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## *Mishearing and the voice in poetry*

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*Mishearing and the voice in poetry*

Abstract:

Speech recognition software can be used as a compositional tool in poetry and as such constitutes a form of homophonic translation, in which phonemes are substituted for each other based on near similarity. The end result bears a degree of similarity to the original based on phonemic patterning. One of the conclusions drawn in this article is that the phoneme is not an invariant fundamental particle of language, but can be thought of as bearing information in the sense that a voice can be defined as a distinctive patterning of phonemes, and thus the phoneme can be understood to bear information, in a probabilistic sense, about its neighbours. Drawing on Albert Bregman's work on auditory scene analysis, as well as recent research into non-arbitrary aspects of the relation of signifier to signified, this article proposes stylometric analysis of misheard or mistranslated poetry to see if distinctive phonemic patterning can be measured.

Biographical note:

David Musgrave is the author of eight books of poetry, the most recent being his *Selected Poems* (Eyewear UK, 2021), two audio CDs of poetry and one novel, *Glissando*. He co-edited *Contemporary Australian Poetry* and *Feeding the Ghost 1: Criticism on Contemporary Australian Poetry*, both published by Puncher & Wattmann, the press he founded in 2005. He has also published the monograph *Grotesque Anatomies: Menippean Satire Since the Renaissance*, and his research currently focuses on stylometric analyses of poetry, on Wittgenstein and ordinary language, and on literary hoaxes. He teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle.

Keywords:

Speech recognition, structuralism, information theory, Albert Bregman, auditory scene analysis

## Introduction

In this article I want to examine the role that voice plays in our reception and understanding of poetry. By ‘voice’ I do not merely mean the performing or transmission of poetry by the human voice, but rather voice in the broadest sense that means style, or signature, but including those aspects of style which are traditionally the domain of stylometry, such as the distribution of frequently used words, as well as the less well-defined aspect of style that might be tentatively termed ‘phonemic patterning’. The latter has been the subject of extensive studies since the time of Saussure’s studies of anagrams in Saturnian verse, and it is this sonic distinctiveness that I largely want to focus on here. Is there a discernible correlation between distinctive sound patterning and authorship? While the full answer to this question ultimately lies beyond the scope of this article, the examples I use to consider what ‘phonemic patterning’ may consist of will, I hope, help to lay a framework for future research into this area. Despite the relevance of psychoanalytic approaches to considerations of voice (for example, Dolar, 2006), I will for the most part avoid speculating on this aspect, for space does not permit, and it is perhaps an issue to be addressed after the work of this article is done. Specifically, I will be addressing the question of what has been termed homophonic translation as an analog practice, with regard to my poems ‘Coastline’ and those contained in the second partition of *Anatomy of Voice*, as well as digitally (with an analog component) with regard to experiments with speech recognition in a suite of poems titled ‘Mishearing’.

The Mishearing project utilises the speech recognition functionality of Microsoft Word 2005 to effect a form of homophonic translation of certain poems, with the view to seeing how the ‘recognition’ of speech via the mapping of phonemes to words bears a trace of the voice of the poet in the manner outlined above. That is, can the phonemic patterning of a poem remain recognisable after homophonic translation effected by imperfect speech recognition? The poems from the Mishearing project I will consider in this article are Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’ and Seamus Heaney’s ‘To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff’. Before I can examine these examples of ‘Mishearing’ in detail, I will further explore what phonemic patterning is, following the example of Starobinski’s engagement with Saussure’s study of anagrams and Jakobson’s further engagement with both in his studies of Shakespeare, Xlebnikov and folkloric riddles. I will further consider the notion of patterning as a distinct marker of an authorial selection from language considered from the point of view of words, as well as sounds chosen from those available in any given language. First of all, I will consider what is involved in homophonic translation.

## What is ‘homophonic translation’?

‘Homophonic translation’ is a term used in a variety of contexts ranging from analytic philosophy to experimental practices such as Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s *Catullus* (Zukofsky, 1991), to the mondegreen and simple paronomasia. All of these are relevant to the Mishearing

project, but there are differences between the way in which homophonic translation is understood in the analytic philosophical tradition, as is evident in Quine's collection of essays *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (1969), and the way in which homophonic translation has been taken up as a tradition deriving from Zukofsky and others (including various members of Oulipo) in the Australian avant-garde by Chris Edwards, John Tranter and Toby Fitch. In the context of discussing the inscrutability of reference (Glock, 1993), Quine (1969) cites the hypothetical example of 'radical translation', meaning 'translation from a remote language on behavioral evidence, unaided by prior dictionaries' but concedes that in his argument 'the resort to a remote language was not really essential' and that 'radical translation begins at home' (p. 45). He continues:

Must we equate our neighbor's English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouths? Certainly not; for sometimes we do not thus equate them. Sometimes we find it to be in the interests of communication to recognize that our neighbor's use of some word, such as 'cool' or 'square' or 'hopefully' differs from ours, and so we translate that word of his into a different string of phonemes in our idiolect. Our usual domestic rule of translation is indeed the homophonic one, which simply carries each string of phonemes into itself; but still we are always prepared to temper homophony with what Neil Wilson has called the 'principle of charity'. [1] We will construe a neighbor's word heterophonically now and again if thereby we see our way to making his message less absurd. (Quine, 1969, p. 46)

And he goes on: 'The homophonic rule is a handy one on the whole ... Homophonic translation is implicit in this social method of learning [for example, imitating elders]. Departure from homophonic translation in this quarter would only hinder communication' (Quine, 1969, p. 46). Here we see that for Quine, homophonic translation is a model for communication and learning, yet in terms of communication involving different frames of reference, which could be understood to operate in both a synchronic and a diachronic sense, heterophonic translation is occasionally necessary.

