

Syntactic Violations: Motivated or Unmotivated? —A Semiotic View of Tu Fu's Controversial Couplet*

Tim-hung Ku

Tu Fu's 杜甫 (712–70) famous couplet “Hsiang tao chuo yü ying wu li/Pi wu ch'i lao fêng huang chih” 香稻啄餘鸚鵡粒/碧梧棲老鳳皇枝, the correct reading of which has been a controversy in Chinese literary criticism because of its syntactic oddity,¹ recently aroused a new debate among scholars from different disciplines in *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 1, January 1980. That particular issue of *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* presents Matthew Chen's essay “The Primacy of Rhythm in Verse: A Linguistic Perspective” in which Tu's couplet is used as one of the illustrations of Chen's argument as suggested by the title, and complements it with James Liu and Wayne Schlepp's short essays as responses to Chen's view of the couplet. Chen's view, proposed within the framework of his large argument, is that the present word order of the couplet is a hyperbaton, or “free” word order in Chen's words, resulting from the primacy of rhythm over other linguistic considerations. Liu, however, insists that the couplet can be understood as such in its present word order. Therefore, the couplet is not, necessarily, an example of hyperbaton. Schlepp draws our attention to the fact that there exists another potential word order, alright on all levels, syntactical, metrical, and rhythmic, which Chen did not consider and which Tu Fu did not choose.

From the informations and arguments conveyed in these three essays, one can see that the primacy of rhythm in verse (I am not questioning this

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position in general, which is well supported in Chen's essay in spite of this "problematic" example) does not cover the whole problem concerning Tu's choice of the present word order. To me, Tu's couplet is an example of syntactic violation or deviation, the whole problem of which implies but goes beyond metrical and rhythmic considerations. The problem must be located in the semiotic relation between syntactic violations and the content of a poem: motivated or unmotivated? In other words, one must consider whether or not the syntactic violation bears on the content level and elicits a significant response from the content level. In principle, as many semiotics-oriented critics have suggested, deviations or violations must carry with them some information by their very deviations or violations.² But the problem might be complicated by the fact that when poems are written in verse, violations may arise due to a mere clash between a set syntax and a set meter or rhythm, without much motivation. How can one then distinguish a syntactic violation as unmotivated (i.e., a result from a mere clash) or motivated (i.e. a carrier of information)? Tu Fu's most controversial couplet offers itself as a complicated case through which one could examine the complexity of the semiotic aspect of syntactic violation or deviation.

For the sake of cogency, allow me to present my argument in its own order, beginning with a word-to-word denotation as below:

香 稻 <u>Fragrant rice</u> A	啄 餘 <u>peck drop/left over</u> B	鸚鵡 粒 <u>parrot grain</u> C D
碧 梧 <u>Green firmiana</u> A	棲 老 <u>perch aged</u> B	鳳 皇 枝 <u>phoenix branch</u> C D

Scholars have suggested different readings of the syntax of the couplet. The following English renditions of the couplet will follow strictly the word order suggested by the individual readings. These English renditions are, necessarily, awkward, but they serve the present academic purpose. For the convenience of analysis, I break up each line into four syntagmatic units, namely, A, B, C, and D. Most scholars find the couplet in the present word order syntactically unsmooth. They suggest that A and D are in fact

a lexical unit and the order of B and C should be reversed. While taking AD as a lexical unit, we can either have D to follow A immediately or have A and D separated as they are in the present order. Hence we have two potential texts, rendered in Chinese and English as below:

1) Text ADCB (a potential text)

香稻粒【爲】鸚鵡啄餘

碧梧枝【爲】鳳皇棲老

Fragrant rice grains, which the parrots pecked and dropped;
Green firmiana branches, on which the phoenix perched and aged.

2) Text ACBD (a potential text)

香稻【乃】鸚鵡啄餘【之】粒

碧梧【乃】鳳皇棲老【之】枝

Fragrant rice: the parrots' pecked-and-dropped grains;
Green firmiana: the phoenix's perched-and-aged branches.

In the first potential text, the word *wei* (the word in parenthesis), a verb-to-be in the passive voice, is elided. The sentences mean: the fragrant rice grains *are* pecked and dropped *by* the parrots and the green firmiana branches *are* perched and aged *by* the phoenix. In my English rendition, in order to preserve the word order as such, I have to resort to a relative pronoun "which." In text 2, a verb-to-be (*nai*) and a function word (*chih*, functioning as an apostrophe, connecting unit CB and unit D), are elided. In other words, these two potential texts are what I would call syntactically "elliptical texts." To understand these syntactically elliptical texts, one has to put the elided words back to the texts as I have done in the Chinese renditions of the readings.

