from Latin to English and back again. According to the *OED*, as late as the 19th c., the term *syntax* denoted a school subject below poetry and above grammar.

Wherever syntax is placed in school curricula, it has often been viewed as a surly and difficult subject. This perception derives in part from the fact that syntactic analysis requires a historical education in several taxonomic schemes and in multilingual terminologies for rhetorical tropes involving varying perceptions of "transgressive" behavior in the construction of sentences. The figure of *hyperbaton, for instance, denoting "various forms of departure from ordinary word order" (Lanham), is called *transgressio* in Latin and "the trespasser" by George Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589). Despite or perhaps because of the fact that there is no stable or single concept of ordinary (or common or natural) syntax that crosses from Greek to Latin to the European vernaculars, the notion of difficult syntax—as a written and later a printed phenomenon that members of an educated elite can appreciate as something different from "vulgar" speech—has been valued by writers such as Torquato Tasso, Giovanni della Casa, Luis de Góngora, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Maurice Scève, and John Milton, as well as by modern poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Giusippe Ungaretti (see HERMETICISM), R. M. Rilke, e.e. cummings, and Ezra

Pound. Different instances of a poetic syntax designed to deviate conspicuously from vernacular usages may, of course, refract quite different political and philosophical views about ordinary language and the people who are thought to speak it.

In his *Institutio oratoria* (1st c. CE), Quintilian suggests that a "difficult" style might appropriately be described as "Virgilian" or even as "rhythmical"—the latter quality presented in a way that admits of no clear division between admirable poetry and artistically crafted prose. The best way we have of making our speech (s*ermonem*) rhythmical (*numerosum*), writes Quintilian, is by "opportune change[s] of [word] order" (8.6. 64–65). Such changes clearly entail questions about the appropriate limits of poetic license both for the writer and the reader. Quintilian avers that "language would very often be rough, harsh, limp, or disjointed if the words were constrained as their natural order demands" (*si ad necessitate ordinis sui verba redigantur;* 8.6.62); however, he also insists that the freedom exhibited in hyperbaton and related syntactic figures would not be allowed in *oratio* (rendered as "prose" by one Eng. translator, at 8.6.66). "Oratio," however, can also be translated as "speech," and Quintilian in the same passage praises Plato for trying out many different patterns of word order in his prose sentences [8.6.64]). raises Worrying that errors may arise from *hyperbata* that are too long, Quintilian does not say exactly how long is too long; nor does he distinguish clearly between aesthetic and moral dimensions of appropriate and inappropriate syntax. Finally, he relies on tropes to explain what counts as "good" syntax: "Words," he writes, are to be "moved from one place to another so as to join where they fit best, just as, in constructions made of unhewn stones, the irregularity itself (*ipsa enormitas*) suggests the right stones which each piece can fit or rest upon" (9.4.27).

Many poems in various languages create effects of "irregularity" in ways that call attention to poetic form while asking the reader or listener to reflect on what often began as her or his subconscious knowledge of verbal regularity in a given language Such calling attention to the medium is central to what

Jakobson defines as the *poetic function of language. The writer's or linguist's or literary critic's educated perspective on what constitutes regular and irregular patterns in a given evidentiary field makes poetic syntax into an object of study but seldom warrants generalizations about it across cultures. An exception might be in those cases where we can hypothesize a foreign influence on an English poetic construction that can be observed in numerous examples from a certain era. An example is the "absolute participial" construction that occurs with some frequency in medieval and early modern English literature--in this line of *Hamlet*, for instance: "The passion ending, doth the purpose lose" (3.2.185). Some linguists have explained the apparent irregularity of this line—what is its grammatical subject and how does that "agree" with the verb form?—as a sign of the significant influence of Latin or French syntax on English poetry.

In a famous letter, John Keats deplored the "gallicisms" of Chaucer's poetry and found Milton's *Paradise Lost* a "corruption" of the Engish Language. But Keats himself had been criticized for "bad" writing, and many of his lines imitate Milton's in syntax and diction**.** For poets and their interpreters, the distinction between proper and improper usages is fluid and usually open to testing, as is the distinction between native and foreign. Inversions of word order, so critical to Quintilian's understanding of what makes an admirable high style like Virgil's, occur as often in Pope's poetry as in Milton's, according to Brogan; and such "inversions" also occur in poems by those who explicitly reject a high style. S. T. Coleridge described one of his *conversation poems, for instance—"Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement"—as a "poem which affects not to be Poetry"; he elaborates the paradox in that phrase with his first line, which conspicuously departs from what many feel is the usual word order of English: "Low was our pretty Cot!" In versions printed after 1797, moreover, Coleridge's poem begins with a Latin epigraph: "Sermoni propriora." Charles Lamb jokingly translated this as "properer for a sermon," whereas others— more seriously but not necessarily more correctly—have rendered it "more suitable for conversation/prose." The adjective in its original context, however (Horace's *Satire* 4) is spelled differently:

propiora, which is usually translated into English as "nearer." Coleridge plays with the meaning of the English word *proper* as "one's own." Is a low style, nearer to prose, more properly English than a high style? Like many other poets, Coleridge poses the question without providing a definitive answer.

