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**RESEARCH PAPER**
**Stylistic Analysis of Empowerment in Sarah Kay's 'The Type'**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper presents a stylistic analysis of *The Type* by Sarah Kay. While literary criticism has traditionally focused on written texts, this study bridges the gap between graphology (the visual structure of the poem on the page) and prosody (the sonic features of performance). Using Systemic Functional Linguistics, the research examines both the 2016 illustrated book edition published by Hachette Book Group and the original 2013 live performance. The findings show that Kay employs graphological variation, deictic shifts, and syntactic parallelism alongside prosodic elements such as voice inflection, pauses, and gestures to challenge traditional portrayals of femininity and construct an empowered female identity. Furthermore, the poem functions as a “doorway,” a concept described by Baumann, enabling identity negotiation. Ultimately, the stylistic power of the poem lies not only in its semantic content but also in the dynamic integration of multiple modes of meaning-making.

**KEYWORDS**

Spoken Word Poetry, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Deixis, Prosody, Multimodal Analysis, Identity Construction, Sarah Kay

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**Introduction**

Spoken word poetry is in an oddly and theoretically generative space at the cross of literature, linguistics and performance. Spoken word poetry is essentially a form of performance annotated by vocal delivery, through gesture in corporeality, and the immediacy of the communicative situation of performance, unlike canonical page poetry, which delegates meaning to the interior processes of interpretation by the reader. According to Campion (2021), spoken word is an art form which is characterized by the auditory existence; a form of linguistic expression that comes to the ear before it comes to the eye. Such an oriental disposition toward the performed over the printed is a challenge to established procedures of literary and linguistic analysis, which have historically been tuned to the fixed artifact, the written text.

In the twenty-first century, the spoken word performers like Sarah Kay have made a huge contribution to the spread of the form over space and culture. As one of the co-founders of Project V.O.I.C.E. (Vocal Outreach Into Creative Expression), Kay has been able to build a fanbase globally with live performance, educational workshops and published collections like *No Matter the Wreckage* (2014). Her work is always defined by the subject matter of identity, strength, individual story and the transformative power of narration. She has widely been received as a feminist manifesto with her poem “*The Type*”, a single-poem volume published by Hachette in 2016, that was received as a feminist manifesto to women who find themselves pushed and resisted by the cultural norms and the after-effect of being emotionally vulnerable.

“The Type” is certainly one of the most interesting artifacts to consider as a stylistic object as it is both a performance and a printed text whose meaning is informed by the other. Such a multimodal artefact requires a methodology that can explain the graphological decisions - line breaks, white space, layout of the visuals, and direction of the breath, as well as exploring how the prosodic features of volume, pitch, pace, and emphasis of a gesture would create interpersonal and ideational meaning. The present paper argues that the effectiveness of “The Type” is because of its well organized stylistic structure. By making the shift with conditional “If” constructions of declarative “You are....” assertions, Kay uses the momentum of syntax in pushing the listener through a progressive realisation of self-worth and agency. This paper approaches a rigorous linguistic mapping of these aspects through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics in order to shed light on how spoken word poetry prompts the ability to generate emotional and ideological change.

### **Literature Review**

Spoken word poetry as a subject of investigation in the field of stylistics is a relatively new field of study but at the same time a rather fast-growing area of exploration. Traditional methods of analysing poets have traditionally favoured more formal elements like meter, rhyme scheme, stanzaic form - elements that are frequently not well applied in the context of spoken word which is more likely to lean towards a rhythm and rhetorical cadence approximating the naturalistic forms of colloquial speech (Walkington, 2021). According to Gibbons and Whiteley (2022), modern stylistics needs to broaden its methodological repertoire in order to fit the multimodal, performative, and culturally embedded aspects of poetic production of the twenty-first century.

