this matter. I really think it can, and for the following reasons. But first I wish to make the obvious point that the way in which stylistics and literary criticism approach a literary text exemplifies a particular perspective, namely a perspective on the study of literature. Thus, very generally speaking, literary criticism directs attention to the larger-scale significance of what is represented by a product of verbal art. On the other hand, stylistics tends to focus on how this significance can be related to specific features of language, that is, to the linguistic texture of a literary work. Following this argument, I think the literary critical and stylistic perspectives are complementary, or perhaps the poles of a dialectical process. Obviously, this complementarity does not provide the means of arriving at a definitive interpretation, which, of course, does not exist anyway. But a stylistic analysis does enable readers, especially student readers, to obtain textual evidence for a particular literary critical view of a poem and, not least, to heighten their own sense of what a literary text means to themselves (Rubik and Widdowson 2000: 6). In sum, stylistics brings literary critical appreciation into clearer focus.

'The Unprofessionals': Syntactic Iconicity and Reader Interpretation in Contemporary Poems

LESLEY JEFFRIES

1. Introduction

In my first attempts to apply linguistic description to poems (see, for example, Jeffries 1993), I noticed that something interesting seemed to be happening in relation to their syntax. Whilst some poetic movements and individuals in the twentieth century (e.g. the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets) used extremely deviant and thus clearly foregrounded syntax, to reflect their concerns and the themes of their times, others (e.g. Larkin, Hughes) seemed on the surface to be using fairly standard sentence and clause structure which made the reading process relatively straightforward and did not cause obvious resistance amongst readers. Nevertheless, these more approachable poets appeared to be using syntax in subtle and possibly iconic ways. It is important to note here that I am using the word 'iconic' in its semiotic or linguistic sense. That is, I am referring to the occurrence of linguistic forms which more or less *directly* reflect their meaning and which have been seen as the exception, rather than the rule, by modern linguistics. Most typically, this iconicity is illustrated at the phonological level by words which are onomatopoeic ('baa', 'moo', and so on), though in this chapter I am referring to the direct representation of meaning in syntactic structure rather than phonology. In the next section, I will link my observations to some of the most relevant recent linguistic work on iconicity, which addresses the question of degrees of directness, among other things. Having initially noticed this phenomenon, I began to realize

that it might link into a level of understanding and appreciation which was, perhaps perversely, more emotionally immediate and less cerebral than the explicit syntactic challenges of, for example, some modernist or avant-garde writers. I say *perversely* because I believe that many practitioners of syntactic deviation in poetry have used this technique with the intention of getting directly to emotion, by-passing what they see as the stale conventions of the language. I believe it works exactly the other way round.

At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to introduce this subject by returning to an example of this phenomenon that I first noticed in a poem called 'Broadcast' by Philip Larkin (see Jeffries 1993 for a fuller analysis of this poem). The poem recounts a radio broadcast of a concert, which in those days would have been aired *live*. The poet describes the sounds of the audience settling into their seats, getting up again as the National Anthem, 'The Queen', is played, and having to sit back down again afterwards. Then, the audience's anticipation of the music starting is interrupted again, this time by the tuning up of the instruments on stage. Here are the opening lines:

> Giant whispering and coughing from
> Vast Sunday-full and organ-frowned-on spaces
> Precede a sudden scuttle on the drum,
> 'The Queen', and huge resettling. Then begins
> A snivel on the violins:

What struck me here was that the narrator's anticipation and his frustration with all the fuss of people settling in their seats before the concert begins is mirrored in the syntax. It turns out later that he isn't really impressed by the music itself, but wants to use the broadcast to think about his lover who he knows is in the audience. His irritation at the pre-concert noises, then, becomes linked with his desire to settle down and think of her. The first sentence lasts for almost four lines, and we only get to the predicator (verb) of the main clause, 'precede', at the beginning of the third line. Thus, the first two lines consist of one very long grammatical subject, which for English speakers is an uncomfortable length. Since we normally expect to find reference to given information (i.e., information that is already shared) in subject position, and thus arrive fairly quickly at the main verb-phrase, any delay in doing so may produce a sense of frustration or irritation directly in the reader/hearer of the sentence. I argued then, and still maintain, that this entirely natural reaction to an unusual if not excessively deviant sentence structure may – and often does – directly correspond to the emotions being evoked in the content of the poem. This is the phenomenon that I have been labelling *syntactic iconicity*.

Until recently, I had not taken this observation much further, though I have collected very many examples of similar syntactic effects in poems

that I believe work in similar ways. However, in working on the question of reader-involvement in poems (see, for example, Jeffries 2001, 2008), I became more interested in how syntactic iconicity operates in relation to the reading process, rather than simply seeing it as just another type of foregrounded feature like alliteration or unusual collocation. In the rest of this chapter I will discuss the concept of iconicity in language, and review some of the writing on this topic. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of a single poem, 'The Unprofessionals' by U. A. Fanthorpe, which will enable us to explore the kind of syntactic iconicity introduced above. Finally, I will draw some tentative conclusions about the cognitive aspects of this phenomenon.

2. Iconicity

Although much of modern linguistics, particularly from Saussure onwards, has been predicated on the notion that the linguistic sign has an arbitrary connection to its referent(s), the existence of iconicity in language has always been recognized minimally in the form of onomatopoeia and sound-symbolism more generally, and has recently been studied extensively as a property of language as a whole, including possible universal iconic features. Much of the impetus for this work has come from literary studies, and particularly from those working in this field from countries where English is not the dominant language, who often do not see a gap between literary and linguistic approaches to text. As Müller (1999: 394) says:

> The study of iconicity provides an ideal field of research for linguists and literary critics alike and may thus help to bridge the gulf between the two disciplines which has steadily widened in the course of the twentieth century.