As this story of translation indicates, matters of poetic syntax invite analysis in relation to other aspects of a poem or the culture where it was produced and where it continues to be interpreted. Chomsky proclaimed the existence of an "autonomous syntax principle" and of a phenomenon he named linguistic "competence" and defined as an "innate" knowledge of syntactic and grammatical rules possessed by every speaker of a natural language. His theory, frequently revised, is important because it calls attention to the issue of constraints on syntax without moralizing them—but also without considering them in relation to educational institutions or to the entire domain of what Chomsky called "performance" and defined as a set of specific utterances produced by *native* speakers. Chomsky's "performance," which some critics have allied with Saussure's "parole," is conceived without reference to the institution of the theater or to some cultures' traditions of oral poetic performances (see ORAL POETRY). For poetic syntax considered in a comparative context, there is no "autonomous" principle of syntax, ontological or hermeneutic. There is, however, a useful heuristic notion (also a spatial metaphor) proffered by structuralist theorists in the 20th century: the notion of the "syntagmatic" and "paradigmatic" axes of language Formulated by Saussure for the field of semiotics and elaborated for poetry by Jakobson, Frederic Jameson, Silverman, Culler, and others, this interpretive schema relies on Greek terms but departs from Greek presuppositions concerning syntax as *mimesis and tropes as instances of both culpable and admirable erring. The notion of the two axes—often visually represented as a horizontal (syntagmatic) line crossed by numerous vertical (paradigmatic) ones—allows Saussure to explain how linguistic meaning arises from two kinds of difference: that which we might provisionally see as occurring in a syntactic unit (a clause or a sentence) as extended in the time of speech or the space/time of the text; and that which arises in the reader's or hearer's

mind from the relations between a sign and other elements in its "system." The vertical axis, which

Saussure called "associative," works with the syntagmatic axis to create sequences of various degrees of

complexity. The paradigmatic axis may include case endings or parts of speech other than the ones

actualized in the words of a given sentence or clause; the paradigmatic axis is more commonly thought of

as "supplying" the missing terms of a *metaphor or alternate sounds or letters of a rhyme or a pun. Any

word, *line, couplet, or *stanza of poetry can be analyzed with reference to these axes, with syntactic

elements now construed as aspects of language working in concert (via forms of *parallelism including

tropes such as *isocolon) but also in tension with other elements of the poetic line and/or with other

signifying units.

Many syntactic units are, of course, smaller or larger than the sentence; and many poets have

worked against as well as with the traditional idea, inherited from Aristotle and the Stoics in many

elegantly circular forms, that a *proper* sentence or clause "reflects" a *complete* thought. One could indeed

say that the enigmatic idea of a proper sentence (as memory or expectation or pedagogical rule) exists on

the paradigmatic axis created jointly by many English poems and their readers and hearers; consider, for

instance Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," which consists of two syntagms (including the title) that

traditional Western grammarians would call *sentence fragments*. Inspired in part by Japanese and Chinese

poems, Pound uses the fragment to present a new reality; in one of his *manifestos for *imagism, he

contrasts poetic "presenting" with painterly "describing" ("A Retrospect," 1913). But his *fragment poem

relies on the reader's knowledge of what counts as a complete sentence, as do many poems that delay a

main verb in long invocations of a *muse who figures *inspiration.

An approach to poetic syntax that is at once structuralist (synchronic) and historical (diachronic) is

difficult, as Fredric Jameson observes in his *Prison-House of Language* (1972); but attempting it allows us

to construct a paradigmatic axis that extends over time and space to encompass a recurring contrast

between theories and practices of "difficult" syntax and those devoted to a style that aspires to plainness and that presents features of colloquial, even dialectal, speech, the vulgar or "mother" tongue (see <SC>PLAIN STYLE</SC>). Under a different figure, this is what William Wordsworth, in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), called language "really spoken by men." But which language is that? And does it exist except as it has been historically (re)constructed in relation to a poetic language marked by "irregularities" such as *elision and inverted word order?