Text ADCB and ACBD are potential texts only. The actual text is text ABCD. Why were these two potential texts abandoned by Tu Fu? We know well why text 2(ACBD) was not chosen: the text violates the required meter of the genre, the seven-character eight-line regulated verse. We did not know well why text 1 (ADCB) was not chosen until, perhaps, Chen's exposition of the rhythmic pattern of the genre. Chen suggests that while text 1 (ADCB) word order is "more in line with the normal word order,

it goes violently against the poetic rhythm: it involves both ‘foot splitting’ and ‘foot straddling.’” It goes without saying that violations on both metrical and rhythmic level are forbidden. Since Chen believes the ADCB word order is more in line with the normal word order and that the actual text (ABCD order) is syntactically unacceptable but alright on the metrical and rhythmic level, it follows that the actual text of the couplet is an example of hyperbaton or “free” word order and the reason for using hyperbaton is to match the poetic rhythm.

If the actual text (ABCD order) is syntactically unacceptable, Chen’s taking the actual text as a hyperbaton is unquestionable. James Liu, however, suggests that the ABCD word order can be understood, without any kind of hyperbaton. The syntax of the ABCD text in Liu’s reading may be rendered as below:

3) Text ABCD (the actual text)

香稻【乃】啄餘【之】鸚鵡粒

碧梧【乃】棲老【之】鳳皇枝

Fragrant rice: the pecked-and-dropped parrot grains;

Green firmiana: the perched-and-aged phoenix branches.

As one can see in the Chinese rendition of Liu’s reading, the text ABCD has omitted a verb-to-be and one function word—a syntactically elliptical text again, similar to elliptical text ACBD. Liu takes CD in both lines as a lexical unit. Although it might be odd and is against the general opinion to take CD as a lexical unit, Liu’s reading is, nonetheless, acceptable. Therefore, whether the couplet is an example of hyperbaton or not depends on whether or not we follow Liu’s reading. One must note that whether the couplet is a hyperbaton or not does not nullify Chen’s primacy of rhythm over other linguistic considerations since the ADCB text, which violates the poetic rhythm, remains unchosen.

If the discussion of the couplet is limited to the actual text and its two potential texts, text ADCB can be taken as the deep structure from which two other texts are generated. Text ADCB generates text ACBD by separating the AD unit into A and D. Text ACBD matches the poetic rhythm Chen defines but still violates the meter. Then, text ACBD generates the actual text (ABCD) by exchanging the position between B and C to

match the required meter. If the actual text is taken as a hyperbaton, the transformational process is almost obligatory. If Liu's reading is followed, the transformations become potential only.

In terms of poetics, which is my main concern, if the transformations are obligatory, required by the meter and by the rhythm, they shall not in this sense elicit any significant response from the content level, especially when the actual text is undone and directly reduced to its deep structure. In such a situation, these transformations, with their syntactic oddities, are unmotivated. But this is not the only approach we could take to this couplet. Suppose one disregards the unacceptable metrical and rhythmic violations for the moment, without directly taking the actual text back to its deep structure, but compares the actual text with its potential texts, one might discover a new meaning the actual text might take on. As far as one can define a response from the content level due to the transformation, the syntactic deviation or violation becomes motivated. A semiotics-oriented critic knows well that a word, a sentence or a text signifies not only by itself but also by its two kinds of relation to other words, other sentences, and other texts; or in De Saussure's terms, signification relies not only on the present syntagmatic axis but also on the absent paradigmatic axis.³ Indeed, the re-constructed potential texts form a paradigm against which the actual text could fully signify itself. A semiotics-oriented critic also knows well that literary analysis must ground itself on the linguistic base of the text in question, taking into account the linguistic properties of the language in which the text is written.⁴ In the present case, the elliptical nature of the actual text and its potential texts, with different kinds or degrees of ellipsis, made possible by the flexibility of Chinese language, is what I shall adhere to in my paradigmatic reading of the couplet.

To deepen such a reading, I would like to ground my comparison upon Louis Hjelmslev's four "functives" in the formation of a sign, namely, content-form, and content-substance on the content plane, expression-form, and expression-substance on the expression plane. The expression plane is the sound chains while the content plane refers to thought. The non-phonological features, including the lexical and the syntactical, belong to the content-form. Therefore, our comparison of the texts of the couplet will be carried out on Hjelmslev's content plane. Hjelmslev illustrates his perception by comparing the ways of saying "I do not know" in different languages. He postulates a content-purport or amorphous thought-mass

as the common content of the utterances in different languages. He then points to the fact that each language imposes its form upon the content-purport and gives rise to its particular content-substance. He expresses this beautifully, saying that "each language lays down its own boundaries within the amorphous 'thought-mass' and stresses different factors in it in different arrangements, puts the centers of gravity in different places and gives them different emphases."⁵ Indeed, the way the syntactic features of the three texts of the couplet activate the content is exactly the way the content-form imposes itself upon the content-purport and gives rise to the content-substance. Hjelmslev's analytic method proves its usefulness once again in this Chinese couplet.

