

The Linguistic Architecture of the Absurd Humor: A Stylistic Analysis of Foregrounding in Yousufi's *Mirages of the Mind*

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Abstract

Mushtaq Ahmad Yousufi is a titan of Urdu literature, known for his distinctive satirical, humorous, and existential approach. His magnum opus is 'Aab-e-Gum' (Mirages of the Mind), which is a unique version of the 'absurd' based on the postcolonial experience of partition and displacement. However, there is still a lack of systematic linguistic analysis that explains how these effects are created. In this paper, this is addressed by contending that the absurd humour of Yousufi is mostly a result of the linguistic "foregrounding," which is the strategic incorporation of deviation and parallelism as the two main mechanisms of generating absurdity. The study, based on the model of stylistics by Leech and Short, examines how Yousufi employs lexical deviation, semantic deviation, and grammatical deviation to build new Urdu terms, logical contradictions, and inversions in syntax, respectively, and his use of strategic parallelism to create rhythmic contrast. Here it is shown that the absurdity of Yousufi is not just thematic but is created by a deliberate "linguistic architecture", consisting of stylized prose which deliberately undermines reader expectations at various linguistic levels in a systematic way. This study adds to the body of knowledge in Urdu literary studies by offering an easily replicable, evidence-based model for analysing humour, and to stylistic and postcolonial literature theory by giving an illustration of how absurdism is rooted to a particular culture but can be systematically analysed using a linguistic model.

Keywords: foregrounding, deviation, parallelism, absurd humor, stylistic

Introduction

Mushtaq Ahmad Yousufi (1923-2018) was one of the most important writers of the twentieth century in Urdu literature, both as a humorist and satirist, and as a writer who transcended amusement and funny stories to raise deep existential questions. Yousufi's literary career lasted for more than fifty years, and the number of his literary works is small but of very significant impact, as he is referred to as "the finest humorist in Urdu" (Ahmad, 2014, p. 45), with five major works: Charagh Talay (1961), Khakam ba Dahan (1969), Zarguzasht (1976), Aab-e-Gum (1990), and Sham-e-Shair-e-Yaraan (2014). Of these, Aab-e-Gum (Mirages of the Mind) is his recognised masterpiece, which has been acclaimed for its intellectual depth, cultural richness and unmatched stylistic virtuosity (Reeck & Ahmad, 2014; Abid, 2014).

Qazi Yousufi's literary voice was formed in a certain historical crucible, the Partition of India in 1947, which displaced millions and left an indelible mark on the South Asian psyche. Yousufi was a young man who was a refugee from Kanpur when he moved to Karachi—and a generation between worlds. This sense of uprootedness served as the theme for his art and is dismally reflected in his humorous compositions (Mufti, 2004; Abid, 2014). But it is Yousufi's genius to turn this tragedy into comedy, to send his readers out laughing at the very absurdities that could otherwise make them cry.

Yousufi's work is a special niche in Urdu literature as well as world literature. His work is inspired by classical Urdu prose writers such as Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqui, as well as by Western writers like Mark Twain and P.G. Wodehouse (Hasanat, 2018). The digressive, anecdotal and anti-plot approach to his narrative puts him in dialogue with modernist writers like James Joyce and Marcel Proust, which he explicitly named as influences (Yousufi, 2014; Ahmad, 2014). But, simultaneously the work is steeped in the tradition of South Asian satirical humor that has been embodied in publications such as Awadh Punch and writers such as Shafiq-ur-

Rehman (Parekh, 2017). The confluence of these influences produced a unique literary voice, global, yet also very local.

Despite the recognition he has received, and his comedic genius is evident, scholarship on Yousufi's work has been mostly at the level of thematic appreciation. The critics (Ahmad, 2014) have appropriately praised his sharpness, high level of thought and moving evocation of nostalgia and uproar. As recent studies have pointed out, however, this crucial discussion has continually ignored a systematic and linguistic account of production of Yousufi-effects (Alam, 2025). The current scholarship addresses the what of Yousufi's work, namely the themes, the depth and the cultural richness; the how, however, the language mechanisms that underlie these effects, is rarely discussed.

This is particularly true as Yousufi is known for not only saying the words, but saying them right. His reputation as a "craftsman par excellence" (Hasanat, 2018) depends upon his careful use of language, constant play on words, use of alliteration and inversion of thought. As one critic points out, "Style doesn't just fall from the sky, but comes after a long laborious process. He writes, rewrites, revises, edits, crafts, refines each word, each sentence, time and again" (Hasanat, 2018). Because of this extraordinary attention to the details of the language, he needs an analytical approach, but one that is also attuned to the texture of his prose.