Those working in this field have drawn distinctions between iconicity which has a direct link to referents, in some way straightforwardly mimetic of the 'real world', and iconicity which is more indirect in its linking to referents. These have been labelled *imagic* and *diagrammatic* iconicity respectively, initially by Peirce (1960) and Jakobson (Jakobson and Halle 1956; Jakobson 1963) and later by Haiman (1985b), amongst others. Fischer explains:

> ... only in imagic iconicity, is there a straight iconic link between the verbal sign and the image or object (the 'signans' and the 'signatum'), as for instance in onomatopoeia. Diagrammatic iconicity is more like a topographic map, where the relation between objects or concepts in the real world (as we see it) can be deduced from the relations indicated on the map ... (1999: 346)

If we think in terms of phonology, then, the fact that speech sounds can (directly) mimic other sounds such as whistles (through fricative consonants), high pitches (through close vowels) or gunshots (through plosive consonants) would be seen as *imagic*, since there is a direct correlation between the sign and its referent. Sound-symbolism, such as the use of close vowels to signify small size and open vowels to signify large size, would then be *diagrammatic*, since there is a correlation, but not a direct mimesis.

However, there is not an absolute distinction between these two kinds of iconicity, as Fischer explains:

> But even within diagrammatic iconicity, there are differences in terms of concreteness. It is interesting to observe, for instance, when Max Nänny applies the various types of diagrammatic iconicity distinguished by Haiman (1980) to poetry, that the use made of it there is more concrete than the examples that Haiman gives from the more conventional syntax of everyday speech. (ibid.)

It seems, therefore, that there is at least a single-dimension cline between directly iconic and less concretely iconic signs in language. It is possible, too, that this gradation falls away in more than one direction, as we will see when we discuss the kind of syntactic iconicity observed in poetry, and specifically in 'The Unprofessionals'. Notice that those concerned with iconicity make no qualitative distinction in general between the iconicity of literary works and the language more generally. Müller (1999: 393–4), for example, makes the explicit assumption that literary language works in much the same way as other language:

> Now if iconicity is always a latent possibility of aesthetic or poetic language and, further, if we take it for granted that aesthetic or poetic language exploits, develops and heightens possibilities already inherent in ordinary, non-poetic discourse, the massive presence of iconic forms of expression in literature can be regarded as lending support to the theory of the iconic potential of language in general.

This assumption is one that is now taken for granted in stylistics, which treats all text processing by readers as essentially the same. This will be an important point in the analysis of iconicity later in this chapter, since I want to argue that iconicity in poetry of the kind I am interested in is both dependent on and deviant from the norms of English.

For now, let us consider some of the iconicity that has been proposed at the syntactic level of language. One of the more influential writers on this topic in recent years has been Haiman, who is among those postulating a universal link between the tendency for languages to order their syntax in SVO order,

and the centrality of the action in linking the participants in any process. Here is an explanation of this idea from Conradie (2001: 230):

> Given that entities/things and actions/activities are conceived of as a basic distinction in perception, two universal but complementary strategies of sentence construction come to mind as possible ways of dealing with the relationship between them: (i) a classificatory strategy of grouping together elements similar in status, viz. the entities vs the action, as would be exemplified by SO–V or V–SO structures, and (ii) an activity-based strategy with the action in the centre (not only figuratively, but also literally) and entities relegated to the periphery. Though it is to be expected that any universal trait of language is iconically motivated in some sense, the present claim in regard to iconicity does not apply to the former or other conceivable strategies, but only to the latter, i.e. the relation between SVO structures and activity.

This relation between the SVO order and a proposed arrangement of process/action and participants is part of the argument some put forward for a 'natural' iconicity which reflects the point-of-view of the producer, rather than an objective link to something in the real world. Thus, it is argued, human beings perceive the events that they see unfold as processes linking the various participants and circumstances, with the result that it seems most natural to have the verb in the *middle* of a clause, linking the subject with the object or other participants. Note here that the use of point-of-view refers to the natural, and possibly universal, perceptions of any speaker or writer in any (SVO) language. However, in the case of many specific texts, including literary ones, there is also the potential to exploit this underlying (possibly universal but at least generalized) point-of-view and present a *specific* point-of-view of a character, the narrator or the author. I will return to this point later, but here we should note that even early semiotics (as put forward by Peirce 1960 and others) never really claimed that linguistic signs linked to any *objective* reality; rather, the whole of linguistic signification, from the arbitrary to the iconic, is always a question of point-of-view. Nöth (2001: 20) explains:

> The object of a sign, according to Peirce, is no object of an external reality, no object that exists independently of the sign. Peirce says nothing about the 'reality' of this object at all and describes it as something 'perceptible, or only imaginable or even unimaginable in one sense' (CP 2.230). He even goes so far as to speculate that 'perhaps the Object is altogether fictive' (CP 8.314).

So, iconicity in language is the direct (imagic) or indirect (diagrammatic) or even mediated (metaphoric) representation of perceived objects, events,

actions, and processes. If we think in terms of the more concrete (direct) end of this spectrum being a little like looking at a film of a person, then the experience is similar to actually seeing this person, even though it is a two-dimensional image which cannot interact with us, rather than the three-dimensional interactive image we see if we actually encounter her/him. At the other extreme, but still within the non-arbitrary range, we have something like the stylized map of the London Underground, which represents the relationship between stations in terms of their links but has no direct relationship to distance, as anyone who has tried walking overground using a Tube map in London will testify! Some of the stations that look close together on the map are actually very far apart indeed. So, the Tube map is like a code, but it is not completely arbitrary. We can work out routes in the real world from the logic of the system, without being able to directly translate from the map to the lines themselves.