Sociolinguistically, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes define the style of performance that comes with slam and spoken word poetry as a socially salient register, a set of linguistic properties that speakers and audiences are aware of and that identify them as members of a particular expressive community. Scholars have described this style of performance as a so-called Poet Voice, and it has a variety of prosodic characteristics such as emphatic pauses, a sustained rhythmic cadence, a certain breathy or resonant tone, and a specific intonation pattern of rising and falling. Alterman (2018) maintains that these features are not simply ornamental or incidental to meaning but they make it: with the control of voice quality and prosodic contour, the poet conveys an imagined author who uses conscious control over meaning-making and emotional impact. Even the performed voice, in this narration, is a semiotic resource, meaning a meaning-making tool as important as diction or syntax. Williams (2021) also proves that the ability of performance poetry to build identity is especially relevant to the educational and therapeutic practice, when the performance of subjectivity in a poem forms what he terms a pattern of self-narration and self-identification in the audience.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the theoretic framework created by Halliday (1985) and developed over the course of decades of shared research (Halliday and Hasan, 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014; Matthiessen and Halliday, 1997), theorises a conceptualization of language, in which the structures of the language system are conditionalized by situational and cultural contexts in which they are used. Language in SFL has the following three metafunctions, i.e. the ideational, where the speakers encode their experience of the world and their inner world; the interpersonal, where social roles and relationships are realised; and the textual, where messages are arranged in a coherent and contextually suitable wa

The transitivity system, which classifies clauses in terms of the processes they describe (Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioural and Existential) and the roles of participants which can be involved in the process (Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, Behavioural and Existential), has been a particularly fruitful analysis tool in the study of poetic language, as it is the system of ideological expression. Both Eggins (2004) and Thompson (2014) prove that systematic consideration of the patterns of transitivity can make ideologically significant transformations in agency and experience that would otherwise exist as tacit. Using an SFL model of lyrical poetry and song, Griffiths (2012) illustrates the role of mood systems, especially the opposition between declarative, interrogative, and imperative structure, as well as the modality choices, in placing the addressee and creating interpersonal meaning. Similar arguments are put forward by Leech (2008) who asserts that formal linguistic analysis does not have to put poetry into a collection of technical properties but may, when done with an interpretive instinct, also shed light on how exactly form creates and modifies meaning.

### **Material and Methods**

The proposed study follows a qualitative design, which is descriptive and combines the style analysis with the multimodal discourse analysis. It is aimed at exploring the ways in which certain linguistic and performative structures play artistic and ideological roles in the poem, and therefore, give a systematic explanation of the operations by which the decisions made by Kay define meaning and generate effect. The approach to the study is based on the conventional tradition of literary stylistics that Leech (2008) describes as the systematic use of linguistic terms and techniques to literary writing to clarify its aesthetic and interpretive qualities.

### **Data**

The paper examines two major types of "The Type". The former is the printed text as one can find in the single-poem illustrated book published by Hachette (Kay, 2016) and especially the lineation of the poem, the typographical decisions, and the way the page is divided. The second is the live performance of 2013, which is the main source of the data to be analyzed in terms of the prosodic and gestural characteristics. These two versions combined enable the study to triangulate between the intention of graphological and the performance of the realization and consider the correlation between page and stage, themselves analytically meaningful. Another source the study relies on is the collection of works by Kay "No Matter the Wreckage" (Kay, 2014) to provide some context and compare the works.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Graphological Deviation**

Graphology works as a generative and not just a descriptive system; in the printed version of "The Type" the poem is not merely written down but scripted to be performed. The use of the line breaks and the white space Kay employs has provided a visual rhythmic look to the page which is directly translated into the patterns of breath, pause, and emphasis in delivery. This graphological organization of the prosodic realization is the key to the meaning-making structure of the poem. According to Gibbons and Whiteley (2022), in modern poetry the visual structure of the text on the page is becoming a semiotic resource in its own right, creating a meaning through the space that it creates between the elements of the used verbal.

The most educative example of such a dynamic is presented when Kay introduces a series of short and disjointed lines that serve as metaphorical substitutes to the gaze at the body of a woman. By meting out these metaphors into different lines instead of holding them together and making it one grammatical structure, Kay establishes a staccato rhythm that requires emphatic pauses during performing. Each separate line can be described as such a deviation into the foreground by Leech (2008) as such a deviation, a break in the syntactic continuity that focuses attention and requires interpretive focus. The visual separation of individual metaphors on separate lines performs the isolation and reduction itself of which the poem speaks: being fragmented into self-exchangeable units of perception instead of being perceived as a whole and intricate subject.

