

## Stylistic analysis of the poem 'if' by Rudyard Kipling

Muhammad Ismail Memon, Farhat-un-Nisa Tunio, Moiz Awan

Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Shaheed Benazirabad, Sindh, Pakistan

### Abstract

The paper intends to give a stylistic analysis of the poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling on three fundamental levels: phonological, morphological, and pragmatical. The poem has been a source of inspiration for disheartened youth, and is a linguistic marvel because of its unique structure and style. The poem is written in a form of paternal advice to the poet's son. The poet has employed several literary devices and techniques in the poem that have been stylistically analyzed. The findings of the study would help the readers in understanding the core principles and concepts of Stylistics that have been aesthetically employed by the poet in the poem 'If'.

**Keywords:** stylistics, analysis, phonology, morphology, pragmatics, Rudyard Kipling, if

### Introduction

Stylistics is a branch of Applied Linguistics, and can be simply defined as the study of style in a text, and since style can be assumed in different ways, so there are several stylistic approaches to analyze a text; and this variety in Stylistics is due to the major influences of other branches of Linguistics and Literary Criticism (Katie, 1989) [4]. Initially, in Stylistics, only literary texts were analyzed, but around 1960s, the field of Stylistics was expanded, and non-literary texts started to be analyzed as well.

In A Dictionary of Stylistics, Katie Wales (1989) [4] writes that the goal of Stylistics is simply to describe how a text is styled; but not simply to describe its formal features for their own sake, but to show their functional importance in the interpretation of the text, or to highlight their literary effects in the linguistic arena.

The stylistic analysis provides the reader with a scientific and objective commentary on the linguistic features of a literary as well as non-literary text based on a concrete and quantifiable data processed in a systematic way. In this paper, the poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling has been stylistically analyzed on three fundamental levels: phonological level, morphological level, and pragmatical level. 'If' is a poem about hope and determination grounded on the principles of Victorian-era Stoicism. It was first published in 1910 in *Reward and Fairies*, a collection of Kipling's poems and short stories. In his biography, 'Something of Myself', Kipling has said that while writing this poem, he was inspired by Leander Starr Jameson. The poem is filled with immense motivation and ultimate inspiration that tells us how to deal with different and difficult circumstances in our life. Moreover, the poet constructs a whole philosophy of how to achieve our goals, and more importantly, how to become a good human being.

### Research Question

1. How a poem can be stylistically analyzed at phonological level?
2. How a poem can be stylistically analyzed at morphological level?
3. How a poem can be stylistically analyzed at

Pragmatical level?

### Research Objectives

1. To stylistically analyze the poem at phonological level.
2. To stylistically analyze the poem at morphological level.
3. To stylistically analyze the poem at pragmatical level.

### Literature Review

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field of Linguistics has witnessed enormous developments and a rapid growth due to which it has become a vast and independent field of its own. Moreover, the application of linguistic theories and tools in the study of literature has opened new doors of study for literary critics. Stylistics is one such aspect of linguistics in which a linguist or literary critic studies and analyzes the style of literary as well as non-literary texts (Katie, 1989) [4]. According to Katie (1989) [4], stylistics is an interdisciplinary field that combines the field of literary criticism and linguistics. Whereas, Widdowson (1975) [5] defines stylistics as the study and analysis of literary discourse through linguistic spectacles. Literary writings, says Widdowson (1975) [5], have unique linguistic techniques used by literary writers that can only be understood through a linguistically oriented analysis, and it is best served by the field of stylistics.

Short (1996) [3] defines stylistics as a linguistic approach to view and analyze literary texts; that is to say, in stylistics, a linguist or a literary critic explains the characteristics of a text with the help of linguistic descriptions. Furthermore, a stylistic analysis can be perceived as a linguistic analysis as well as a literary criticism depending on the nature of the study (Short, 1996) [3].

Leech (1969) [2] further explains the field of stylistics as the studious and scholarly analysis of linguistic texts. The texts might be literary and non-literary in nature. For literary texts, the stylistic analysis would highlight the artistic and aesthetic techniques used by the writer, whereas, for non-literary texts, stylistic analysis would explain certain important things which without stylistic analysis could not be understood (Leech, 1969) [2]. Researchers do stylistic

analysis of the texts on certain fundamental levels such as, phonological level in which they analyze the particular sound arrangement or pattern of the particular language in which the text has been written; morphological level in which the structure of words is analyzed; and, the pragmatical level in which the hidden or contextual meaning of the text is analyzed. By style one means to refer to the unique and individualistic way of writing of a particular writer. According to Katie (1989) <sup>[4]</sup>, humans have a tendency to write the same thing differently. Further, she says, the writing style varies from genre to genre, for instance, the romantic and classical poetry would require different style and pattern because they are two distinct genres of poetry.