Quine's notion of heterophonic translation bears some similarity to the term 'homophonic translation' as utilised by those who, following Zukofsky and various members of Oulipo, render words from a source language different to the target language based on similarity of sounds. The claims for what this kind of homophonic translation achieves range from Horáček's (2014) statement that the Zukofskys' *Catullus* 'dismantles the concept of transparent literalism as a foundation of fluency-based approaches to translation' and 'never abandons semantic correspondence but rather redefines it' (p. 106), to Bernstein's (2021) advocacy for homolinguistic and homophonic translations as means of writing a poem, and to Tranter's (2009) admission that, in his poem 'Desmond's Coupé', which is a 'homophonic' translation of Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Un Coup de dés':

Though there are some tenuous links to the master poem, the employment of homophonic 'translation' causes the vocabulary and topic to vary erratically, leaping

from seriousness to crude slang in a single phrase: ‘heroic’ to ‘cough’, for example. The only literary decorum is a total lack of decorum, relentlessly imposed. (p. 121)

Another view of homophonic or mistranslation espoused by Toby Fitch (2019) emphasises the element of chance as well as the dethroning of meaning:

Mistranslation in poetry, according to many experimenting or procedural poets ... is a means to an end, a constraint-based, generative practice, whereby a poet ‘translates’ another poem (usually from a foreign language) into something *newly mistaken*. Transposition from one mode to another, as a practice/praxis, shortcircuits control, bringing chance to the fore – the poet is at the whim of words and their swervings. To double-up (or doubledown) on Walter Benjamin’s ‘Translation is a mode’, let’s think of mistranslation – predicated on ceding the initiative to a pre-text – as a *mood* ‘in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation’. (p. 17)

The desire to overturn, to thumb one’s nose at sense, perhaps needs to be taken at face value as light-heartedness and fun; however, the claim that the process is aleatory, is a confusion of chance with contingency, as I have written about elsewhere (Musgrave, 2021, p. 175). At best, Fitch’s notion of short-circuiting control can be understood as the source language serving as a kind of constraint against which the wit of the poet-translator is exercised. In the case of mistranslation, the poet is not really ‘at the whim of words and their swervings’ but rather makes selections, constrained by an apparent similarity to the phonemes of the source language, from language in a manner that has a significant unconscious element. Of course, unlike speech, where individual selections and arrangements of language are made in real time without full cognitive awareness, the process of writing, and of mistranslation, offers the opportunity for revision and invention. As an exercise in wit, such mistranslation has value, and the best example of it in the Australian tradition is Chris Edwards’ (2005) mistranslation of Stéphane Mallarmé’s ‘Un Coup de dés’, ‘A Fluke’.

In distinction to the Australian avant-garde tradition of mistranslation, which is radically heterophonic in the Quinian sense, the Mishearing project has its basis in homophonic translation within the same language but is heterophonic in the sense that phonemes are ‘misheard’ by the speech recognition software, and the output resembles the source poem in shape and sound, but not (entirely) in sense. [2] We could term this kind of mistranslation ‘hetero-homophonic’ as it operates in one sense at the level of difference and offers the same possibilities as heterophonic mistranslation for the exercise of wit through revision and editing, while also perhaps evincing an element of parody; yet it also shares elements of homophonic translation with its basis in similarity of sound (and the occasional ‘survival’ of sounds from the original text in the ‘misheard’ version). Additionally, hetero-homophonic mistranslation raises interesting questions with regard to the translation of phonemic patternings, and whether these can be said to retain a sense of the voice of the original. This begs the question, of course, of the relation between voice as I have defined it above as a stylistic signature consisting of the patterning of keywords, which is the domain of stylometry, and the patterning of phonemes,

which has been investigated by Saussure, Jakobson and others but is yet, to my knowledge, to be subject to stylometric analysis.