How can we see the iconicity of syntax in relation to this range of iconicity in visual phenomena? We may, perhaps, assume that any direct connections between language and the bodily senses are at the concrete end of the spectrum. Since language cannot be smelt or tasted, and only in relatively rare cases (including of course braille) can it be felt, we are left with the sound and the look of language as the main possibilities for imagic iconicity. These bring us back to the classic case of onomatopoeia in the case of sound, and perhaps concrete poetry, where the layout and font can be made to look like the meaning, in the case of the written language (see Short 1999 for discussion of this phenomenon). As we saw earlier, one step away from direct iconicity might be the sound-symbolism which relies on some kind of indirect relationship, such as the relation between pitch of vowels and size, or the use of fonts in emails to SHOUT at your addressee. Once we move to syntax and higher-level structures, it is the linearity of language which leads us to the most direct kind of syntactic iconicity. Thus it is the linear form of language which can most directly be mapped onto the (perceived) world either in space or in time. Sentences and sequences of sentences often tend to address events and process in the order they happened, leading to the common view that chronology is the default order of a narrative and that this is direct (imagic) iconicity. Similarly, it would be possible for the linearity of a sentence or sequence of sentences to represent relationships in space, though as space is multi-dimensional and time is more clearly experienced as linear, time tends to take precedence in linking to structure.

Whilst this kind of link between syntax or discourse structure and the world may *seem* to be direct, we are reminded by various researchers that the link is between the linguistic form and the norms of human cognition and perception, rather than being simplistically a mirror to reality. Here is Müller (2001: 305) on this subject:

What the linguistic structure imitates is not external reality, but a subjective perception or, rather, conception of reality, a mental structure which is related to external reality but does not merely imitate or copy it. Rhetorical features, for instance, schemes like asyndeton and climax or different forms of word-order, are structuring and ordering devices, which point to the structure and activity of the mind and to cognitive and epistemological processes. The categories, which Earl Anderson relates to syntactic 'iconisms' – 'chronology, hierarchy, preference, direction, length or duration, and complexity versus simplicity' (Anderson 1998: 265) – belong to the sphere of the mind or consciousness and not to that of external reality.

This argument appears to take iconicity beyond the purely physical and into the emotional and cognitive field. Directly evoking emotion, as opposed to evoking sensory effects in the visual or auditory domains, seems nevertheless to retain something of the more concrete, imagic form of iconicity since no key is required to unlock the iconicity. However, since it is presented in the quotation above as a version of universal iconicity, which by its nature will be backgrounded, it is being presented as not choice-based and therefore can have no particular stylistic effect. Nevertheless, there do appear to be syntactic choices, in English at least, whereby if we take the basis of syntax and discourse construction to be a case of working with the grain of natural iconicity, authors can produce otherwise syntactically acceptable texts which foreground deviation from this iconic norm. This property of text construction points to what could be seen as a secondary kind of iconicity, producing an iconic reaction in readers as a result of deviating from universal iconicity and leading to effects that I will discuss in relation to the poem in the next section.

Some scholars of rhetoric have argued that there is a relation between the tropes and schemes of rhetoric on the one hand and natural iconicity on the other. Here, Müller (2001: 308) makes this point:

Citing evidence from the entire tradition of rhetoric, Brian Vickers argues that in writing 'schemes and tropes are basically stylizations or records of man's natural emotional behaviour as expressed in language' (Vickers 1970: 105). Thus rhetorical figures of omission, unusual word order or repetition are held to be imitative of actual disturbances of language in emotional contexts, which, in turn, reflect feelings and emotional states such as anger, grief, indignation or consternation.

This kind of argument is often made, not just in relation to rhetorical figures, but also in relation to the style, for example, of Modernist writing, where

the disintegration of syntax was seen as a direct reflection of the apocalyptic views often taken in the literature of the early twentieth century (see Sherry 2004 for a discussion of this subject). What I want to argue here goes beyond the simple reflection of the subject matter of a text in its syntax. I would make the case that the reader is invited to directly experience some of the meaning of the text, triggered by the structures of the text. This is achieved most readily when there is some kind of foregrounding, as explained by Müller (2001: 319):

> In this as in many other cases in rhetorical speech it is just the deviation from the iconic norm which manifests iconicity most conspicuously. This is iconicity, to be sure, on a level different from the mere miming of external reality. It is non-objective or, to use Tabakowska's term once more, 'experiential iconicity'.

Though Müller seems to be arguing that iconicity is foregrounded by being deviant, this foregrounding is normally still within the bounds of syntactic acceptability (unlike some of the more radical syntactic deviation I have mentioned above). Thus, although the reader may be marginally aware of things not being quite 'normal', this will be less salient than, say, an invented word or a string of alliterative words. We will return to the question of salience later. What is clear, from those approaching iconicity from the viewpoint of rhetoric, is that some rhetorical figures are seen as naturally iconic and others seem to be deviant, and thus foregrounded, to achieve their effect.

