
PLANNED COMPARISONS. See
MULTIPLE COMPARISONS

POETICS

Poetics takes language both as its substance and as a conspicuous vehicle for wider ends of communication. It is a universal aspect of language-centered behavior that can be emphasized or de-emphasized according to the purposes at hand. The focus on composition and the conspicuous display of the language used in poetics are the keys to understanding it, not simply its forms of production (e.g., poetic prose, rich with metaphor and allegory; poetry as prose or verse; chanting, singing) or the kinds of messages sent (e.g., aesthetic, didactic, mythic, ritualized). It appears with increasing frequency today as a matter of special interest in the social sciences, especially in their concerns with texts as cultural artifacts. Rooted in part in the conflicts of POSTMODERNISM and in part in increasing awareness of the common denominators of cultural diversity, this “literary turn” has led to expanded research on semiotic behavior and the production of meaning in discourse, text construction and authority in performance, and, more generally, the place of poetics in the philosophical and critical problems associated with the representation and communication of experience in any form. It includes among its broad topics of inquiry the mutually constructed viewpoints of critical dialogics, the histories and forms of poetics in the world (from tribal societies to modern theater), studies of ritual and worldview and their relationships to language and culture, and the self-conscious filings of autoethnography and ethnographic fieldwork. It is rich with implications for social science.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL POETICS

The specific challenge of anthropological poetics includes developing sensitive and realistic cross-cultural translation skills and a genre of reporting that systematically incorporates edifying poetic qualities without sacrificing the essence of ethnographic accountability. We need to know something of the

substance and what it means to be situated differently in language and culture from the actor’s point of view while, at the same time, finding ways to combine and communicate those differences. On the assumption that all human beings are sufficiently alike to be open to discovery and mutually empathetic communications, anthropological poetics attempts to evoke a comparable set of experiences through the reader’s (or hearer’s) exposure to the text. Ethnographers have been attracted to these kinds of arguments precisely because they help to define the constraints on self-conscious research and writing. This increasing “literariness” has also led some social scientists to a classic obsession with lines, punctuation, and white spaces—in a word, to poetry as an alternative form of representation.

Poetry is by far the most celebrated category of poetic communication. Denying mind-body separations in concept and argument, it is cut very close to experiential ground. It takes place simultaneously in the deepest level of minding and in that part of consciousness where ideas and opinions are formed, constructing the poet as a cultural and sentient being even as the experience is unfolding. It is a self-revealing, self-constructing form of discovery, like writing in general and that fundamental human activity, “storying.” It takes its motivations and saturations from the exotic and the quotidian and from our dreams, creating and occupying sensuous and meaningful space in the process. Everything we do has meaning, from the simple act of digging up a sweet potato to the launching of rockets to the moon, and every meaning is ultimately anchored in the senses. Nevertheless, it is mostly only the poets who write about experience consistently from a sensual perspective—centering, decoding, reframing, and discoursing literally as “embodied” participant observers, full of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and vision, open to the buzz and joy, the sweat and tears, the erotics and anxieties of daily life. Poets offer their take on the world sometimes with a view closer than a bug’s eye on a plant, sometimes deep into the sublime, the universal. At work in ethnography, poets hope to reveal that world for what it is to themselves and to Others through mutual authorships, getting especially at the work that cannot take place within a single language or culture, as it is experienced in distinctive patterns and puzzles and can be shared with coparticipants, and yet doing so ultimately in a manner that makes the Otherness of obvious strangers collapse on close inspection. Poetry insists on being about all of us. But adding it to

the repertoire of social science methods is problematic. Among other things, it opens those disciplines up to the whole complicated realm of aesthetics and to what appears to the received wisdom to be a truckload of counterintuitive arguments about ethnographic representation, including the place of language (and writer consciousness) in scientific writing.

SCIENCE AND POETICS

Scientific inquiry can give us a more or less dispassionate glimpse of causal relationships among things and behaviors, in both small- and large-scale patterns. It does not give us ordinary reality, the world we live in *as* we live it. Instead of writing or talking exclusively *about* their experiences through abstract concepts, as one might do in applying productive scientific theory, trying to make language as invisible as possible while focusing on the objects of scientific expressions, poets report more concretely, *in* and *with* the facts and frameworks of what they see in themselves *in relation to* Others, in particular landscapes and emotional and social situations. They aim for representation from one self-conscious interiority to another in a manner that flags their language, stirs something up in us, finds the strange in the everyday, and takes us out of ourselves for a moment to show us something about ourselves in principle if not in precisely reported fact. Keeping people from jumping to culturally standardized conclusions about what is reported and evoking a larger sense of shared humanity in the process make the poetic effort both didactic and comparative.