Before investigating phonemic patterning further, I want to briefly outline the method of production of the poems in the Mishearing suite. Microsoft Word 2005 has a native speech recognition function, by default trained to a North American accent. I avoided the ‘training’ process of attuning the software to an Australian accent, and I used a microphone of poor quality, held at different distances from my mouth and occasionally muffled by a tissue or a cloth, and the recordings took place in the presence of varying degrees of ambient noise. From experience, the software appears to reference Word’s in-built dictionary, Microsoft Outlook’s personal folders and cached web pages to map sounds to words, using probabilistic tables in a manner similar to that of stylometric programs such as ‘Stylo’ and the textual analysis/reconstruction program ‘Brekdown’. I would repeat the process a number of times for a single poem using different combinations of distance, bafflement, and ambient noise, and then set about producing a single version through selection and some editing. The result, in deference to Tranter’s experiments with ‘Brekdown’, is given a name that is an anagram of the original poem. Thus Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’ becomes ‘Cymru Tony’, Judith Wright’s ‘Wildflower Plain’ becomes ‘Low Ripe Windfall’, Les Murray’s ‘Spring Hail’ becomes ‘Lip Sharing’, Gig Ryan’s ‘The Cross/The Bay’, becomes ‘Be the Scary Host’, and a passage from *Finnegans Wake*, ‘Genie Wanks Fan’.

### Mishearing and information theory

In his book *Auditory Scene Analysis: The Perceptual Organization of Sound*, Albert S Bregman (1994) cites the research of O’Leary and Rhodes into phonemic restoration, whereby a subject listens to a recording of speech that is interrupted by periodic silent gaps, apparently finding that ‘filling the gaps by noise can actually improve the accuracy of recognition’ (p. 376). Bregman goes on to ask:

Why should this be? After all, the nervous system cannot supply information that is missing from the stimulus. It can only supply its best guess. Why could it not do that without the noise filling the gap? I have argued earlier that the noise eliminates false transitions from sound to silence and vice versa that are interfering with the recognition of the sounds. [3] In addition, because silences are interpreted as part of the speech itself and not as an added sound, the rhythmic introduction of silences is heard as a rhythm in the speech itself and disrupts the listener’s perception of any natural rhythms that may have been in the original speech. [4]

The method of repeatedly interrupting a stream of speech has been used to show how the restorations depend on being able to develop a guess about the deleted sound from a consideration of the other nearby words. (p. 376)

Silence, therefore, is both a necessary signifying part of speech and also its antithesis. The introduction of noise would seem to minimise the uncertainty as to whether the introduced

silences were signifying or non-signifying. In terms of the Mishearing project's use of speech-recognition, distance, bafflement and ambient noise would function in the same way, with this important proviso: if a listener is able to accurately guess missing sounds from their context, it means that the remaining phonemes possess some kind of information about those missing parts. Here we are getting closer to what the Mishearing project may in part be revealing to us: the probabilistic nature of certain sound patterns, and the possibility that traditional stylometry (for example, Stylo, Brekdown, Verse by Verse), which tracks the deep and occluded process of individuation in language selection and arrangement at the level of the word, can be used to track individuation in phonemic selection and patterning, thus complementing our understanding of authorial distinctiveness through word patterning with the patterning of sound as well. It goes without saying that this process is inherently meaningful in hetero-homophonic translation in the same language, more so than hetero-homophonic translation across different languages.

At this point it might be worth countenancing the objection that to mishear is to mistake, and there is nothing more to be said on the matter. But the thing about the human voice is that it originates in the body and, when heard, ends in another. In an age where AIs such as Google's Verse by Verse can write poetry and programs such as Neil Rubenking's 'Brekdown' can combine the poetry of one poet with the style of another, is the voice that inessential part of a poem which, when lost, takes the author with it? Certainly, John Tranter (1998) thought so when he asked the question:

How does a writer create a writer-free literary text? A text free of authorial intentions and without buried cultural, social, economic and political values and hidden personality agendas, giving forth only 'literature' in its pure state? (para. 5)

I am not that sure such purity is at all possible, even if Tranter meant it ironically. In terms of the digital transmission of a message, uncertainty is resolved completely once a message has been successfully received, having been homophonically translated through space and time. In the analog environment, it is a little different: strings of phonemes, which travel as sound waves through the air, cause vibrations of the tympanum, which in turn set off movements in the auditory ossicles – that tiny forge where the malleus, incus and stapes work to transmit to the cochlea, filled with endolymph – where the mechanical movements are transduced into neural impulses. Hearing is therefore a transcription of sorts, and as such cannot ever be said to be perfect, for there is energy lost through the act of aural transcription of the message in the air, and in the middle and inner ears. In addition to the physical imprecision of hearing, there is the potential to mis-listen in the homophonic translation of homonyms and the heterophonic translation of unfamiliar words. In each of these models I have just sketched, it is assumed that the phoneme has no signifying force in itself, only in a string of phonemes. This is a view shared by most 20th century philosophers of language; for example, Giorgio Agamben (1991) writes 'the phoneme is singularly close to the Heideggerian idea of a "voice without sound" and of a "sound of silence"' (p. 86). This view of the phoneme is a 20th century phenomenon and is best exemplified by Jakobson's view that "'A phoneme", as Sapir remarked, "has no singleness of reference". All phonemes denote nothing but mere OTHERNESS' (Jakobson &

Halle, 2002, p. 22). However, it is well worth noting that in the second half of the 19th century, the term had currency in psychiatry as an auditory hallucination (an interesting fact to which I shall return):

Phonemes (the verbal auditory hallucinations of Ségla) have a special significance, inasmuch as they consist of ‘words representing ideas’ (Rogues de Fursac, 1905/2006, p. 44)