The blankness between these separate statements, has a complementary semiotic purpose. Instead of signifying lack or nothingness, the whites surrounding every line creates what could be termed as an acoustic frame, a silence that the performer is in and to which an audience is also welcome to share with her. This space as a significant stop is an example of the multidimensional quality of spoken word as a form: the printed text prefigures and codifies the performance, and the performance retroactively validates and accomplishes the graphological decisions of the text. The two versions of the poem are not two parallel versions of the same artifact, but rather expressions of one complicated design, which mutually constitute one another.

### **Deixis and the Construction of the Addressee**

The main tool whereby "The Type" can build its own interpersonal action and control its own emotional trajectory is deixis, the language system according to which speakers position utterances in relation to a reference point in terms of person, space, and time. The use of second-person address pronoun you permeates the entire poem and creates and maintains a direct address relationship between the speaker and an implied interlocutor. This deictic decision is a rhetorically and emotionally important one: calling the audience you instead of telling them what happens to another person in the third person or introspectively about the experience of another person, Kay makes what Griffiths (2012) refers to as a zone of interpersonal immediacy, where the audience is not an outsider to what is happening to someone but the core of the proclamations made in the poem.

The systematic deictic shift in the poem is identified by the analysis in the three major movement phases of the poem. The "you" being considered is characterized in the initial stage, which is more relational in nature; that is, the way she is viewed, wanted or classified by others. The deictic centre is, then, not inside the self but in the gaze of others: men, they, the unnamed and generalised others that form the objectifying gaze. This orientation of the "you" as the view of others and not the view of her own creates the original mode of the poem that is the mode of which ideological and emotional movement is sent away.

The deictic centre in the middle part of the poem moves inwards and shifts the location inside the materiality of the body. The language used by Kay in this part is quite somatic- her wording is placed in advance the material sense of the female body as a subject-of-living-sensing-biological-being and not as an aestheticised or symbolic object. The transformation between a relational definition of the addressee (that which is perceived by other people) and a somatic definition (that which is defined by her very physical presence) is a major motion towards the politics of representation in the poem. In this case, the body is reinvented as an interior and not a surface as the point of experience and not the spectacle.

The final stage of the poem carries out what could be the most important deictic change: the re-defining of space as it is referred to as “place”. In the first movements, a “place” is an external object, a pursued and sought-after location, a place that should be discovered, a standpoint that must be reached by the consent of other people. This deictic of space is radically turned about in the last pronouncements. The addressee is made to realize that she does not have to go and find a place since she is the place, that the place she has been searching to get is not somewhere outside but a state of her own agency and being. This redefinition of space is the consequence of the ideological project that the poem is; the alteration of a female subject who is placed to the subject who makes her own ground.

### Parallelism

Parallelism, the intentional repetition of a syntactic construction in one or more consecutive clauses or lines, is one of the most ancient and widespread figures of speech in rhetorical and poetic speech and it is the main characteristic of the logical structure of the text in “The Type”. Kay uses two parallel patterns that interlock and interact to create the usual movement of the poem. The former may be called conditional anaphora: the repetition of the phrase “If” at the start of the next clauses listing all the situational traps, all the cultural expectations, and all the relations patterns that make the landscape of vulnerability that is being traced in this poem. The second is declarative assertion: the change into the scheme of the “You are”, which is gradually, and then also decisively, replacing the conditional scheme with the scheme of categorical, unconditioned certitude.

These structures and their functional effects in the realm of rhetorical design of the poem are summarized in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Functional Effects in the Realm of Rhetorical Design**

Syntactic Structure	Representative Pattern	Functional Effect
Conditional Anaphora	“If you grow up the type of woman...”	Established the cultural and relational conditions that cover and define women against their will, building a recognizable landscape of shared vulnerability.
Negative Asyndeton	“Not apologies, not excuses, not someone else's definition...”	Systemically dismantled external standards and imposed categories, clearing the discursive ground for self-definition.
Declarative Assertion	“You were born to build.”	Asserts identity and agency through material procedures, replacing the passive grammar of objectification with active grammar of creation.

The move between the conditional and the declarative forms is not formal only but ideological. As Thompson (2014) explains in his description of the SFL mood system, the conditional mood carries a world of contingency and qualification in which existence is conditional upon compliance with externally set standards. Through the accretion of conditional structures in the first part of the poem, Kay traces the vast range of the conditionality of the construction of femininity culturally. This shift to the declarative mood then effects an ideological break: the conditional world, where the value of a woman lies in being a particular type, evoking a particular reaction, occupying a particular place, is replaced by the declarative one where her value is proclaimed as unconditional, self-grounded, and non-negotiable.