The closest example I have found to my own observations is from Müller (2001: 406), who describes in detail the way in which Wilkie Collins manages to produce suspense in his most famous novel, *The Woman in White*. The commentary is long, and the following begins about halfway through:

> It is only then that the grammatically required temporal clause is reached which resolves the syntactic and semantic suspense of the construction. But even then Collins uses protracting syntactic devices, an adverbial phrase and a passive construction which shifts the agent of the action to a prepositional phrase: 'when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand ...'. But, owing to Collins' point-of-view technique, even now the entire event is not yet brought into focus. The following one-sentence paragraph describes the protagonist's physical reaction to the event, before the whole situation is depicted in the last of the quoted sentences, yet again not without the use of suspense-increasing syntactic devices (inversion of the word order, the use of adverbial elements, parenthesis): 'There [...] stood the figure of a solitary Woman ...'. This is indeed a supreme example of the art of creating suspense. The syntax with its many

retarding, i.e. suspense-heightening devices, makes the passage examined a suspense plot in miniature, an analogue to the novel's overall structure with its step-by-step revelation of the central mystery.

Interestingly, the commentary itself acquires something of the same technique of slow revelation as it describes each clause and delaying tactic that is used to produce a sense of anticipation in the reader. What Nöth (2001) does not do, however, is to take the reader's perspective in this description. If he had done so, he would have used this commentary to explain how the reader is drawn into the viewpoint of the narrator and how s/he therefore feels some of the anticipation directly, as a result of the syntactic suspense. It is this direct experience of the reader which interests me here, and which I would argue cuts across some of the distinctions made by other researchers into iconicity.

3. Reading poems

In order to explore the phenomenon of syntactic iconicity a little further, this chapter will focus on the style of a single poem by U. A. Fanthorpe called 'The Unprofessionals'. In it, she describes people (probably relatives and friends) who arrive at your house when something awful happens, and the things they do. Here is the whole poem for you to read before I continue:

The Unprofessionals

When the worst thing happens,
That uproots the future,
That you must live for every hour of your future,

They come,
Unorganized, inarticulate, unprofessional;

They come sheepishly, sit with you, holding hands,
From tea to tea, from Anadin to Valium,
Sleeping on put-you-ups, answering the phone,
Coming in shifts, spontaneously,

Talking sometimes,
About wallflowers, and fishing, and why
Dealing with Kleenex and kettles,
Doing the washing up and the shopping,

Like civilians in a shelter, under bombardment,
Holding hands and sitting it out

Through the immortality of all the seconds,
Until the blunting of time.

(U. A. Fanthorpe, 1995)

When I introduced this poem to second-year undergraduates studying stylistics, I was surprised by their almost unanimous view that the poet (or narrator) did not approve of the 'unprofessionals', since I had personally responded to it as a very *affectionate* account of the support that people give each other when they are in trouble. This led me to wonder whether there was a right answer, and if so, whether it was me or my students that was/were correct. The question of what constitutes a right answer, of course, is contentious and does not indicate a return to the notion of the supremacy of some kind of intentional authorial meaning. However, the orthodoxy that holds sway in some fields of literary theory, which states that meaning is infinitely open and fluid and depends almost entirely on the reader, is also an extreme which is called into question by text analysts, including many stylisticians. Though there is certainly a level at which readers may well take away *different* interpretative impressions from a text, particularly a poem, linguists would also argue that the text itself does close off *some* options, and only the most transgressive or inexperienced readers will be able to read certain meanings into texts. There are at least three possible answers, then, to the problem that my students posed for me in class. Firstly, my interpretation of 'The Unprofessionals' may have been based on textual cues which my students missed. Secondly, they (and I) may have been reacting to an unambiguous narrative from their (my) own experiential perspective. Finally, there may be textual cues to *both* interpretations, which we reacted to differently *because of* our age, experience or background. This question will be revisited later, but it may be worth noting here that other readers of my age and similar background have reacted in the same way as me, which may seem on first sight to favour the final option presented above.

Before I address this question by exploring the syntactic iconicity in the poem, let us consider the other, more commonly noted, stylistic features of this poem. I will concentrate on those features which might be described as the 'traditional' stylistic features, pointing out those which are in some sense foregrounded either by deviation or by parallelism at the different linguistic levels.

Fanthorpe is not generally a poet to exploit the musicality of language. She doesn't depend on strict form and doesn't use rhyme or half-rhyme in any amount. For this reason, where there *are* moments of phonological patterning, such as consonance (alliteration), they are foregrounded. So, line 12's 'Kleenex and kettles' stands out because the two words beginning with the velar plosive /k/ are noticeable, not only because there are two of them, but also because their context is populated with the softer-sounding fricatives (e.g. /f/, /s/) and semi-vowels (e.g. /w/) than with plosives. Whilst this is the kind of feature that makes a poem pleasant to read, and it may possibly be argued that the alliteration and the contrasting context is meaningful in some way, there is nothing in the phonology of this poem that seems to inform our quest for the deeper interpretation.

Similarly, Fanthorpe does not seem to exploit the possibilities of morphology (word formation) very often and therefore, when she does it is more prominently foregrounded than in poets who use inventive morphology more frequently (e.g. Hopkins). The main morphological effect in this poem is the invented noun, the 'Unprofessionals' of the title, which will be discussed in detail below. Line 5 is also morphologically foregrounded with three adjectives being listed, each of which has a negative prefix ('Unorganized, inarticulate, unprofessional'). There is a phonological effect here too, of course, since the profusion of syllables (four in the first and five in the second and third) adds to the impression of fussiness of these people who have arrived, perhaps chaotically in the middle of the loneliness of the person in crisis. One could argue, perhaps, that these syllables iconically reflect the empty chatter of the people who arrive with no specific purpose other than to be of support. The effect of the morphological negation lends some support to the interpretation of my students in thinking that these people are not entirely welcome, hopeless as they seem to be. I will argue later that the syntax of this poem contradicts the negative morphology, and that perhaps the ambivalence that results for the reader is one of the strengths of this as a poetic experience.