The more complicated hallucinations which are conceived by the patient to be ‘voices’ – verbal auditory hallucinations – are known as phonemes (White, 1911, p. 47)

Jakobson explains that within phonemics, the phoneme is as an irreducible, non-signifying ‘particle’, an invariant ‘building block’ analogous to the atom of physics. He acknowledges that this is a relatively recent development, and is also anxious to trace its pre-history:

The search for the ultimate discrete differential constituents of language can be traced back to the *sphoṭa*-doctrine of the Sanskrit grammarians and to Plato’s conception of *στοιχείον*, but the actual linguistic study of these invariants started only in the 1870’s and developed intensively after World War I, side by side with the gradual expansion of the principle of INVARIANCE in the sciences. (Jakobson & Halle, 2002, pp. 18-19)

While this kind of thought is typical of the development of the social sciences through the 20th century (Midgley, 2001), there are other ways of considering the phoneme. For example, recent research suggests that the relation between certain sounds and words are not entirely arbitrary (Blasi et al., 2016; Dingemanse et al., 2015; Griffiths, 2011; Monaghan et al., 2014). [5] Even if these relatively recent findings are found to be questionable, we have seen that Bregman has suggested the possibility that phonemes contain information about other phonemes, and Jakobson – in discussing the likelihood that ‘it is possible from a part of the sequence [of phonemes] to predict with greater or lesser accuracy the succeeding features, to reconstruct the preceding ones, and finally to infer from some features in a bundle the other concurrent features’ (Jakobson & Halle, 2002, p. 16) – seems to be suggesting the same. These observations can be explained by classic information theory, in which the measure of information in a system is understood as a logarithmic relation of uncertainty, or Shannon entropy (Shannon, 1948). A system of phonemes is informational in this sense, even if each phoneme is non-signifying. And the information of a phonemic system can be comprised of several things: the rules of a language that permit or forbid certain phonemes and their combinations; the possibility that certain idiolects or dialects favour certain phonemes; the possibility that the individual’s selection of words, which we know from stylometry is distinctive, may be governed by the sounds of those words, or even by a preference for certain sounds (sometimes over sense); and lastly, the self-conscious selection of words and sounds by poets when composing poetry, which is never entirely without a subliminal aspect. This last possibility has received extensive attention from linguists, with Saussure and Jakobson being two prominent exemplars. In his book on Saussure’s anagrams, Starobinski (1979) writes of the transmission of legends across centuries that:



one must consider meaning as a product – the variable product of the combinative function [of the material elements of a legend] – and not as a preliminary absolute, *ne varietur*.

In Poetry it is clear that the laws of usage are concerned not only with verbal unities ('concepts invested with linguistic form') and with symbols; the phonemes themselves are used according to specific laws. And these laws can vary, depending on style, period, tradition. (pp. 8-9)

I will examine this attention to the phonemes themselves in the work of Saussure and Jakobson in the following section, in order to prepare the ground for the discussion of individually distinctive sound patterning in the Mishearing suite.

### **Subliminal verbal patterning in poetry**

From 1906 to 1909, Ferdinand de Saussure devoted over one hundred notebooks to the phenomenon of anagrams in, initially, Latin Saturnian verse, and subsequently in poetry from several periods, including Vedic poetry, medieval French poetry and German poetry. He claimed to have discovered a rule by which a hypogram, or concealed name or theme-word (in the case of Saturnian verse, the name of the individual memorialised in the poem; in other poems, either the hero or title) is then rearranged in successive lines according to set rules. [6] As Starobinski (1979) notes:

The hypogram inserts a simple name into the complex array of syllables in a poetic line; its function will be to recognize and reassemble its leading syllables, as Isis reassembled the dismembered body of Osiris. (p. 20) [7]

The problem which Saussure was unable to overcome was his doubt that these paragrammatic and anagrammatic identifications were not, in fact, apophenic, a problem exacerbated by the fact that he was able to apply his rules and make identifications seemingly at will. Starobinski is of the opinion that Saussure refrained from publication because he could not resolve these questions, and indeed Saussure confesses at one point that 'everything overlaps, and one cannot see where to draw the line' (as cited in Starobinski, 1979, p. 98). What becomes apparent in reading through Starobinski's selections from Saussure's notebooks is an anxiety accompanied by frustration that certainty cannot be found in his hypothesis. Yet there is also an awareness that, in Starobinski's words:

Ferdinand de Saussure interprets classical poetry as an art of *combination*, whose developed structures are tributaries of simple elements, fundamentals which are required by the rules of the game to be both conserved and transformed. Only it happens that all language is combination, even without the intervention of an explicit intention to practice combination as art. Decipherers, whether they be cabalists or phoneticists,

have a free range: a reading which is symbolic or numeric or systematically attentive to a partial aspect can always bring to light a latent depth, a hidden secret, a language within the language. And if there is no cipher? The constant attraction of the secret, of anticipated discovery, of steps astray in the labyrinth of exegesis – all these would remain. (p. 129)