The explanation of the narrative paradigm of spoken-word performance provided by Fisher (2022) is applicable here; he claims that a successful spoken-word poetry creates a narrative logic that attracts the listeners via a series of recognitions to a destination that is discovered but at the same time familiar. This narrative logic is illustrated once again by the movement of structure of the wording between the conditional tense of the conditional accumulation of recognition in the form of the conditional tense in the sentence as well as the declarative sentence as an expression of the conditional tense into the statement of declaration: the conditional tense builds up pressure of recognition, and the declarative sentence ventures the pressure of recognition. The rhythmic scaffolding that takes the audience through this arc is the repetition of syntactic structures, of which Alterman (2018) writes that it is the anaphoric patterning that he refers to as Poet Voice.

### **Poe voice and Performance**

The live reading of "The Type" in 2013 provides abundant information to examine the prosodic features and their role in the general meaning of the poem. Alterman (2018) claims that the prosodic style, that is a characteristic of spoken-word performance, which can be examined as a sociolinguistically coherent register which can be characterized by distinct features, is not a mere superficial stylization, but rather a system of expression that creates meaning along with the lexical and syntactic decisions. This assertion is validated in the appearance of Kay where prosodic modulation is constantly and accurately adjusted to the semantic and emotional content of particular passages.

There are three prosodic characteristics, which are worth analyzing. The former is volume management dynamism. At the outset of the poem, Kay sets a very slow, conversational rhythm and tone which creates a tone of reflective, personal communication. Her tone also changes in response to the stakes of each line of the poem, becoming nearly silent at the points of greatest vulnerability, swelling to emphasis at the points of refusal or affirmation. This vocal scope of authority produces an acoustic incarnation of the emotional movement of the poem to make the movement out of silence and vulnerability to voiced strength something sensorially accessible to the audience.

The second prosodic feature is vocal texture. Kay uses the voice quality modulation defined by Wolfram and Schilling -Estes, changes in breathiness, resonance, and tension of the larynx, to indicate variations of affective state and to indicate the start and end of the poem phases. The more sustained and breathier tone with which she places her passages detailing the physical and emotional experience of the body contrasts with cleaner and more projected tones of the final declarations, and this contrast has a significance in itself: it performs the shift between embodied vulnerability and empowered declaration at the voice level.

The third point is the aspect of gesture. Baumann (2020) argues that in spoken word performance, gesture is not only an accompaniment of verbal meaning but a semiotic channel on its own, able to elaborate on, clarify or offer counterpoint to the meaning presented by words. Gestural movement is firmly combined with the rhythmic pattern of the verse in the performance of Kay: her hands move in harmony with the rhythm of her lines, outline the spatial metaphors, and depict the physical tension and stretching that are mentioned in the text, and create a kinetic architecture that makes abstract conceptual material tangible. Gestures following the outline of a question mark, that open out to indicate expansion and potentiality, or that close in to indicate groundedness and delivery are not decorative additions to the verbal text, but part of its meaning.

## **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

A full implementation of the SFL metafunctions shows the logic of structural empowerment in the way it is spread throughout the ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels of the poem. Individually each metafunction represents a different aspect of the movement of the poem in objectification to agency and when combined offers a multi-layered description of the building of meaning in the entire stylistic gamut of the poem.

The transitivity analysis identifies systematic change in the type of process and role in the participants at the ideational level. During the first stage of the poem, the dominant role belongs to mental processes, and the grammatical forms have a consistent position of the female addressee as an object of perception and cognition of other people and never as a senser or actor. The presence of a grammar of objectification in which the female subject is determined by the actions of others and not the female during the encoding of looking, touching, and categorising. During the middle and the final stages of the poem, the material processes gain more and more control, and the addressee turns into an actor: she seeks, she sings, she constructs. This transitivity pattern change performs the main ideological change of the poem, on the grammatical level, showing how the processes of the identity reclamation by language are possible. According to Eggins (2004), this systematic attention to transitivity is especially illuminating in ideologically infused texts since the distribution of agency and patient roles represents connotations of power and selfhood that may not be necessarily thematised.