This paper attempts to remedy that by proposing that the humorous nature of Yousufi is also to a great extent a conscious use of the language "foregrounding" techniques that make the technique itself salient or noticeable for its intended effect. The paper focuses on two primary ways of foregrounding, according to Leech and Short (2007): deviation (violation of the linguistic norms) and parallelism (repetition of the linguistic structures). It's a kind of "linguistic architecture" in Yousufi's absurdist prose; a carefully designed whole that knows how to throw the reader off balance at various points.

It has been previously shown through corpus-based research that Yousufi's work is important and that it is heavily focused on lexical deviation. Iqbal (2021) proved that the "unusual and uncommon language" gave readers a strong impression on their minds and the use of lexical variation was used to add emphasis to the event described and to entertain the readers (p. 30). On the basis of this, the present research further explores the semantic, grammatical and structural level of foregrounding in Yousufi to give a full picture of the stylistic strategies used to create his particular form of absurd humor.

The study examines which foregrounding devices, deviation and Parallelism, are most prevalent in Yousufi's *Mirages of the Mind*, how these devices create the effect of absurd humour, and how they serve the text's philosophical and satirical objectives.

This study contributes to the extant literature in various ways. It gives a systematic evidence-based account of Yousufi's stylistic techniques that goes beyond thematic description to linguistic explanation. Then it provides a repeatable methodological approach for the analysis of Urdu literature in the light of humor, which can be successfully adopted in the study of non-Western literature using Western analysis techniques. Furthermore, it aids in postcolonial literary studies by showcasing Yousufi's work as an example of "vernacular absurdism" that is specifically rooted in the cultural and spiritual context of South Asia. Last but not least, it illuminates the linguistic architecture of Yousufi's literary genius, explaining how his seemingly effortless humor is crafted with great skill.

Methodology

The method used in this study is qualitative and descriptive analytical with stylistic approach. The analysis centres on foregrounding in Yousufi's prose and its understanding using the Leech and Short's (2007) model of stylistics. The study is descriptive since it is aimed at describing the linguistic aspects of the text systematically, and analytical because it is aimed at interpreting the function and significance of the aspects of the text.

The main source of data for this study is *Aab-e-Gum* by Mushtaq Ahmad Yousufi (1990), from which the Urdu original, translated into English as *Mirages of the Mind*, was used, with the translation being done by Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad (2014). Analysis primarily carried out in Urdu original, and Urdu translation is used as a secondary source. The study also relies on the existing corpus-based study on the text, which is a study conducted by Iqbal (2021) to lay a foundation for the study.

The analysis is performed in a systematic way, following Leech and Short's (2007) approach. Firstly, instances of deviation (lexical, semantic, and grammatical) and parallelism will be identified with close reading of the text. Then the instances identified are categorised based on the taxonomy of Leech's taxonomy of foregrounding. Each of the instances is examined for stylistic purpose, how absurd humor is created and how it serves the philosophical and satirical purpose of the text. The findings are synthesized in order to illustrate the functioning of the various types of foregrounding in creating the "linguistic architecture" of the text.

Selected examples are given in the Urdu text (with transliteration and translation) and discussed with respect to their stylistic role. The presentation consists of a common structure: Urdu original, Roman transliteration, literal translation, and analytical commentary. The protocol ensures that the analysis is based on the source language while at the same time open to an international scholarly audience.

Findings and Discussion

Lexical Deviation

Perhaps the most obvious form of foregrounding in Yousufi's prose is lexical deviation, defined as the use of unusual words. As shown by Iqbal (2021), Yousufi often employs a creative mechanism, neologism, in Urdu for constructing new words that are not part of the standard language. These "nonce formations" are used to draw the reader's attention to the comic effect by presenting new lexical innovations.

Urdu Original:

استاذیانہ

Transliteration:

Us ne ek nayā lafz ghar liyā: ustādiyānah.

Literal Translation:

He invented a new word: ustādiyānah.

Analysis: The neologism "ustādiyānah" (استاذیانہ) is coined from the word "ustād" (teacher/master) with the addition of the suffix "-iyānah" (یانہ), which usually denotes a quality or manner. The term "ustādānā" (استادانہ) describes something in the style of a teacher, whereas "ustādiyānah" is a coinage used by Yousufi that evokes the spirit of a teacher but more of a caricature. The unexpectedness of the deviation is the source of the humour, as is its satirical quality, which lampoons the pretension to authority of the character.