It is worth noting that ‘the *Course in General Linguistics*, developed between 1907 and 1911, is in large part of a later date than the research into anagrams’ (Starobinski, 1979, p. x) and that the anxiety over the ungrounded combination of phonemes was retained and transferred to a more generalised fear of the system of language as he had come to theorise it. [8] Starobinski’s recuperation of Saussure’s studies into anagrams was taken up by several linguists and scholars of style, including Roman Jakobson, who seems relatively untroubled by Saussure’s apophenic fears. For example, in his essay ‘Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry’ he finds the titular hero of Xlebnikov’s poem ‘The Grasshopper’ to be embedded anagrammatically in its lines, while the answer to a folkloric riddle can also be found in a manner similar to what he calls Saussure’s ‘daring studies on poetic anagrams’ (Jakobson, 1985, p. 61). In his study of Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 129’ he finds a crucial anagrammatic insertion of Shakespeare’s own name (as well as in sonnets 134-136 and 76) (1970, p.30). For Jakobson (1985), these anagrams are part and parcel of the poet’s intuition which:

may act as the main or, not seldom, even sole designer of the complicated phonological and grammatical structures in the writings of individual poets. Such structures, particularly powerful on the subliminal level, can function without any assistance of logical judgement and patent knowledge both in the poet’s creative work and in its perception by the sensitive reader. (p. 68)

We know that subliminal verbal patterning is what stylometric analysis has succeeded in establishing as individual authorial signature styles based on patterns in common word choice. It is my contention that stylometric analysis of phonetic units would succeed in uncovering other patterns, equally distinctive and that these, taken together with common word choice patterns would approximate voice as I have defined it; moreover, it would help us to understand that voice in poetry is what sits at the juncture of conservation and transformation.

### **From rhyme to hypogram: *Anatomy of Voice***

‘The willed production of sound always is in tension with the involuntary aspect of hearing,’ writes Susan Stewart (2009) in her essay ‘Rhyme and Freedom’, and she continues: ‘in rhyme, the production of sound can seem involuntary and hearing can be attuned to particular intervals’ (p. 41). In many ways, rhyme was my portal into the Mishearing project, with years spent before it reading the slant rhymes of Paul Muldoon, which owe much to the poetry of Louis MacNeice, among others. The rhyming of ‘rickshaw’ with ‘peepshow’, for example, in MacNeice’s ‘Bagpipe Music’ (2001, p. 32) or the slant rhyme of the title of Muldoon’s little poem about alcoholism, ‘The Mist-Net’, with the last line ‘*You mustn’t. You mustn’t.*’ (2001,

p. 156) caught my ear as much for their chiming imperfection as for their subtle structuration. Stewart (2009) is right to defend the inclusion of rhyme in one's poetic armory as an endowment 'with certain freedoms',

among them: the vernacular, including the locality of the poem itself, released from the standard; the monolingual in dialogue with the multilingual; sound opened up by vision, and sound released from meaning entirely; expectation released into surprise; and pattern drawn from the oblivion of time. (p. 48)

When Stewart writes of 'sound released from meaning entirely', she is referring to semantics, but there are other meanings which are not linguistic which structured sound contains, such as musicality, and the intimation of an order that may be beyond words, as well as aesthetic concerns: distaste, for those poets and readers who abhor rhyme, pleasure for those who do not.

My initial response to these various considerations of rhyme and its variants was to adopt, as a constraint, the rearrangement of the terminal phonemes of rhyming lines, which in practice involved up to four syllables and which also involved the occasional inversion of phonemes. The result was the poem 'Coastline', in which sonorousness arose from a process of fracture (Musgrave, 2019, pp.11-14). The next step was to extend the process of manually rearranging terminal phonemes to those that comprised an entire line. In the second partition of *Anatomy of Voice*, I took each line of a nine-line poem and, in order, used them as the first lines of nine subsequent poems, each of which had six lines, with the second to sixth lines consisting of rearrangements of the phonemes making up the first line. Here is the fourth of these rearranged poems (Musgrave, 2016, p. 57), with accompanying image:



Conjured from nothing but parts of the flesh.  
In your pungent rhumbas, the shuffle of  
injured tongues. From the *book-trap* of shelf  
the jury thronged the prefab muff confits.  
Bud Junior, of shopping tube country, films  
the pledge of neuro-buffing comfort shunts.

The motto for this image is '*Tamen Discam*', which can be translated as 'Let me learn', and is taken from Gabriel Rollenhagen's *Nucleus*, Arnheim, 1611. I Nr. 75. Its accompanying verses:

Et licet in tumbam pes decidat alter, et alter  
Vivat adhuc, studiis invigilabo tamen

[Although one foot might fall into the tomb, and the other  
might go on still living, yet I shall pay close attention to my studies]  
(Henkel, 1996, p. 982; translation as in Musgrave, 2016, p. 97)

are a laudation of learning. The intention here was, coincidentally, very close to the ‘rules’ which Saussure discerned in Saturnian verse: I wanted to see what anagrams such rearrangement would yield and to see if one of these anagrams could serve as a ‘key’ (which I then indicated in italics) that could correspond to an image from one of several thousand emblems dating from the fifteenth through to the eighteenth centuries which embodied one of the virtues of Bill Maidment, my late friend. In this regard, phonemic rearrangement was an artistic practice animated by grief. I have written elsewhere about this:

I hit upon the idea of the emblem as something which might convey a personal quality as much as a conventional moral. Those emblems I have included in the book were chosen for the way in which they seemed to embody many of Bill’s virtues, but were also chosen for the way in which they arose, often seemingly by chance, from the poems I was composing. The Second Partition could be considered as a small emblem book in its own right. (Musgrave, 2016, p. 92)

The hypogram does not arise by chance for, as with apophenia in general, *something* will arise, or appear, from the process of looking or, in this case, rearranging something as apparently fundamental and inconsequential as the phoneme. It was nevertheless a pleasing part of the overall design of *Anatomy of Voice*, not the least because the operation at the level of the phoneme seemed to bear some trace of that word’s original meaning of ‘auditory hallucination’ (noted above): ‘Phonemes (the verbal auditory hallucinations of Ségla) have a special significance, inasmuch as they consist of “words representing ideas”’ (Rogues de Fursac, 1905/2006, p. 44); ‘The more complicated hallucinations which are conceived by the patient to be “voices” – verbal auditory hallucinations – are known as phonemes’ (White, 1911, p. 47); especially fitting, given the genesis of *Anatomy of Voice* was in just such an auditory hallucination (Musgrave, 2016, p. 93).

### The Mishearing suite

The following are two examples of misheard poems from the Mishearing suite, accompanied by their originals. I undertake a reading of them after Ross Chambers’ notion of ‘paratextual density’ (2018).

‘My Country’

The love of field and coppice  
Of green and shaded lanes,  
Of ordered woods and gardens  
Is running in your veins.  
Strong love of grey-blue distance,  
Brown streams and soft, dim skies  
I know, but cannot share it,  
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.  
I love her far horizons,  
I love her jewel-sea,  
Her beauty and her terror  
The wide brown land for me!  
(Mackellar, 1987, p. 11)

‘Cymru Tony’

The love of this agreement  
chided lines before the words  
and ideas running new times  
strong loss of a great lady  
stands for streams and soft team skies  
and I became a share  
my love is otherwise

allow the Sunday country land  
is sweeping kinds of writing  
and running shoes of transit  
funding Ryan’s love  
is the rise of some of the jewels  
say the PC and that era  
the profit from a stock swap

The voice of Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’ (‘Cymru Tony’) strikes me as blunt and earnest. The vowels are short and repetitive (‘love’, ‘sun’, ‘count’), and where they are apposed to the longer vowels (‘sweeping’, ‘far’), the contrast is heightened by the connotation of the sounds and words contained by those words with the longer vowels: ‘Sweeping’ contains

‘weep’, and ‘wee’, ‘far’ contains the ‘ah’ of a cry of pain, ‘terror’ contains ‘error’ or ‘err’. One interesting feature of the Mishearing project in general is the prevalence of numbers, proper nouns and language relating to economic activity generally in the misheard version, suggestive of some generalised pecuniary anxieties or preoccupations.

‘My Country’ was published in a collection titled *The Closed Door* in 1911, the title implying that secrets were contained within, perhaps requiring decoding. Michael Farrell’s (2015) reading of Mackellar’s poem draws attention to its title which ‘enacts settler identification and possession’ (p. 87), and his discussion of Mackellar’s writing generally focuses upon her secret diary, which was written using an invented code. What is the relation between the voice of this famous poem and this elaborate concealment? According to Farrell, ‘Mackellar is more concerned to hide her desires, and their intensity, rather than her actions’ although ultimately he sees that the *Diaries* ‘value is the critique they offer of the settlement model’ (pp. 88, 91). Certainly, a reading which focusses on unsettlement in the diaries raises the question of whether this effect is entirely absent from ‘My Country’, or whether the poem indeed helps produce ‘a home or settled structure’ in relation to Australia’s national culture’ (Farrell, 2015, p. 96). It is significant, perhaps, that the line ‘my love is otherwise’ survives hetero-homophonic translation; in doing so it draws attention to itself and offers ways in which it may be read, as ‘other than wise’, or foolish. And certainly, the overwrought love affair with R. (Brisbane-based architect Robin Dods) implies an attraction to drama and the need to hide it, but there are also numerous diary entries referring to heavy menstruation (Farrell, 2015, p. 89). Perhaps the sounds of pain concealed in ‘My Country’ emerge in its misheard version as a softened commodification of desire; certainly ‘running’, ‘streams’ and ‘transit’ figure prominently in the misheard first two stanzas.

‘To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff’

Niall Fitzduff brought a jar  
of crab-applejelly  
made from crabs off the tree  
that grew at Duff’s corner –  
still grows at Duff’s Corner –  
a tree I never once saw  
with crab apples on it.