A content-purport can be reasonably postulated behind these three texts of the couplet: they denote the same content with different centers of gravity because of their different syntactic treatments. The syntactic ellipses I propose help in marking out the centers of gravity. In text ADCB, the so-called deep structure, the ellipsis displays a space dividing the line into two parts: the fragrant rice grains and the green firmiana branches on the one hand, the parrots and the phoenix on the other. The center of gravity moves towards rice grains and firmiana branches since the text is an activity in which the objects of concern are the rice grains and the firmiana branches. In text ACBD, two ellipses take place, dividing each single line into three units. When the absent verb-to-be is made present again, it reveals that each line is a definition-type statement. What is significant is of course not the subjects, namely, the rice grains and the firmiana, but the definitions or statements given to them. The center of gravity, in the first division, is therefore placed upon the predicate. But since the last unit (grains or branches) is parasitical upon the first unit as said earlier, the center of gravity, in the second division, moves towards the middle unit. This middle unit, to our surprise, is a complete activity of the parrots or the phoenix. This middle unit, occupying the central position of the sentence, being a meaningful activity itself, giving significance to the subject by functioning as a statement about it, is the unquestionable center of gravity of the line. In text ABCD (the actual text), two similar ellipses take place if Liu's reading is followed, but the second ellipsis in this text takes place between the fourth and the fifth word. Each line is also a definition-type sentence, similar to those of text ACBD. The difference is that the last unit in the actual text (parrot grains or phoenix branches) is self-sufficient by itself and this turns

the second unit into the position of a modifier. Or, one might say, the definition-type sentence is a combination of two definitions: 1) the fragrant rice is the parrot grain; 2) the fragrant rice is something pecked and dropped. Because the three units are almost equally important in their own ways, one might conclude that the center of gravity is diversified. One more ellipsis might be identified if one wishes it: the parrot's action becomes elliptical, implied in the word group "the pecked-and-dropped parrot grains." From the viewpoint of ellipsis, one may conclude that the syntax of text ABCD is most complex, most deviative from the normal syntax. To be sure, the previous analyses and judgments are not, necessarily, absolute. It is however clear that the three texts of the couplet are different in their content-substance although they share the same content-purport. It is in this sense we can definitively say that the syntactic deviations or violations have already elicited responses from the content level.

But we have not yet covered the whole story about the couplet. There exists another potential text, which is all right on all levels, syntactic (no ellipsis of any kind), metrical, and rhythmic. This normal text is the CBAD text:

4) Text CBAD (a potential text)

鸚鵡啄餘香稻粒
鳳皇棲老碧梧枝

The parrots pecked and dropped the fragrant rice grains;
The phoenix perched and aged on the green firmiana branches.

Then why didn't Tu choose this potential text? To cut a long story short, in the CBAD text, the subjects are the parrots and the phoenix, while in the early texts, the subjects are rice grains and green firmiana branches. This difference is essential. It has been an argument among Chinese scholars as to whether the subjects of the couplet are parrots and phoenix, or rice grains and firmiana branches.⁶ If one takes the rice grains and the firmiana branches as the subjects, one can simply dispel the CBAD text as something out of the question. If one follows another view, one has to take text CBAD as the deep structure behind the earlier texts and must search for the reason behind this shift of subject.

Without taking a position in advance, let us follow our semiotic belief

that a full syntagmatic-paradigmatic analysis of the texts in question will put us in a better position to judge and account for the formation of the actual text. When text 4 (CBAD) is added to the paradigm we formed from the three earlier texts, a number of new features become noticeable. First, in text 4 (CBAD), the syntactic subject and the center of gravity are identical since each sentence is a presentation of an activity in which the center of gravity tends to move towards the syntactic subject although the gravity might be light. But in the three earlier texts, the syntactic subject and the center of gravity are not necessarily identical as shown before. Second, in text 4 (CBAD) the sentences are activity-type while those in both text 2 (ACBD) and the actual text (ABCD) belong to definition-type. In the activity-type, all the objects involved in the activity are supposed to be present, to be all actual or all fictional without mixing up, unless there exist indicators to mark off the fictional from the actual. On the contrary, in the definition-type, the objects in the predicate could be present or absent, actual or fictional, indifferent to the status of the subject the predicate defines. On this linguistic base, the actual text (ABCD) and text 2 (ACBD) allow of the non-present mythical phoenix and the present-or-non-present parrots, while text 4 (CBAD) makes their presence a necessity since the fragrant rice and the firmiana branches are, most likely, intended as actual objects according to the extra-textual information. The couplet or the poem is a nostalgic re-account of the poet's tour in the scenic area of the capital city Ch'ang-an before the T'ian-pao Insurrection, where rice plants (thus, rice grains) and firmiana branches are abundant.⁷ The parrots might be present but the phoenix, as a mythical bird, is rather fictional than actual. Here we find one inter-textual information useful: the bird phoenix appears as mythical and fictional rather than real in all the eight entries in Tu's poetry.⁸ The activity-type sentences in text 4 (CBAD) are unable to present the tangle of the actual (rice and firmiana) and the fictional (parrot and the phoenix). Furthermore, syntactic subject and center of gravity, as intimated before, are two different states of affairs. It is obvious that the center of gravity in the couplet is not the rice-grains and firmiana branches as natural objects: they lack of significance by themselves. Since the couplet expresses a nostalgia for the golden past the center of gravity falls, of course, on the symbolic meaning invoked by the mythical, fictional phoenix and the beautiful parrots. Text 4 (CBAD) falls short of this expression because of its activity-type sentences. In view of the gravity center, text 2 (ACBD)