Leech (1969) points out that it is not only a question of decoration but also of "making an imprint on people's thoughts" (p. 42) when introducing neologisms. Neologisms in Yousufi's hands serve as a means of revealing character and challenging society. Yousufi is a linguist, and he is able to describe the absurdity of what goes on in the story and the pretentious characters by inventing new words, giving the absurdity a linguistic reality that's double.

Urdu Original:

یہ داغ نہیں، یہ تاریخ ہے۔ یہاں مگر مچھ نے انڈے دینے کی کوشش کی تھی

Transliteration:

Nahi ye dāgh, ye tārikh hai. Yahāñ magarmachh ne ande dene kī koshish kī thī.

Literal Translation:

This is not a blemish, this is history. Here a crocodile tried to lay eggs.

Analysis:

The term "tārikh" (history) usually refers to a major event, whereas "dāgh" (blemish) refers to a defect in wood. The elevated register of "history" applied to a commonplace defect creates a comic effect. The crocodile story transforms a blemish into a sign of distinction. This lexical deviation reveals character, ridicules pretension, and produces humour through absurdity.

Lexical deviation is also found when lexical items are used "out of context" which leads to a clash of connotations. Yousufi often employs elevated registers (religious, literary, bureaucratic) in describing ordinary, even ludicrous, objects, thus evoking a lexical dissonance, which is humorous and critical.

Semantic Deviation

Yousufi's construction of absurdity is characterized by semantic deviation, which results from the logical absurdity or paradoxical meanings created. Leech (1969) notes that "sometimes absurdity occurs in the literal sense of the literary text which can lead the reader's mind to the comprehension in a figurative sense" (p. 49). Yousufi uses this effect in an ironic way, turning the absurdities of the literal into a problem for the reader to solve.

Look at this typical example, for example, where the logic of Qibla is manifested contra.

Urdu Original:

"آج سردی ہے۔"
"نہیں، کل زیادہ سردی ہوگی۔"

Transliteration:

"Āj sardī hai."
"Nahīn, kal ziyādah sardī hogī."

Literal Translation:

"Today is cold."
"No, it will be colder tomorrow."

Analysis:

The response "No, tomorrow will be colder" does not contradict the first statement; both can be true. The semantic deviation lies in the irrelevant temporal comparison, which breaks conversational expectations. The humour arises from the incongruity between the expected agreement and the unexpected response, revealing Qibla's contrarian nature.

One of Yousufi's most effective stylistic devices is extended metaphor, which is a way of deviating from the norm semantically. As Yousufi's metaphors continue over a lengthy passage, the metaphorical and the actual come into existence side by side, producing the continual semantic incongruity.

The most elaborated instance of this procedure is the extended metaphor of the car in *Mirages of the Mind*. The car is described as a "noble stallion" on a number of occasions, as it is a faulty and unreliable vehicle.

Urdu Original

"یہ گاڑی کوئی گاڑی نہیں، یہ ایک کالا گھوڑا ہے۔"

Transliteration

Ye gārī koī gārī nahīn, ye ek kālā ghoṛā hai.

Literal Translation

This car isn't a car, this is a black horse.

Analysis

The statement "this car is not a car" violates the law of identity. The metaphor of the horse is extended throughout the story: the car is "restive," must be "broken in," and does not "obey" commands. The incongruity between the actual state of the car (broken-down) and its deceptions (noble steed) produces absurd humour and reveals the folly of imposing aristocratic values on a modern world.

Grammatical Deviation

Yet another process of foregrounding is grammatical deviation, or the breaking of the syntactic rules, as found in Yousufi's prose. Although not as common as lexical or semantic deviation, grammatical deviation is highly effective when it does occur.

Urdu Original

"تھی (میرے پاس جو تھا) وہ کھو گیا؛ (جو نہیں تھا) وہ مل گیا"

Transliteration

Thī (mere pās jo thā) vo kho gayā; (jo nahī thā) vo mil gayā.

Literal Translation

What I had, I lost; what I didn't have, I found.

Analysis

The sentence is grammatically correct but makes a paradoxical statement. The parallel and antithetical construction mimics a proverb or aphorism. The grammatical deviation lies in the logical impossibility: losing what one had and gaining what one did not have. This enacts the migrant experience of losing the familiar

and gaining the unfamiliar, resolving the conflict of order and chaos through formal structure.