Semantically, there are a number of features in the poem which depend on lexis (word choice, word combination, and so on) in this poem. These include, for example, the metaphor which is created in line 2 by combining the verb 'uproots' with an abstract object ('the future'), though it normally requires a concrete, animate (but not animal) object (uproot the tree, the shrub, and so on). This type of collocational feature is sometimes described as breaking the 'selectional restrictions' of the verb. The term *selectional restrictions* was created by generative grammarians to capture what they saw as a generalized semantic restriction on the combining potential of lexical items. Thus, their version of the dictionary attached to a grammar would list alongside words (particularly, but not only verbs) any restrictions of this kind (e.g. 'spill' has to be used with a liquid). Metaphors which depend in this way on breaking the normal rules of lexical combination are foregrounded and may cause the reader to pause and take in the effect of, in this case, comparing the future with a tree. Another semantic effect in the poem is found in the use of nouns from very different semantic fields in the list of topics that are discussed by the visitors ('wallflowers and fishing and why'). The listing of such different items, and in particular the inclusion of the significant third item, which is the question on everyone's mind, demonstrates the changing topic of the conversation, skirting around, and finally settling on, the big question of why this crisis has happened.

Comprehensive stylistic analysis is important, because a poem works as a whole and stylistic features will inevitably form part of the experience of the reader in processing this poem. Many poetic effects are produced by a combination of features from different linguistic levels. Thus, the effect of the line 'From tea to tea, from Anadin to Valium' depends on a range of features, including the following:

- the semantico-syntactic expectation that the frame *from X to Y* expects time nominals, either repeated (e.g. 'time to time') or contrasted (e.g. 'morning to night');
- the musical effect of the assonance of front open vowel /æ/ in 'Anadin' and 'Valium' and its contrast with the /i:/ of 'tea to tea';
- the consonance of the nasals in 'Anadin' and 'Valium';
- the construction of unconventional opposites ('Anadin' and 'Valium') in this frame, echoing the usual collocations of morning and night;
- the underlining of this created opposition sense relation by the almost alphabetical A to V (A to Z) of the brand names of the drugs taken to get up in the morning and go to sleep at night.

The agony of this crisis for the unnamed protagonist (hidden behind the 'you' of the opening line) is reflected in many of these features, even, possibly in the range of vowels and the nasality of the consonants which might be argued to reflect the various sounds of crying. What none of these features does, however, is to throw any light upon the central question of the poem: what does the poet (what should the reader) think of the 'unprofessionals'?

Another typically foregrounded feature is found in line 9 ('Coming in shifts, spontaneously') where the noun 'shifts' semantically includes notions of organization and cooperation, and therefore clashes with the adverb 'spontaneously' because the latter usually collocates with individual and unforeseen activities rather than intrinsically organized and group-based activities like taking on shifts. The comma between the main part of the clause and the adverb almost seems to embody the clash between these two – the organized versus the impulsive – and creates one of the smaller, localized riddles of the poem which the reader is forced to work out. This creation of textual 'problems' which cause the reader to make some effort of understanding is a common result of many lexical and syntactic features in contemporary poems. In this case, responding to the apparent semantic mismatch may cause the reader to think along one or both of the following lines:

- the 'unprofessionals' have indeed organized themselves into shifts to make sure that the person in trouble is not left alone for too long, but they are pretending that they have arrived spontaneously, to save that person from feeling too indebted;
- the 'unprofessionals' do in fact arrive at different times from each other, which looks as though they have arranged themselves in shifts, but in fact this is an accident which could be the result of the concern and care that these people are taking, which means they are aware of other likely visitors and time their own visits accordingly.

Either or both of these would be appropriate in the context, and each makes sense of the apparent clash of semantics. Both of them produce a richer meaning than either 'shifts' or 'spontaneously' would have done in isolation, since they produce the impression that the person in crisis is attempting to understand what seems like a strange and alien world, and the people visiting are, in either scenario, making an effort to be considerate. This example *is* one that seems to favour my initial argument that the poem is an affectionate appreciation of the unprofessionals' visits. I will return to the question of individual responses to the poem in the final section, but here it is worth noting that stylistic analysis of this kind can help readers reach a consensus about the major interpretative meanings of a poem, even where the text leaves some problems to be solved.

Perhaps the most foregrounded, and thus the most striking, feature of the poem is in the title, in the neologism (invented word) 'unprofessionals'. Whilst there exists an established negated adjective in English, 'unprofessional', there is not, to my knowledge, an equivalent negated countable *noun* except in this poem. One of the possible reasons for the differing reactions of myself and my students on reading this poem could be traced to the two different ways of reading this invented word, depending on the order in which the bound morphemes are added. These options can be represented diagrammatically in the following way:

- professional (aj) → unprofessional (aj) → unprofessional (n) + {Plural} = unprofessionals
- professional (aj) → professional (n) → unprofessional (n) + {Plural} = unprofessionals