The use of metaphor as a tool of and for discovery sets a similar instructional table. The idea that grandfather is an oak or that subatomic particles are best conceptualized as billiard balls in motion might prove to be the source for unraveling the very things that puzzle us most and the kinds of insights not available to us any other way. Knowing that, and consciously exploiting the “as if” world of analogies and creative equivalencies that is metaphor and that binds *all* interpretations of experience (for scientist and poet alike, albeit at different levels of disciplinary recognition), poets argue that the most productive form of inquiry depends on the nature of the problem to be addressed. Just as *Finnegan’s Wake* refuses reduction to the subject of free masonry or river journeys and resurrection or to critical summaries of its formal properties and

inspirations, so the statistical expression of cross-cultural trait distribution in aboriginal California cannot yield its exactness and rhetorical integrity to interpretive statements high in poeticity or uncommon metaphor. The implications of that are important, not only for helping us unravel the cultural constructions of a shared world that both differentiates and consolidates through various levels and circumstances, but also because changing the language of our descriptions, as Wittgenstein (1974) says, changes the analytic game itself, including changing the premises for research entry points. So poetics is not well conceived as a simple supplement to existing quantitative methods. It is a radically different form of interpreting, and therefore of knowing and reporting, whose domain is decidedly qualitative but no less complementary to other kinds of studies as a result.

Poetic inquiry can give us provocative and enlightening information about the nature of the world and our place in it, some of which is not available to the same extent, in the same form, or at all through other means. Ensuring interpretations grounded in self-awareness, it is also designed to keep premature closure on thinking in check while encouraging creativity in research and reporting. It is a way of reminding us that, despite numerous common denominators, science and poetics do different work; that no single genre or method can capture it all; that nothing we say can be nested in the entirely new; and that the field of experience and representation is by definition both culturally cluttered and incomplete for all of us at some level. Softening or solving such problems (e.g., by reaching beyond analytic categories whose only reality lies in the minds and agreements of the researchers themselves) matters if we are ever going to get a handle on the ordinary realities of the people we study—the universe *they* know, interpret, and act in as sentient beings. Such realities escape only at great cost to understanding ourselves, how we are articulated socially and semiotically, how we construct our Selves as meaningful entities in our own minds and in relation to each other, and what that contributes to acting responsibly in the shrinking space of a shared planet. For these and other reasons, privileging one form over the other as the source of Truth for all purposes is to confuse apples and hammers—to be satisfied with one tool for all jobs and with the politics of the moment. Inclusive is better. The combination of ethnological science and anthropological poetics can yield a more robust and complete accounting for and

representation of our existence as meaning-making and meaning-craving Beings-in-the-World.

—Ivan Brady

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POINT ESTIMATE

A point estimate is the estimated value of a population PARAMETER from a SAMPLE. Point estimates are useful summary statistics and are ubiquitously reported in QUANTITATIVE analyses. Examples of point estimates include the values of such coefficients as the SLOPE and the INTERCEPT obtained from REGRESSION analysis. A point estimate can be contrasted with an *interval estimate*, also known as a CONFIDENCE INTERVAL. A confidence interval reflects the uncertainty, or ERROR, of the point estimate. A point estimate provides a single value for the population parameter, whereas a confidence interval provides a range of possible values for the population parameter. Although the true parameter cannot be known, the point estimate is the best approximation.

A point estimate facilitates description of the relationship between VARIABLES. The relationship may be STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT, but the magnitude of the relationship is also of interest. A point estimate provides more information about the relationship under examination. A hypothetical simple REGRESSION analysis is provided here to illustrate the concept of a point estimate. Given an INDEPENDENT VARIABLE X and a DEPENDENT VARIABLE Y in the regression equation $Y = a + bX + e$, let X = number of hours of sleep the night before a test, Y = exam grade (in the form of a percentage) in a sample of students in an American

politics seminar, b = slope, a = y -intercept, and e = error. An analysis of our hypothetical data produces the following regression equation: $\hat{Y} = -2 + 9.4X$. A point estimate is the value obtained for any sample statistic; here we are interested in the values of the intercept and the slope. The slope suggests that, on average, 1 additional hour of sleep is associated with an increase of 9.4 percentage points on the exam. If the slope estimate is also significant, the point estimate indicates that students who sleep more the night before a test perform substantially better. If, on the other hand, the slope estimate were very small—say, .5—the relationship would not appear to be substantively meaningful despite statistical significance. The example illustrates that point estimates provide valuable information about the relationship under examination.

The value of the intercept is also of interest. For this example, the value of the intercept is -2 . The intercept indicates that, on average, students with zero hours of sleep received a score of -2 percentage points; however, this value does not make sense because the grading scale ranges from 0 to 100. Also, if we were to plot these data along an x -axis and a y -axis, we would see that none or perhaps just a couple of students slept very little—say, 0 to 2 hours—the night before the test. With so few data points, PREDICTION of test scores for such little sleep should be avoided (in this case, we obtain a nonsensical result). Point estimates are useful for illustrating the relationship in more concrete terms and for making predictions but contain more error when based on relatively little data. In this case, the y -intercept underscores the caution that must be taken with point estimates.

The hypothetical example given here to illustrate the concept of a point estimate employed ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES as the ESTIMATOR; however, point estimates of parameters may be obtained using other estimators, such as MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD. In fact, the point estimate, or the value obtained for the sample statistic, depends in part on the estimator chosen by the researcher. Thus, it is important for the researcher to select an appropriate or *preferred* estimator given the particular properties of the research question (Kennedy, 1998, pp. 5–6). Point estimates are also sensitive to the SPECIFICATION of the model, the presence of measurement error, the sample size, and the SAMPLE draw.

—Jacque L. Amoureux