Parallelism

Complementary mechanism of foregrounding in Yousufi's prose is parallelism, which is the repetition of the linguistic structure. Deviation gives prominence by breaking rules, parallelism gives prominence by repeating rules, making patterns which stand out.

Short (1996) states that "when readers encounter parallel structures they attempt to identify a suitable semantic connection between the parallel construction in the text" (p. 65). Such a process of meaning-making is a part of the thinking that enables parallelism to be a powerful stylistic tool.

Urdu Original:

"وہ کھاتا تھا، پیتا تھا، سوتا تھا، جاگتا تھا۔۔۔ مگر کبھی مطمئن نہیں تھا"

Transliteration:

"Vo khātā thā, pītā thā, sotā thā, jāgtā thā---magar kabhī mutma'in nahī thā."

Literal Translation:

He ate and drank and slept and awoke, never satisfied.

Analysis:

The parallel structure ("he verbed") creates a rhythmic, hypnotic effect, suggesting the mechanical, ritualistic nature of the character's life.

The syntactic parallelism contrasts with the semantic content of constant dissatisfaction. The irony between formal order and existential futility is a source of both humour and philosophy.

Another application of parallelism is that of creating a semantic incongruity in making a contrast or opposition. The terms parallelism are quite often used to describe the observation of antonymical meaning relations between the paralleled items, as pointed out by Leech and Short (2007, p. 113). This technique can produce quasi-antonyms, opposite word pairs, in Yousufi's hands.

Urdu Original:

"وہاں کا زمانہ اور یہاں کا زمانہ۔۔۔ دونوں ایک جیسے، مگر بالکل مختلف"

Transliteration:

Vahāñ kā zamānah aur yahāñ kā zamānah---donon ek jaise, magar bilkul mukhtalif.

Literal Translation:

The time there and the time here, both the same, but completely different.

Analysis:

The parallel arrangement of "vahāñ kā zamānah" and "yahāñ kā zamānah" establishes formal equivalence. However, the semantic content, "both the same" but "completely different", contradicts that equivalence. The

parallelism creates a contrast that collapses into contradiction,

enacting the absurdity of the postcolonial experience.

Synthesis

As demonstrated in the previous section, Yousufi's comedic style is not restricted to the surface level, but is a systematic approach to the use of language. This architecture is at multiple levels, lexical, semantic, grammatical and structural, and at multiple mechanisms, deviation and parallelism. The results show that Yousufi's prose is not just "witty" or "humorous" but is carefully designed to elicit certain comic and philosophical effects.

Yousufi produces neologisms in the lexical level, and uses the lexical items "out of context" to create comedy by connotative

clash and unexpectedness. On the semantic level, he builds up logical contradictions, long metaphors, which produce extended incongruity. On the grammatical level he breaks with the syntactic rules, thus disorientating the listener. From a structural point of view, he achieves parallelism to create patterns which are more easily detected when there is deviation from them, and to establish ironic contrasts between form and content.

The basic idea behind this linguistic architecture is the same: systematically violate the expectation of the reader. Yousufi's prose always shocks the reader, with every aspect of the text. The humour is achieved by the reader having to decipher meaning from a perceived chaos and make sense of what the transgressions mean, outside the context of the story. Leech (1969) asserts that the readers' mind "ranges to figurative comprehension through literal absurdity" (p. 49). In Yousufi's linguistic architecture, through an absurdity, understanding is achieved.

To understand the relationship between foregrounding and humour, two complimentary theories are used: Incongruity Theory and Benign Violation Theory (BVT).

According to Incongruity Theory (Morreall, 2009), humorous events occur when there is a difference between what is expected and what actually is. The incongruity required at the linguistic level is provided by foregrounding. If Yousufi is creating a neologism, the reader is looking for something familiar and gets something unfamiliar; if he's creating a logical contradiction, the reader is looking for coherence and finds absurdity; if he's playing with the syntax, the reader is looking for a standard, recognizable grammar and getting deviation. A cognitive mismatch emergent from such expectations violation is what leads to laughter.

An important detail is added by Benign Violation Theory (McGraw & Warren, 2010): humor is created when a violation is perceived as both a violation (a threat to how things ought to be) and benign (not dangerous or significant). There are several mitigating factors in Yousufi's foregrounding violations which make them benign. First, the fictional setting of the story means the violations are limited to the story world and not to the real world. Second, the comic genre sets up expectations for norm-breaking behaviour. Third, the voice of the narration, wry, self-deprecating and humane, lets the reader know that they are in a safe and good-humored space. Fourth, the cultural context of South Asian storytelling offers frames which make the violations intelligible, and even expected.