The first option reads the word as a noun derived from the (already derived) adjective, 'unprofessional'. This would result in the assessment of these people in negative terms, because the adjective is certainly semantically negative in its evaluation. A search of the collocates of 'unprofessional' in the British National Corpus yields only one significantly common collocate, which is 'conduct': thus 'unprofessional conduct'. The referents thus seem to be people who embody the quality of being not very good, and possibly carelessly

slack, in their professional capacity. Although this may well be the *first* thing that springs to mind when encountering the noun, it seems less appropriate to the context than the other possible meaning of the word, which could be seen as a negation of the noun, 'professional', rather than a nominalization of the (already negated) adjective. Note that both understandings of the resulting countable noun originate from the adjective 'professional', so it is the *order* of addition of the morphemes that creates the different meanings. The subtle difference is that these people are then seen less negatively as those visitors to a person in crisis who are not the professionals, but others. Thus, we may surmise, they are not the doctors, social workers, police officers, or whoever is officially involved in the crisis itself, but the friends, family, and neighbours who do not have a specific job to do, but who turn up nonetheless. Note that there is still scope for being irritated by them when they seem not to know how to behave ('Unorganized, inarticulate, unprofessional') and I will return to this issue later, but the important issue here is to recognize that they are being defined by the word *unprofessionals* in the title not as incompetent people, but as non-professional people. This may even lend them a positive air, the professionals so often in such situations being seen as somewhat cold as a result of their smooth professionalism. In reading the poem aloud, one might even make a slight difference in the pronunciation of the word to recognize this difference, with the *un-* morpheme given more emphasis than would be normal, to foreground its effect as the negator of the noun and indicate that it was the last morpheme to be added.

Though there are other aspects of the style of this poem which a literary appreciation may want to take into account, I am concentrating here on those aspects which most clearly link to the interpretative issues that the poem raises. In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the syntactic aspects of its style which appear to exemplify very well the phenomenon that I call syntactic iconicity.

4. Syntactic deviation and foregrounding

The first thing to note about this phenomenon is that it depends, as many stylistic features do, on a notion of the linguistically *normal*. Thus, there is a range of ways in which the syntax of a poem in English can deviate from the normal English clause and sentence structure; from subtle differences of emphasis to complete 'ungrammaticality'. This range, I would suggest, also represents the range of reactions that an English speaker will feel on encountering deviant syntax of different types. Thus, a slightly over-length noun-phrase in subject position might produce a subtle and probably subconscious effect of waiting (for the verb to appear) whereas a completely odd word-order lacking usual agreements (e.g. between number or person in subject and verb) might produce a more adverse reaction of frustration. Most of the syntactic deviation I will explore here is not at the extreme verging on ungrammaticality and may well not be noted by readers, except subconsciously. The lack of *conscious* awareness of syntactic deviation, though, does not necessarily mean that these features are not foregrounded. Without particular training in grammatical analysis, speakers and readers may react less consciously to such features, but I would argue that they remain affected by such deviation in the same way as they are by more obvious stylistic features such as alliteration or unusual collocation.

Much early work on stylistics emphasized the importance of choice in appreciating the effects of textual features. This may sound as though a stylistic feature is in a sense separate from its meaning, and able to be appreciated purely linguistically, in contrast with the other options that the author may have had for saying essentially the *same* thing. Of course, there is a question in the case of poetry in particular (and the more poetic of prose literature in general) whether there *really* is a choice, since the language of a poem is often seen as being an intrinsic part of the message itself. So, the question of linguistic choice is not always separate from the question of effect or literary interpretation, but is simply a device that stylistics uses to demonstrate that the style of a literary (or other) text is at least partly the source of its meaning and effect.

The syntactic iconicity that I wish to investigate in 'The Unprofessionals', then, may be ascribed to a particular set of choices that writers have to make when constructing clauses and sentences. This is the question of how to structure the information within the confines of English syntax. The basic issues relating to information and clause structure can be summarized as follows:

1. English information structure is connected to clause structure;
2. The predicator (verbal element) is pivotal to the sense of the clause;
3. Earlier clause elements normally contain given information;
4. Later clause elements normally contain new information;
5. There is therefore normally a correlation between given information and short clause elements, and between new information and longer clause elements;
6. If default clause structure is used, this means that grammatical subjects will be shorter on the whole than objects and complements;
7. Optional adverbials (adjuncts, disjuncts, and so on) will occur more readily towards the end of a clause, particularly if they are lengthy;
8. The predicator (verbal element) will occur relatively early in the clause;
9. Deviations from default syntax (such as fronting, passivization, cleft structures) will tend to uphold the principles of information structure as listed in 1–7.

The stylistic assumption, given the principles above, is that readers would have these principles as expectations in their reading and any deviations from this norm will cause them to react, consciously or unconsciously, depending on the extent of deviation, to the differences of emphasis and flow of reading that will result.

Let us now consider, in order, the syntactic effects in this poem, and whether they are iconic in the sense that I have described above. The opening of the poem is a three-line stanza made up entirely of an adverbial subordinate clause which is therefore syntactically optional – the sentence would be perfectly grammatical without it – and is also unusually long for an optional initial clause element. This, I would argue, may cause the reader to feel slightly uneasy, since it is not clear what the sentence is actually about (theme) or what happens in it (rheme or focus). All we know at this stage is that the context is when 'the worst thing happens'. This adverbial clause is itself also complex, as it has two relative clauses expanding on the nature of 'the worst thing', so that we learn that it changes life irrevocably ('That uproots the future') and that it affects your whole life ('That you must live for every hour of your future'). Note that what we have so far in this stanza is a generalized context ('When'), relating to an unknown or generalized person, at this stage with the second-person pronoun being assumed to apply to anyone. This context doesn't state what the 'thing' is, leaving the reader to identify it as the 'worst thing' they are most familiar with. In addition, the double relative clause modification of this unknown event is no more explicit than the adverbial clause itself, leaving us none the wiser, nineteen words, three lines, and some incomplete syntax down the line.