Elision and inversion are perennially interesting and conceptually difficult for a comparative approach to poetic syntax or to syntax in general. Lacking evidence of normal speech patterns for many past cultures and some present ones, we cannot securely distinguish between approved omissions of words (elisions) and ones that are classified as errors (*vitia*) in the Occidental written record, often under such Greek terms as *barbarism* and *solecism*. Like children, foreigners, and jokesters, poets often use language in ways that have been deemed transgressive; but for past cultures, even in the West, we do not know who would have judged a transgression playful, enigmatic—the sign of textual corruption—or inept. Some forms of elision have been named, noticed, and generally approved as achieving effects of *wit. Elision combines with complex *figuration in *zeugma or *syllepsis: consider, e.g., Pope's famous couplet comparing, contrasting, and compressing the idiomatic Englishphrases "take counsel" and "take tea" (*The Rape of the Lock*, 1714). Other forms of elision arise from syntactic arrangements extending over many lines and often creating instances of double syntax: a syntagm that starts by inviting one interpretation but grows to invite a second reading that conceptually revises the first; see, e.g., the first four lines of cummings's "since feeling is first" or the transition between stanzas 3 and 4 of Emily Dickinson's "A bird came down the walk" (Empson, Ferguson). Elisions of main-clause verbs in English and American poetry have sometimes accompanied semantic inquiries into domination and subordination, disobedience and obedience to rules, and the relation of parts to putative wholes. An example is W. C. Williams's "The

Young Sycamore," which uses ambiguous syntax to explore whether a sapling is an independent entity or is not (yet). The rhetorical figures of anapodoton (omitting a main clause from a conditional sentence) and *aposiopesis (breaking off suddenly in the middle of speaking) are important to poems that explore and dramatize relations between syntax and a fictional speaker's emotional states; Virgil, for instance, illustrates the sea god Neptune's anger—and his ability to control it—in a famous aposiopesis in the *Aeneid*: "quos ego—! sed motos praestat componere fluctus" (whom I—! But better it is to calm the troubled waves [I, 135]). Milton combines anapodoton and aposiopesis in Satan's opening address to Beelzebub in *Paradise Lost* ("If thou beest he; But oh how falln, how changed / From him . . .). The initial subordinate conditional clause breaks off, and Satan (as represented by the narrator) seems to forget his conventional obligation to complete his thought with a main clause.

Like Milton's Satan, many poets have conspicuously failed to obey the rules of the "well-formed" sentence, and sometimes they have done so by following the incompletely codified and imperfectly translated rules of tropes. Sometimes, however, poets transgress in ways that strain even the classical notion of *poetic license, which relies on hypotheses about the poet's *intention and about the poem's ultimate intelligibility. In *Adonais* (51–53), P. B. Shelley, for instance, often writes sentences that are "almost impenetrable" (Austin 1993):

> Thy extreme hope, the loveliest and the last,
>
> The bloom, whose petals nipped before they blew
>
> Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste.

What rules of (English) syntax is Shelley breaking or bending here? How are historically variable conventions of printing and punctuation (here, the absence of the expected "closing" comma after "blew") implicated in our perceptions of what is and is not an intelligible sentence? Shelley's sentence appears to illustrate Chomsky's argument that a "well-formed" sentence, one operating correctly by a recursive rule of

sentence formation, may nonetheless be "unacceptable." Indeed, Shelley's sentence appears to illustrate the phenomenon of "center-embedding" that Chomsky uses to explain the distinction between grammaticality and acceptability; an example is "The man who the boys who the students recognized pointed out is a friend of mine." Such a sentence fails to be acceptable to an English speaker, Chomsky suggests, because of a problem in the domain of performance, not competence. In MacCabe's paraphrase of Chomsky, "the body is simply unable to store the necessary bits of information to decode the sentence although it does have the necessary decoding mechanisms." Shelley's lines, however, like the prose passage by James Joyce that MacCabe analyzes to show "center-embedding" at work, challenge us to think recursively, testing the human memory encountering something like a sentence in the medium of print. Shelley's lines counter common assumptions about language as communication while suggesting the social value of puzzles and *riddles, traditionally close kin to certain experiments in extreme syntax.

Poetic syntax, like unmodified syntax, has seemed a surly subject to many school children taught to attend to language through syntactic categories. But poets shaped by multilingual educational theories and practices have been in constant conversation with philosophers, teachers, and linguists on the question of what is a proper sentence—in the senses both of being correct and of belonging to one's own linguistic tradition. Chomsky generated a modern chapter in this conversation when, in his *Syntactic Structures* (1957), he gave an example of a syntactically correct sentence that is "unacceptable" because it makes no sense: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." A number of writers, including Chinese linguist Yuen Ren Chao and American poets John Hollander and Clive James, have contested Chomsky's point by using figuration and recontextualization to make his string of words legible after all, if not necessarily on first glance. In so doing, such writers participate in a long-enduring and multicultural game that exploits the resources of syntax and tropes—the "colors" of rhetoric—to test the boundaries between sense and nonsense, figurative and proper meanings, practices and theories of language, and last but not least,

between prose and poetry. Hollander's poem makes Chomsky's sentence into a subordinate clause in a larger syntactic unit titled "Coiled Alizarine." The title serves as an apt concluding emblem for the transformational powers of poetic syntax. "Coiled" like a snake, with the potential for fuller extensions in the future, poetic syntax has metamorphic powers like those of alizarine: an organic dye used in the past, and still used today, to change the colors of various paints and inks.

See ELLIPSIS, HYPOTAXIS AND PARATAXIS, LINGUISTICS AND POETICS.

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