A LINGUISTIC SOLUTION TO A PUZZLE IN BEN JONSON'S CARY-MORISON ODE

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AT THE END OF THE FIRST STANZA (lines 9-10) of Ben Jonson's ode "To the Immortall memorie, and friendship of that noble paire, Sir Lucius Cary, and Sir H. Morison" we are presented with a puzzle. The poet mentions in the first stanza that the mythical "Brave Infant of Saguntum" goes back into its mother's womb, thus returning to its birthplace and making its mother's womb its "urne." The Saguntum child displayed a great deal of foresight, since by this act it avoided the catastrophe which would have befallen it at the hands of Hannibal had it entered the world. Mankind is thus left with a circle—the traditional symbol of wisdom and harmony—which could be perfect if only its center were to be found (lines 9-10). The puzzle then is to find the center of the circle "Of deepest lore" that was the infant's legacy to mankind. The poet states further that Morison, who died young, led an exemplary life: "His life was of Humanitie the Spheare" (line 52). Though Morison's life is in this way symbolized by a "spheare," a circle of perfection, its center is still unspecified. Until the center is discovered, a circle cannot be deemed "well-turned."

An answer to this riddle is suggested by two linguistic clues in the poem: (1) the lexical and phonetic equivalences in lines 9-10 of the first stanza and lines 120-23 of the last stanza and (2) the parallelism of the deep syntactic structures of these two passages. The first stanza of the ode and the last two stanzas follow; the passages under discussion are italicized:

Brave Infant of Saguntum, cleare
Thy coming forth in that great yeare,
When the Prodigious Hannibal did crowne
His rage, with razing your immortall Towne.
Thou, looking then about
E're thou wert half got out,
Wise child, did'st hastily returne,
And mad'st thy Mothers wombe thine urne.
How summ'd a circle didst thou leave man-kind
Of deepest lore, could we the Center find!

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This made you first to know the Why
You lik'd, then after, to apply
That liking; and approach so one the tother,
Till either grew a portion of the other:
Each stiled, by his end,
The Copie of his friend.
You liv'd to be the great surnames,
And titles, by which all made claines
Unto the Vertue. Nothing perfect done,
But as a Cary, or a Morison.

And such a force the faire example had,
As they that saw
That such a Law
Was left yet to Man-kind;
Where they might read, and find
FRIENDSHIP, in deed, was written, not in words:
And with the heart, not pen,
Of two so early men,
Whose lines her rowles were, and records.
Who, e're the first downe bloomed on the chin,
Had sow'd these fruits, and got the harvest in.

A number of lexical repetitions and couplings occur in the italicized passages, making the reader aware that there is a strong correspondence between them: They are *leave* (line 9) and *left* (line 121); *mankind*, repeated in both passages (lines 9 and 121); and *find* (lines 10 and 122). The fact that *mankind* and *find* also occur in rhyming positions in both passages foregrounds their lexical parallels and their consequent correspondence. These lexical equivalences lead the reader to a close scrutiny of the passages to check out his intuitive feeling that they have a special bearing on the meaning of the poem.

A phonetic factor, reinforcing the correspondence between the two passages, is the almost total homophony of *lore* (line 9) and *law* (line 120). In present-day Southern Educated British dialect (R.P.) the two words are perfect homophones. It is doubtful whether they were so in Elizabethan times, and especially in the London dialect that Ben Jonson spoke. The evidence is not conclusive either way. Wilhelm Viétor says that “the exact value of Shakespeare’s (r), initial, medial and final, can hardly be determined.” He quotes rhymes, such as *first: must* (Surrey), *Scare: case* (Brooke), *behold: world* (Golding) (97). Helge Kökeritz cites “two rhymes in Shakespeare [that] indicate loss of r, _forsworn: John and earth: death._” Neither of them, however, cites instances that indicate loss of [r] in a final position, the sort of evidence we are looking for. Though we thus cannot definitely say that *law* and *lore* were total homophones in Ben Jonson’s speech, the near homophony of these two words undoubtedly serves the purpose of strengthening the correspondence between the passages under consideration. The lexical and phonetic equivalences help align a number of elements in the two passages and prepare the reader for more alignments on syntactic grounds, which provide the strongest clue to the solution of the puzzle.
The syntactic clue is provided by the parallelism of the deep structures of the sentences in the two passages. The parallel structures are given in Tables 1 and 2, where a normalization of the verses is employed for syntactic analysis. Normalization involves a permutation or shifting of the elements of surface structures to recover their deep structures.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>(Indirect) Object</th>
<th>(Direct) Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>line 9</td>
<td>Thou</td>
<td>didst leave</td>
<td>man-kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>how summ’d a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>circle.../Of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>deepest lore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lines 120-23</td>
<td>[Cary and Morison] or [They]</td>
<td>left</td>
<td>to Man-kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Modal</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>(Direct) Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line 10</td>
<td>We</td>
<td>could</td>
<td>find</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines 122-23</td>
<td>[They might]</td>
<td>find</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sentence “[They] left to man-kind a Law,” in Table 1, may be taken to be the active-voice equivalent of the passive-voice sentence “a Law/Was left yet to Man-kind” in lines 120-21. Though in a number of cases of agentless passive structures the agent is unrecoverable, this is not so in the present case, since the context of the whole poem in general, an encomium to Cary and Morison, and of the last stanza but one (line 116 in particular), enables the reader to recover the agent “Cary and Morison” or the proform “they.” Since the perfection of the acts of Cary and Morison is emphasized in the immediate context of our passage (lines 115-19), the replacement in the above analysis of the passive by the equivalent active, with the agent made explicit, is thus justified.