is most functional, more functional than the actual text (ABCD). After all these observations, I am inclined to think that the actual text (ABCD) is a hyperbatical text of text 2 (ACBD) due to the required meter of the genre.

Is the transformation from the potential text 2 (ACBD) to the actual text (ABCD) motivated or unmotivated? It depends on how one looks at it. If one in his interpretative process reduces the actual text to its non-hyperbatical text ACBD immediately, the transformation is unmotivated since this reductionist process will not elicit any response from the content level. But, if one stays with the actual text as a hyperbatical text, one will feel the "stumbles" resulting from the inversion of B and C. And if one goes further and semanticizes the "stumbles" on the content level, for example, taking the "stumbles" as the revelation of "disturbances" in Tu's nostalgic perception, the syntactic violation is more than a unmotivated hyperbaton resulted from the clash between syntax and meter, but is a carrier of information. The motivated features of syntactic violation on this level are much higher and concrete than those on the content-substance level as defined, although they are more speculative in nature. Yet the poetic potential of the couplet does not stop here. James Liu's reading of the actual text as a non-hyperbatical text offers us a lot more to play with. As a parallel idea to Jurij Lotman's simultaneous presence of natural language system and poetic language system without cancelling each other in poetry,⁹ I would suggest we take the couplet as the simultaneous presence of a hyperbatical text (a hyperbatical reading) and a non-hyperbatical text (Liu's reading) without cancelling each other, but manifesting as two intersected layers. The couplet can be read hyperbatically and non-hyperbatically and may be perceived as two intersected texts—We may say, Tu in this couplet has almost exhausted the high flexibility of Chinese syntax. Indeed, this is where the information saturation and the fascination of the couplet lies. Needless to say, the syntactic violence of the couplet in this dynamic reading is highly motivated.

The problem of syntactic deviation or violation in verse is much more complex than it looks. Whether it is motivated or unmotivated depends on whether one could define, with reason of course, a response from the content. The whole business turns out to be a matter of interpretation. But as shown in the foregoing example, interpretation in turn relies on an adequate analysis of the syntactic violations in question, although inter-

pretation can not be confined to the linguistic component alone, extra-textual elements must be taken into account. From the foregoing analysis, I find that the best way to define the motivated character of syntactic violations in verse is to construct a paradigm from the actual text and its potential texts. Such a paradigm, internal and manageable, might serve as a model for large text-paradigms, essential to inter-textual reading, a concept put forth by semiotics.

Notes

1. Cf. Yeh Chia-ying 葉嘉瑩, *Tu-fu ch'ü-hsing pa-shou chi-shuo* 杜甫秋興八首集說 (Taipei, 1966), pp. 414-27.
2. For example, Jurij Lotman says that "Due to the grammatical, semantic and stylistic bonds present in language certain requirements arise for the 'correct' construction of word-chains. The violation of any of these rules (or prohibitions) makes the broken bond (transferred from the obligatory to the facultative category) a carrier of certain meanings (as an obligatory feature it was semantically neutral." *The Structure of The Artistic Text*, trans. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), p. 204.
3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 122-27.
4. Roman Jakobson expresses this belief forcefully in his influential essay "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 350-77.
5. Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 47-60.
6. Cf. Yeh Chia-ying, pp. 414-27.
7. Ibid.
8. This figure is based on *A Concordance to the Poems of Tu Fu*, in *Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series* (Supplement No. 14). Entry Number: 2/81722.
9. This concept saturates Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. For example, Lotman says, ". . . the artistic text remains a text in a natural language. This dual existence, the tension between these two semantic systems, accounts for the richness of poetic meanings." (p. 170.)