So, the reader may be made to feel uneasy about what could happen to anyone, though note that this is achieved by a hypothetical adverbial clause which is not in fact modal, but categorical: 'When' indicates that 'the worst thing' will indeed happen. The reader is also told that it changes everything, and this will continue for the whole life, in the two relative clauses which by being subordinate to the adverbial clause are also effectively categorical. In all this time, the reader does not get a syntactic resolution of a grammatical subject and verb until line 4, in the second stanza. At that point, 'They come'. Although it is not stated who 'they' might be, the relief of finally arriving at the subject may incline the reader to pass over the lack of explicitness about referents, as we almost don't care who 'they' are, as long as *something* relieves the frustration. The fact that when the main clause elements do finally arrive they are so short and direct is in contrast to what has gone before. The result is that readers may feel that the problem, whatever it is, is thereby solved, the syntax now being complete. Note also that 'come' is spatially deictic and indicates movement towards the deictic centre of the person suffering the crisis. We as readers are positioned in that space too, which may make us

empathize more. After the long wait for the relief of some company, there is no adverbial following the verb. 'They' don't come to do anything specific; they just come.

The main clause elements, then, occupy a line on their own, which reinforces the apparent effect of the syntax being complete at this point. However, there is no punctuation and it turns out that there *are* further optional elements of the sentence to follow on line 5 ('Unorganized, inarticulate, unprofessional'). These adjectives are difficult to analyse grammatically, as they could be seen as reduced relative clauses (i.e., 'Which are …') or they could be seen as postponed modifiers, delayed because they cannot premodify a pronoun (*'Unorganized they'). Either way, they may produce the effect of undermining the relief which was felt as someone ('They') arrived to take charge of the awful situation both by their semantics (these people are not capable) and also by their syntax, as they extend an already long clause with three multisyllabic and syntactically repetitive words. The reader, then, may feel, along with the person at the centre of this crisis, that after an apparently interminable wait, help arrives at last, but is unable, of course, to undo the crisis, instead just being present, as represented in the three long adjectives.

The third stanza begins with a variant of the first main clause, 'They come sheepishly', which is immediately followed by another main clause ('they sit with you'). These two main clauses are the last ones in the poem, as we shall see shortly. So, unlike in the first clause, where there is a long wait for the main clause elements, here the syntax gets quickly to the point ('They come') but this time the manner of their coming is appended ('sheepishly') and the reader is then told the first real piece of information about what happens in the following clause ('sit with you'). This central part of the poem is a turning point, since the 'unprofessionals' have now arrived, and all of their activities fill the rest of the poem's syntactic structure with subordinate clauses, mostly non-finite clauses with the progressive participle (-ing form) indicating repeated actions across a length of time. Stanza three, then, continues after the main clauses with four non-finite adverbial clauses:

- holding hands, / From tea to tea, from Anadin to Valium,
- Sleeping on put-you-ups,
- answering the phone,
- Coming in shifts, spontaneously,

These activities, strung out as they are across the time-frame of the crisis, seem both pointless and also comforting. The 'unprofessionals' fill time and space with activity, and the build-up of these non-finite clauses continues into

stanza four with three further similarly structured clauses:

- Talking sometimes,/ About wallflowers, and fishing, and why
- Dealing with Kleenex and kettles,
- Doing the washing up and the shopping,

Note that the first of these three clauses uses a slightly unusual ordering, with the adverbial ('sometimes') appearing to finish the clause, and then the topics of discussion ('wallflowers, and fishing, and why') being appended almost as an after-thought. This syntactic arrangement takes the reader in and out of syntactic security, almost seeming to represent iconically the experience of the person in the poem who is alternately comforted and then reminded of the crisis. In a way, the addition of the three-part list of topics discussed retrospectively changes the nature of the verb 'talk'. In the online reading process, the apparently complete (albeit non-finite) clause 'Talking sometimes', constructs the verb as an intransitive verb with no objects, and only an adverbial to tell us when the talking might happen. After the comma, however, the addition of the prepositional phrases seems to alter the sense of the verb to one which requires adverbial completion, supplying what is being talked *about*. This change, from just talking to talking about things, echoes the talking itself, with the talking itself being the whole point initially, to break the silence (remember these people are 'inarticulate') and once the silence has been broken, the subjects move from random subjects with no connection to the crisis ('wallflowers and fishing') to the big question, 'why' this has happened. The iconicity here, I would argue, is in the sequencing, the gaps, and the change of tone, from talking for its own sake to talking about the issue on everyone's mind. The comma after 'sometimes' creates a pause that the reader, like the 'unprofessionals' themselves, has to span in order to progress with the reading process, and it acts like an awkward moment in a room of grief.

After this slightly longer subordinate clause, we return to the busyness of the earlier clauses, when the visitors perceive that after touching upon the big question ('why') they can now get active, with practical measures of help such as running the household. The fact that there are no further main clauses lends an air of unreality to the situation. These activities are endless and ongoing, and they do not move things forward, though they fill up time.

The final stanza continues the pattern, though with a single long adverbial clause based on another pair of non-finite progressive clauses ('Holding hands and sitting it out'). This time, though, there are further adverbials both before and after the main elements of the clause:

Like civilians in a shelter, under bombardment,
Through the immortality of all the seconds, / Until the blunting of time.