Contrary, unflowery  
sky-whisk and bristle, more  
twig-fret than fruit-fort,  
crabbed  
as crabbed could be –  
that was the tree  
I remembered.  
(Heaney, 2006, p. 64)

## ‘Did Unfathomable Flagrant Pout’

Nil fits a lot tougher a  
 bridge at this critical jelly  
 made from grapes off the tree  
 that growing doubts corner  
 still grows it does: the country  
 and never once always credible  
 song that contrary to unflattering  
 skyways can bristle more quick  
 for it than for it for granted script  
 could be a thought was that rehire  
 amended

In his review of *District and Circle*, Brad Leithauser (2006) notes that Heaney’s ‘rhymes are rough-hewn, hand-honed’ and that his ‘harmonies have grown harsher over time’ (para. 3). Certainly, roughening is one of the markers of late style (Jones, 2010, pp. 1-9), and in Heaney’s poem the mix of fricative and labial is a kind of bluff verbal biff. It’s a certainty of voice that strikes, with compound words neatly morticing characteristic Heaney sounds, the guttural ‘r’ that confidently places the poem in the local, the district, a poetic world a million miles away. These compound words are compressed versions of the rough rhymes of which Leithauser (2006) asks:

What does it matter? Why should we care whether two words chime cleanly or clunkily? The issue can seem picayune – until you recognize that it’s through just such tiny touches, such minimal modifications of sound, that a poet fabricates an individual, distinguishing music. (para. 4)

At first pass, the poem seems confidently nostalgic, exuding the kind of poetic authority one might expect when one Nobel laureate includes another in his poem. There is also, as so often in Heaney, the confident use of Irish language, proper nouns and names, all of which ring authentically as local, and rural: it reads as almost the exact antithesis of John Tranter’s suite of poems about literary thinkers in Sydney pubs (Tranter, 1990, pp. 149-153). But when the poem is misheard, an interesting translation takes place: ‘Duff’ becomes ‘doubt’, and lines 6-7 become ‘never once always credible / song’. Reading the two poems paratextually, we return to Heaney’s poem and notice that the crab-apple jelly comes from Niall Fitzduff, and that the crabs grow on Duff’s corner: the poem is literally ‘up the duff’ with crabs; yet there are other senses too, of duff: that it means to steal goods by changing their appearance. Is that what we make of Neruda’s presence in Tamlaghtduff, that Heaney has stolen from the Chilean Nobel laureate by changing the appearance, in translation of his words? The crabs themselves transport the persona of Heaney’s poem back to a past which has its own ‘crab-hoard’, a crowded irritability brought on by the speaker’s crabbed, sideways translation into the

fantasised presence of the Chilean poet, replete with verbal invention that reads partly as homage, partly as anxiety of the inescapable influence, perhaps of the older poet.

Subliminally, I think, Heaney's sound choices reveal an uncertainty; whether it is due to the onset of a late style, or an anxiety of influence, a 'rehire / amended'. Here it is relevant to consider Ross Chambers' (2018) notion of paratextual density in looking at the ways I have read the misheard versions against their sources:

Thanks to all these devices, then – the in-built redundancy of natural languages, the specific modes of redundancy that produce the 'poetic function' of language, and finally the 'kinds' of transaction that are defined by the working of genre – the artful texts that we call literary resist entropy and through densification survive the effect of time with considerable success. The type of intertextuality that defines the relation of 'L'Invitation au Voyage' and 'Grab Your Passport' as a matter of mutual replication or paraphrase produces a kind of density, or thickening, that further intensifies the negentropic *Dichtung* that puts literature in general, and poetry in particular, on the side of life in humanity's long battle against time and the work of death. And that is the case even when its themes may incorporate a death-wish or some other form of 'degeneracy' (the sort of thing Tranter attributes to Baudelaire in his paratextual note). Like sexual congress, textual congress works for life against death; and it does so even unto death – which is, of course, the ultimate significance of the *Liebestod*. (p. 235)

In Chambers' understanding, the readings I have offered with regard to these two misheard poems might best be seen as aspects of the paratextual 'thickening' that occurs between the misheard and its original. In this regard, the Mishearing project is, ultimately, yet one more way to achieve that densification and resistance of entropy to which Chambers refers, although Chambers is mixing his frames of reference here, using 'entropy' in the quotidian sense of decay and disorder, rather than the sense of it as a measure of the information of a system, according to classic information theory. In the latter sense, the Mishearing project is concerned with increasing the amount of entropy in the text, or at least between the texts, for as I have shown in my brief examples, hetero-homophonic translation of the constituent phonemes reveals rather more in the texts than was there before. And it is a first, analog step in helping to identify phonemic pattering in poetry and to identify the distinctiveness of a poetic voice.

## Conclusion

One line of research which could lead directly from this article would be a stylometric comparative analysis of six or so poems from six or so poets, in the traditional way of determining the frequency and distribution of common words, and in the way I have suggested through stylometry on the poems rendered phonetically. This could be complemented with a stylometric analysis of these poems that have been misheard, with a comparative analysis against a sample set of poems by the 'mishearer' to see to what extent phonemic patterning is influenced by the mishearing process. This may or may not confirm what I have attempted to



do manually, in an analog sense, with my paratextual readings of Mackellar and Heaney. Perhaps Mackellar's phonemic patterning is in blunt triads apposed to longer vowel sounds revealing suffering and uncertainty. Perhaps it can be shown that Heaney's style in *District and Circle* is indeed 'late' (when compared, say, with a sample from *Death of a Naturalist*) and is crabbed and guttural. Or it could be that my own style is present in both. The possible findings of such research would seem to ramify well beyond identifying an individual voice; it could be used to trace developments in individual style, and possibly differentiate regional variations in sound patternings: an Australian, back-of-the-throat flatness compared with an American front-of-the-mouth enunciation. But there are other questions this research raises.