On an interpersonal level, the SFL analysis of mood and modality validates the structural observation realized on syntactic analysis. The poem has three general forms of interpersonal configurations a declarative mood with high-modality conditionality, where the addressee is placed in reference to external criteria; a declarative mood with rejection of external modality, which consists of the negation and negative asyndeton; and a declarative mood carrying unmodalised assertion, which places the addressee as an unconditioned, self-grounding subject of her own affirmations. The latter stage also enclaves imperative forms - orders to the addressee but to the circumstances that have regulated her, which act not so much as orders as as having-done manifestations of possibility. According to Griffiths (2012), lyrical address imperative often operates in such a way that it is not a true command, but instead, an imaginative, emotional proposition to occupy an alternative state of being.

On the textual level, the theme-rheme pattern of the clauses of the poem follows the progressive foregrounding of the female subject as the thematic centre of her own story. The first lines of the poem are conditional conjunctions or address to men and other people who occupy a lot of clauses by positioning the thematic starting point in the outside world and not in oneself. The thematic position, which is the starting point of each clause, is occupied more and more by the second-person pronoun you as the poem proceeds and the deictic analysis of general reference describes an identical transition: the movement of the addressee as the centre of her own story.

## **Conclusion**

The given analysis proves that the poem "The Type" by Sarah Kay is a complicated and strictly built stylistic piece the power of which is diffused in several dimensions of meanings reinforced by each other. By managing the arrangement of graphological hints, deictic changes, syntactic parallelism, prosodic modulation and evaluative means of Appraisal, Kay manages to produce a poem that is not just a description of female

empowerment but its performance. It is not just a report of a process of identity transformation, but it is a performance.

The transitivity analysis shows that the main ideological process of the poem, i.e. passage of the passive objectification of the female subject to her active, self-determining agency, has been grammaticalized on the level of the type of processes involved in it, i.e. the dominated Phenomenon of other people Mental processes, and the independent Actor of her own Material processes. The interpersonal analysis shows the interaction of the Mood and Modality in this movement with the conditional structures of a world of some external criteria yielding to the unmodalised declaratives of a world of self-knowledge. The deictic analysis follows the spatial and personal aspect of this change which is the shifting of the centre of gravity of the poem to the outside looking and then to the inside looking to the self as place. The Appraisal analysis clarifies the architecture of evaluation that underlines these transitions showing how Kay systematically revalues the terms of womanhoods which she is apprehended in, between the aestheticised and relational and the biological and agentic.

Besides, it is especially important that "The Type" is an object of stylistic study that demands the performative aspect of meaning-making. The description of Poet Voice presented by Alterman (2018), as constitutive, as opposed to ornamental, attribute of meaning is entirely supported by the analysis: the prosodic and gestural materials of the performance transmitted by Kay are not an addition to an already existing written meaning, but a part of a complete semiotic occurrence. Therefore, the print text and the live performance, as Baumann (2020) implies more generally to spoken word, are not two versions of the same poem but two aspects of one multimodal work whose meaning is created solely by the interaction of the two.

The general methodological impact of the work can be seen in the fact that the study of spoken-word poetry has to make use of the framework that is able to cover the entire range of the semiotic modes because of which this sort of poetry can create meaning. Such a framework exists with the integration of Systemic Functional Linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis, used here, which is sensitive to both social and ideological functionality of linguistic decisions at the same time taking care of embodied, acoustic, and visual aspects of performance. Future studies can broaden this multimodal design to other users of spoken-word poetry or can examine the contribution of audience response to the co-construction of performed meaning to enhance upon the interpersonal and dialogic aspects discussed in the SFL account.

Finally, "The Type" asks its viewers to enter what Williams (2021) refers to as a brave space, a discursive and affective space where the difficulties of identity can be challenged, negotiated, and changed. In this way, not about but through language, by carefully highlighting the specific power of spoken-word poetry as both an aesthetic object and as something that, in fact, works, Kay shows how spoken-word poetry, in particular, can serve as a means to not only to create a beautiful object, but to create a real work of creating its own place: a linguistic performance wherein both the poet and the audience are brought closer to themselves, to their strength, and a heightened awareness that they are not metaphors but human beings who can, as the poem insists, also create their own place.

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