The language of the prose of Yousufi, therefore, is an architecture for both the violation that is the foundation of comedy and the framing of these violations as harmless. His humor relies on deviation and parallelism, not only for aesthetic appeal, but as the means of his humor.

Architecture.

The linguistic structure of Yousufi's prose is not simply for amusement but a well-thought-out instrument for philosophical and social criticism.

Yousufi, however, superimposes linguistic failings on to these absurdities, in a systematic manner, the postcolonial predicament of displacement, the trauma of Partition, the pretensions of bureaucracy, and the contradictions of identity.

Lexicologically, the invention of new terms and the collision of connotations are a parody of claims to authority and importance. "History" is a lexical variation on a word that can be used to refer to a wood blemish and it exposes the exaggerated importance that can be given to something that is insignificant. If a

character invents an overly academic term, its new word will tease out the showmanship of the learnedness.

At the semantic level, logical contradictions and absurd metaphors enact the cognitive dissonance of the postcolonial condition. Yousufi's prose is semantically structured to show the contradiction between the past and the present, between what is expected and what is seen, between aspiration and achievement. The extended metaphor of the car as a horse, for instance, is a way of enacting the ludicrous quest to introduce old values to the new world.

The deviations of the syntactic norms are symbolic of the disorientation of displacement at the grammatical level. Yousufi creates sentences that do not follow logical expectations, linguistically enacting the experience of a world that has come undone.

On the formal, structural level, parallelism forms patterns that differ from semantic chaos, reflecting the tension between the need for structure and the experience of chaos. The speech and behaviour patterns which are ritualist with Yousufi are both comic and tragic, they are the marks of a world that attempts to hold meaning in the face of absurdity.

Yousufi's linguistic architecture is also analyzed for important differences with the absurdist traditions in the west. The language of writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco is structured to portray a universe that is without meaning, whereas Yousufi's language is used in a different way, namely to create an architectural structure. His deviations and parallelisms perform a culturally-specific absurdity which draws from the post-colonial experience of Partition and displacement.

Camus (1955) has captured western absurdism in the face-to-face encounter between human meaning-seeking and the utter emptiness of the world. Unlike absurdism, Yousufi's absurdism comes from the clash between a cherished cultural heritage (its spiritual and social rationality) and the confused present of the post-colonial world. His prose is linguistically structured to convey this difference. In Beckett's characters, the breakdown of language is through silence and repetition; in Yousufi's characters the breakdown of meaning is through elaborate linguistic construction. They are not silent, but rather invent increasingly complex stories to try and make sense of the world that is out of control.

This separation can be understood in the light of the Sufi notion of "hayrat" (spiritual bewilderment) which Yousufi translates to the postcolonial situation. There is nothing absurd about his work; but there is something absurd, which is the spiritual confusion that knows itself as confusion. His characters do not live in an indifferent universe, but rather in an indifferent universe from which they have been displaced. All their language performances, new words, long metaphors, ritualistic parallels are their ways of trying to make sense of things.

Across lexical, semantic, grammatical and structural levels, Yousufi systematically violates reader expectations. Neologisms shock; logical contradictions disorient; syntactic inversions confuse; parallel structures create patterns that are then undermined. Together, these foregrounding devices form a "linguistic architecture" that produces both comic and philosophical effects. The humour arises from incongruity (Morreall, 2009), while the violations remain benign (McGraw & Warren, 2010) because of the fictional setting, comic genre and humane narrative voice. This architecture is not merely decorative

but serves a satirical function, enacting the absurdities of the postcolonial condition.

Recommendations

Stylistic analysis of humor should be integrated into Urdu literature curricula to help students appreciate the linguistic architecture of texts like Yousufi's. Translation studies programs should train translators to handle neologisms, semantic deviations, and parallel structures, as these pose unique challenges in cross-linguistic transfer. The future researchers should conduct empirical studies on how readers process foregrounding in Urdu humor, combining stylistic analysis with cognitive approaches. Comparative studies between Yousufi and other postcolonial absurdists, such as Mohammed Hanif, should be encouraged to better understand the nature of South Asian absurdism. Finally, universities should promote critical thinking and linguistic awareness alongside literary appreciation, ensuring that the study of humor is treated as a serious intellectual pursuit rather than mere entertainment.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Risham Zahra: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing , original draft. **Hayati Binti Ismail, Mohd. Muzhafar, Aziz Ahmad:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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