As stated at the outset, I have deliberately avoided any discussion of the psychoanalytic aspects of voice, but like anything repressed, it returns at the end to haunt us, like a missing transcendental signifier, or Saussure's terror at its absence. The subliminal ordering of words and sounds can reveal aspects of desire, in a psychoanalytic sense, but it can equally be argued to reveal the kinds of anxieties or 'unsettlement' which Farrell explores with Mackellar, and in Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie letter' (Farrell, 2015, pp. 48-53, 85-100). Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* contains a critique of Jakobson's fascination with *lalangue* (Dolar, 2006, pp. 145-149) and is rich with possible new research directions. Adriana Cavarero's *For More than One Voice* is centred more on a 'politics of the voice', and it seems to me that one consequence of renewed attention to the distinctiveness of voice is an understanding and allowing of pluralism:

Paying attention to the voice is acknowledging that a speaking voice only exists because it has a listener. In this regard there is a political dimension to identifying what is characteristic in a voice understood as 'a vocal exchange where the repetition of sound, and all its tonal rhythmic variants, expose uniqueness as an understanding [*un'intesa*] and a reciprocal dependence. (Cavarero, 2005, p. 182)

After all, the voice's first function after birth is to call to the other. In a literary sense, the development (or identification) of a voice is that which enables us to enter into the process of myth, understood as the operation of the imagination to identify the human with the non-human world (Frye, 1947, p. 19). As a portal into myth, voice occupies the juncture of conservation and transformation, making these efforts to understand its distinctiveness all the more important.

Yet for all of this renewed interest in the voice in poetry, and the various experiments described and detailed herein, perhaps the most important development in modern poetry took place in the early Jurassic, around 195 million years ago, with the appearance of *Hadrocodium*, a small mammaliaform, now extinct, approximately 3.2 cm long and possessing a nearly full mammalian ear. One cannot speculate how the evolution of mammals, let alone humans, might have occurred without the faculty of hearing, but it is certain that poetry would not exist without it.

## Notes

[1] Quine cites Wilson, 1959, p. 532. Perhaps he had in mind his nephew Robert Quine (1942-2004), guitarist with Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Lou Reed and many others, when thinking of the need to translate ‘cool’, ‘square’ and ‘hopefully’.

[2] Another Australian example of homophonic translation is Afferbeck Lauder’s *Strine* books (Lauder, 2009), in which broad Australian is rendered, somewhat phonetically in standard English, yet is defamiliarised through some exaggeration such that it really appears as a heterophonic translation: hence the suitability of the term hetero-homophonic translation here and in later discussion.

[3] Bregman notes that this was first proposed by Huggins (1964) and later by Powers and Wilcox (1977).

[4] Bregman notes that this suggestion was first made by Cherry and Wiley (1967).

[5] A full discussion of these findings and their significance is simply not possible in this article. Nevertheless, such findings need not necessarily discredit Saussure’s conception of the arbitrary relation between signifier and sign. It might be that language can be conceived of as a more complex system than that of a purely differential one. From a mereological point of view, it is possible that the relation of part to whole and part to part within a whole is complex and variable (Varzi, 2016).

[6] Saussure differentiates between the anagram and the paragram, with the former being a more compressed instance of the latter, which might be spread over several lines (Starobinski, 1979, p. 18).

[7] The rules Saussure discerns for his theory of Saturnian verse are complex, and need not be stated in full, although one example can be reproduced as an illustration. Saussure writes:

since it is impossible to state here my theory of Saturnian verse with any completeness, I will cite:

*Taurasia Cīsauna Samnio cēpit*

This is an anagrammatic line containing the entire name of *Scīpio*, (in the syllables *cī + pī + iō*, in addition to the *S* of Samnio *cēpit*, which is the first letter of a group in which almost the entire word *Scīpīō* appears – correction of – *cēpi* – by the – *cī* of *Cīsauna*). (Saussure as cited in Starobinski, 1979, p. 16)

[8] From Saussure’s ‘Notes inédites’:

The truly ultimate law of language, at least so far as we dare to speak of it, is that there is never anything that can reside in a single term, and this is because of the fact that linguistic symbols have no relation to what they ought to designate, thus that a is incapable of designating something without the help of b, and likewise b without the help of a, or in fact that both of them are without value except through their reciprocal difference, or that neither of the two has value, whether it be through any part of itself (for example, ‘the root,’ etc.), except by means of the same plexus of eternally negative differences.

It is astonishing. But where in truth would the possibility of the contrary lie? Where would be for a single instant the point of positive irradiation in all language, once granted that there is no

vocal image that responds more than any other to what it must say? (as cited in Agamben, 1993, pp. 153-154)

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