A look at the two tables shows that just as *how summ’d a circle and a Law*, occupying the same syntactic position (direct object) in the two parallel structures of line 9 and lines 120-21, are aligned, so are *Center* in line 10 and *FRIENDSHIP* in line 123. It is often observed that in a piece of poetry semantic similarity results between two elements that have parallel phonetic or syntactic structure. When phonetic and syntactic similarities co-occur, as sometimes happens in the case of rhyming units in poetic texts, there is an even stronger semantic closeness than when only one of them occurs. If we apply this principle to the present case, we find that *Center* and *FRIENDSHIP* are, like the two terms of a metaphor, semantically equivalent to each other in this poem.
circle "Of deepest lore" or the law, left by Cary and Morison, thus finds its center in the exemplary friendship of the two noblemen. The exuberant compliment paid to the two friends is also appropriate to the spirit of the Renaissance genre of "Praise" in which Ben Jonson writes this ode, since excessive eulogy is characteristic of this genre.

It may be here objected that the Saguntum infant cannot easily be related to the idea of friendship and that its brief career cannot illustrate this virtue. We can counter this objection by pointing out, first, that the infant is analogous to Morison in terms of the perfection of their act and the brevity of their lives; second, that friendship is realized in acts that are beneficial and hence perfect, though brief; and finally, that the parallel between the Saguntum infant and Cary-Morison is based on the poetic assumption of the latter pair's being an asterism—a twin star (line 89)—and so one. We can, therefore, maintain justifiably that Friendship is, on the one hand, the center of the circle "Of deepest lore" left by the child as a legacy to mankind, and, on the other hand, also the center of the Law left by Cary and Morison as their bequest to mankind.

The Friendship-Center equation, which is in the main a grammatical solution to the riddle posed in the first stanza, becomes possible because in the initial reading of the passage Friendship is strongly perceived as the direct object of read, and find in line 122. The single word Friendship is not the direct object of the verb phrase read, and find, but it is only when we continue reading that we realize in retrospect that Friendship is the subject of the whole clause (NP) "Friendship, in deed, was written... so early men" (lines 123-25)—a clause that is the direct object of read, and find. It is this very grammatical ambiguity that provides us with the chief clue, the syntactic one, to the puzzle presented in lines 9-10. The act of going back to re-read and realize that the whole clause Friendship... so early men is the direct object of read, and find further serves as a perceptual icon for circle, which is the key image in the poem.

Thomas G. Bever's discussion of perceptual strategies can account for the kind of linguistic ambiguity met with in lines 122-23. "Strategy A" is there described as follows:

Segment together any sequences X... Y, in which the members could be related by primary internal structural relations, actor action object... modifier. (290)

The internal or deep-structure relations within a sentence are a chief determiner of how we segment strings into sentence units. The transitive verbs read and find create the expectation of a contiguous direct object—an expectation that is temporarily but immediately satisfied by the closely following word Friendship in line 123. The nature of the verb find also strengthens such perception. It can have (1) a "direct object without any complement sentence" or (2) a "complement sentence as direct object" (Bever, 293). A perceptually easier path is seized upon by the reader who segments the sentence right after the single-word direct object, Friendship. The substitution of a verb like hope in place of find would further clarify the point. Since hope requires a complement sentence and not a single-word NP for its direct object, the reader would be unable to segment the
sequence after *FRIENDSHIP* ("They might hope friendship" is ungrammatical). The reader must continue reading until he comes to the end of the NP clause—*FRIENDSHIP*, in deed, . . . so early men." The verb *find* makes an early segmentation of the sequence perceptually natural.

Thus a syntactic clue in lines 122-23 provides an answer to the riddle posed in the first stanza of this poem, while the lexical and phonetic equivalences in the two passages point to several correspondences between them. The correspondences add their weight toward making the equation between *Center* and *FRIENDSHIP* a critical imperative arrived at through the cognitive processing of the syntax of the second passage. Friendship is undoubtedly the theme of the poem. Among other things, it forms part of the title of the poem; but this semantic core of the poem is reinforced by the syntactic medium used to convey this message. Thus the form corroborates the meaning in this ode of Ben Jonson.

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I am grateful to Professors Sidney Greenbaum, Robert Turner, Bruce Stark, and John Taylor of the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee for reading this paper and making helpful suggestions.

2. My observations on lexical correspondences between the two passages are based on the theory of "coupling" in Samuel R. Levin's *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962). He defines "coupling" as two convergences of "naturally equivalent forms (i.e., equivalent as to sound or meaning, or both) occurring in equivalent positions" (p. 33).
5. E. J. Dobson, in his *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, 2nd ed., Vol. II (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968, p. 762), notes the presence of a glide [ə] between a vowel or diphthong and *r*, chiefly before a final *r*; but in regard to the phonetic situation of the final *r*, he too has nothing conclusive to offer. In the section on phonetic correspondence in this paper, square brackets represent sounds, while italics represent letters of the alphabet.
6. On the question of using deep structures in the analysis of a poem, see Levin, p. 54: "It is thus legitimate to introduce . . . whatever we may know about a construction and its history of transformational derivation."
7. Levin's hypothesis most relevant to my observation of the semantic equalization of syntagmatically equivalent forms—*Center* and *FRIENDSHIP* in this case—is the following: "As a matter of fact, there seems to be a rather consistent correlation between semantic couples and the syntagmatic axis" (p. 46).