There is a plethora of styles that are employed by authors and writers in their writing, such as, formal, informal, poetic, prosaic, narrative, etc. All the styles can be defined as the choice of one particular style over others by the authors (Carter and Stockwell, 2008) <sup>[1]</sup>.

**Methodology**

In this paper, the poem ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling is stylistically analyzed using qualitative research. The researchers have analyzed the poem on three fundamental levels: phonological, morphological, and Pragmatical.

**Data Analysis**

**Phonological Level**

Phonology is the branch of linguistics in which one deals with the study of how sounds form patterns in a language and across languages. Where in Phonetics, one studies the sounds in terms of their production (Articulatory Phonetics), transmission (Acoustic Phonetics) and acquisition (Auditory Phonetics); in Phonology, one studies the arrangement and organization of those sounds in a particular language.

Interestingly, in Phonology, one does not only study sound patterns or speech productions of certain language speakers, one also studies and analyses literary texts, particularly poetry. Poetry has its own unique sound patterns, as Leech (1969) <sup>[2]</sup> defines, “poetic language may violate or deviate from the generally observed rules of the language in many different ways.” Poetry can be phonologically analyzed through observing sound changes in it such as assimilation or dissimilation. In this paper, the poem ‘If’ by Rudyard

Kipling has been analyzed, and segmental features like ‘assonance’, and supra-segmental features like ‘half-rhyme’, ‘perfect-rhyme’ and ‘eye-rhyme’ have been highlighted.

**Assonance**

In Stylistics, assonance is a literary technique that is used in any form of language in general, and in poetic compositions in particular, for the amusement of ear or to put more emphasis on the message being conveyed. When in a composition, two identical vowels are repeated with differing consonant sounds, then it is said to be in assonance with each other. In the poem ‘If’, the technique of assonance can be observed being used in the words ‘allowance’ and ‘doubting’ as the identical vowel ‘/au/’ can be spotted in both the words.

**Half Rhyme**

A half rhyme is a kind of rhyme in which the initial or final consonant sounds are identical but the vowel sound embedded in them differ from each other. In the poem ‘If’, the word ‘losing’ and ‘blaming’, and ‘being’ and ‘hating’ are half-rhymed.

**Perfect Rhyme**

Perfect rhyme is a type of rhyme in which the stressed vowels and the following consonant sounds are identical whereas the preceding sounds are not. In the poem ‘If’, the words ‘meat’ and ‘treat’, ‘nerve’ and ‘serve’, and ‘talk’ and ‘walk’ are in perfect rhyme because of the common stressed vowel sounds and following consonant sounds.

**Eye Rhyme**

Eye rhyme is that rhyme in which words are spelled similarly but pronounced differently. In the poem ‘If’, the word ‘bear’ and ‘hear’ are the example of an eye rhyme because they are spelt alike but their sound varies as in the word ‘bear’ the diphthong ‘/eə/’ is used and in the word ‘hear’ the diphthong ‘/ɪə/’ is used.

**Alliteration**

In Stylistics, alliteration is the repetition of the same initial sound in sequential words or in a sentence. In the poem ‘If’, alliteration can be found being used as “treat those two imposters the same.”

**Table 1**

Assonance	Half-rhyme	Perfect Rhyme	Eye-Rhyme	Alliteration
/au/: allowance/doubting/eɪ/: knaves and make	/ɪŋ/:being/hating /ɪŋ/: losing/blamig	/i:/: meet/treat /ɜ:v/: nerve/serve /ɔ:k/: talk/walk	/eə/ & /ɪə/: bear/hear	/t/: treat/those/two/the /o/: on/of/toss

**Morphological Level**

As one of the crucial branches of Linguistics, morphology is the study of word-structure and word-formation in a language. In Morphology, the most fundamental unit of a word is a morpheme that can be defined as the smallest meaningful unit of language that cannot be further subdivided. Moreover, there are two main types of morphemes that are ‘free morphemes’ and ‘bound morphemes’, respectively. Free morphemes have the potential of being alone and can take place in a sentence on

its own, whereas, the bound morphemes are bound to stick or take place with another morpheme. Also, there is another important term used in Morphology that is ‘root’ by which one means to refer to those morphemes from which other morphemes are formed. From the poem ‘If’, free morphemes such as ‘allowance’, ‘breathe’; bound morphemes such as ‘-ed’, ‘-(e)s’, ‘-en’, ‘ing’; and, root words such as, ‘begin’ ‘fool’ ‘crowd’ have been highlighted in table no. 02.