The first of these produces a simile, where the visitors are likened to people in a war, and as in the first clause of the poem, this adverbial extends the waiting time for the reader, who will not know yet whether there is going to be a final, resolving, main clause, or whether the long string of -ing clauses will continue. The next line, of course, confirms the latter, and it is followed by two final lines of adverbial prepositional phrases, each emphasizing the length of time that healing can take. By this stage, even the verbs have disappeared, and they are phrases with nominals expressing time ('immortality', 'all the seconds', 'time') and a nominalization of a verb ('the blunting') expressing the process by which time heals. By the end of the poem, then, it has been eleven-and-a-half lines since the reader encountered a main verb, and though the potential frustration for the reader of the earlier subordinate clauses is less evident in the long list of adverbial clauses after the main verb, it nevertheless may affect the reader by producing a resigned feeling that time is not moving on and that there will be no further syntactic relief.

The iconicity that I would suggest is produced in reading this poem is a direct reflection of the dynamics of the situation in the structure of the syntax. Through the juxtaposition of subordinate clauses and main clauses, the poet may cause the reader not just to perceive but to actually *experience* some of the same feelings of frustration and resignation that are being described. The ongoing presence of the vacuously active 'unprofessionals', against such a bleak background, is, perversely, rather comforting, and this tension between what they actually do and the fact that they are there, endlessly and continuously, seems to reflect both sides of the discrepancy that I noted in the reactions of my students and myself when we read this poem in class.

Of course, personal experience and local or cultural knowledge often has some kind of influence on a reader's interpretation of a poem. In the case of my teaching 'The Unprofessionals', for example, the student who ran crying from the room had recently had experience of caring for, and losing, a close relative. The other students, particularly those with least sympathy for the unprofessionals themselves, seemed to be more distant from recent tragedy or personal crisis.

Apart from the extensive interpretative possibilities that individual experience accounts for, and which cannot be part of a theory of stylistics or interpretation, there are other types of shared knowledge or cultural experience which can be included in such a theory. Schema theory, for example, has been increasingly used in stylistics (see, for example, Cook 1994; Semino 1997 and 2001; Jeffries 2001) to explain some of the means by which readers access textual meaning. Schema theory claims that much of our experience is stored cognitively as patterns (schemata or scripts) which produce our expectations of the situations we find ourselves in. Thus, a schema for what happens after a death in mainstream society in Britain will include much

visiting of the bereaved household by family and friends, many of whom have no specific role to play, but try to help (often ineffectually) in practical or emotionally supportive ways. In more highly structured societies (e.g. religious communities or rigid hierarchies), where roles and activities are laid down in an explicitly or at least well-understood codified form, this poem might not be as accessible as it is to those who share the underlying assumption: this is a terrible crisis, and no one knows what to do to help.

The discussion of schema theory in relation to literature has centred on the argument, first produced by Cook (1994), that one of the functions of literature is to defamiliarize (make strange) the familiar. This idea was taken in another direction by Semino (1997), who used schema theory to help explain how readers deal with the oddness of poems which mix unlikely schemata or which seem to pull the familiar schemata out of shape in some way. Jeffries (2001) made the case that not all literary experience involves a change to the reader's schemata, but that the explicit description of familiar, but perhaps relatively hidden, schemata might be one of the functions of poetry. In this case, it could be argued that (particularly in a non-religious society) we have no clear way of dealing with grief and crisis, and that the 'unprofessionals' are a result of this lack of ritual. The ambivalent feelings that a reader or a group of readers may have towards them is thus a reflection on both the unprofessionals' ineffectiveness, and also the fact that this incompetence is the result of a cultural vacuum and is therefore not their fault.

5. Conclusions

The exploration of syntactic iconic effects in the last section depends on the expectation that relatively competent readers of English (it is not yet clear to what extent this iconicity extends to other languages) may experience directly, but not necessarily consciously, the frustration of a long or late grammatical subject, or the timelessness of a minor sentence, or an overly long series of subordinate clauses, and so on. In other words, I am arguing that competent readers of Standard English at least will be accustomed to certain typical lengths of clause elements, early topics (subjects) and predicators (verbs), and right-branching structures where the longer elements represent new information and are later in the clause; in short, that the regular information structure is expected, and diversions from this structure have consequences.

In the context of the iconicity debate more generally, we may ask whether this is more similar to the imagic iconicity of direct mimetic effects such as onomatopoeia, or the diagrammatic iconicity of Haiman and others who argue that, for example, the linear ordering of events in a narrative is iconic of the chronology of the narrative. The fact that language is experienced in time, whether in silent reading or in listening to speech, is support for the iconicity of this default tendency in narrative to be chronological. It also, perhaps, supports the notion that there are levels of concreteness (i.e., directness) which would place chronological ordering somewhere between directly mimetic and less direct effects such as sound symbolism or the use of symmetrical syntax to reflect balance.

Because syntax is less salient for language users than, say, word choice, I would suggest that one of the consequences of altering the expected norms in subtle (i.e., not ungrammatical) ways is to gain access directly to the reader's subconscious, thus producing in them reactions that may not be quite as salient as reactions caused by, say, unusual collocations or novel metaphors, but which nevertheless influence their interpretation of the poem. Thus, in 'The Unprofessionals', the reader will probably make a relatively conscious effort to understand the title, and may note and even revel in the unusual way of marking out day from night in 'from Anadin to Valium'. S/he will probably be relatively aware of the apparent contradiction in 'Coming in shifts, spontaneously' and may think about the simile and to what extent s/he agrees that the people concerned are like 'civilians in a shelter'. What is less likely is that the reader will think consciously about the delayed first main clause elements in line 4 ('They come') or about the fact that the subordinate -ing clauses start in line 6 and continue to the end, though s/he will possibly feel slightly uneasy as they build up without further main clause resolution.