Table 2

Free	Bound	Root
a, about, after, again, all, allowance, and, are, be, bear, breathe, build, but, by, can, common, count, deal, disaster, distance, doubt, dream, earth, except, fill, for, force, gave, give, gone, good, head, heap, hear, heart, hold, hurt, if, in, in, it, just, keep, life, long, look, lose, make, man, master, meet, men, minute, more, much, my, neither, nerve, none, nor, of, on, one, or, pitch, risk, run, same, serve, sinew, sixty, son, start, stoop, talk, the, their, there, think, those, too, toss, touch, trap, treat, triumph, trust, truth, turn, two, up, virtue, wait, walk, way, when, which, will, wise, with, word, worth, yet, you, your	-(e)d: hated, lied, tired, twisted -(e)s: beginnings, crowds, dreams, foes, fools, friends, imposters, kings, knaves, lies, says, seconds, theirs, things, thoughts, winnings, yours -en: broken, spoken, -ing: being, blaming, doubting, everything, hating, losing, loving, nothing, unforgiving, waiting	be, begin, blame, break, crowd, doubt, dream, foe, fool, forgive, friend, hate, imposter, king, knave, lie, lie, lose, love, say, second, speak, their, thing, thought, winning, tire, twist, wait, your

**Pragmatical Level**

Pragmatics is a branch of Linguistics in which one studies the interpretation or comprehension of language in accordance to its context; or, to put it more simply, how linguistic meaning is interpreted in a particular context. In order to rightly understand a piece of language, one has to have knowledge of linguistic context, thematic or situational context. In the pome ‘If’, Kipling has used some certain pragmatic features that have been highlighted as follows:

**Anaphora**

Anaphora is a literary technique in which certain words or phrases, throughout the passage, are repeated in successive clauses or sentences. By the use of this technique, writers or speakers put emphasis on their main objective or the message being conveyed. In the poem ‘If’, Kipling has repeated several times the phrase “If you can”, and thus, he has made the objective or central theme of the poem that only “If you can” do things and overcome feelings asked by the poet, you can achieve your goals and become truly a man.

**Abstract Diction**

In pragmatics, abstract diction is referred to the expression that create no mental picture in the readers’ mind. Thus, the readers would have to be provided the required or remaining text in order to understand the actual meaning of the passage. In the poem ‘If’, the title ‘If’ is the example of an abstract diction because when a reader reads it, he has no sense of what it means. Only when the reader has read all of the poem, he realizes what is meant by the title ‘If’.

**Personification**

Personification is a figure of speech used in literary writings in which non-human entities, things or ideas are given the humanly attributes or qualities as if they were humans. By personifying, writers make their writing more sentimental and vibrant. In the poem ‘If’, dreams are personified as ‘master’ who can control us; success as ‘Triumph’ which can make us complacent; failure as ‘Disaster’ which can make us believe that failure is per meant; the verb ‘Will’ is personified as if it was a human who tells us to “Hold on!”

**Metaphor**

Metaphor is a figure of speech which is used in literary writings for making an implicit or hidden comparison between two entirely different things but have some peculiar common characteristics. In the poem ‘If’, Kipling has called ‘Triumph’ and ‘Disaster’ the two ‘imposters’ which is a person who disguises himself in order to deceive someone. Same is the case with ‘worn-out tools’, it’s used as a metaphor for a feeling of exhaustion which can force someone to quit or give up.

**Symbolism**

In literary writings, symbolism is referred to the use of symbols for certain things or ideas in order to signify them. Through symbolism, writers embed symbolic meanings different from that of literal meaning in their writing. In the poem ‘If’, ‘knaves’, ‘crowds’, ‘kings’, ‘common touch’ have been used as symbols to mean ‘liars’, ‘common men’, ‘influential people’ and ‘humility’, respectively.

Table 3

Anaphora	Abstract Diction	Personification	Metaphor	Symbolism
If you can	If (Title of the poem)	Dreams Triumph disaster will	Imposters worn-out tools	Knave crowds kings common touch

**Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to discover the style and methods used by poet while writing this poem. In order to understand the poem, the poem was stylistically analyzed on three fundamental grounds: phonological, morphological, and pragmatical. It has also been proved that a literary piece of writing has many hidden features that a reader has to analyze in order to interpret and comprehend it. In the poem ‘If’, the poet has employed several literary devices and techniques in order to put more emphasis on his intended message. The poem ignites a spark of hope, and is an excellent source of inspiration for the disheartened youth. Apart from its aesthetical features filled with extraordinary fervor, the poem is a linguistic marvel as well.

**References**

1. Carter, Ronald, and Peter Stockwell, Ed, THE Language and Literature Reader. New York: Routledge, 2008.
2. Leech, Geoffrey N. A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. Longman, 1969.
3. Short, Mick. Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays, and Prose. Longman, 1996.
4. Wales, Katie. A Dictionary of Stylistics, London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1989.
5. Widdowson, Henry George. Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature, Longman: London, 1975.