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THE ABSENCE OF PUNCTUATION & THE PRESENCE OF READERS IN THE MATEJA MATEVSKI'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Punctuation shapes how one's texts are read and understood. Punctuation marks, in poetry, serve as a key concept that gives structure, meaning, and leads the reader through the interpretation process. This research aims to answer the question: Does the absence of punctuation marks in Mateja Matevski's poetry have an impact on the reader's reading process and interpretation. The purpose of this study is to perceive the effect that poetry, written without punctuation, has on the readers. The research is quantitative, and the sample is a selection of poems, mostly from the poetry collection "Kopnezh po celina" ("Longing for Entirety", 2005), which means that a corpus was compiled for the needs of the research. The selection of poems is based on the absence of punctuation. The research relies on a combined content analysis based on the coding of the responses. The results of the research show that the absence of punctuation has a linguistic, interpretative, cognitive, and emotional impact on readers.

Key words: Mateja Matevski, punctuation, interpretation, syntax.

1. Introduction

Punctuation is a subtle yet powerful tool to shape the rhythm and the syntax flow. Within established linguistic norms, punctuation marks provide a framework to indicate pauses, changes in tone, and outline ideas into units of thought. Therefore, punctuation's presence or absence may be observed as an artistic practice. The reader's interpretation transcends the absence of punctuation, replacing it with a new meaning that is often unique. The uniqueness of interpreting the meaning of poetic language arises from the individual perspectives of the literary word and from the way the language is perceived by the reader. To take away the punctuation from the language structure is an act inseparable from the mastery of one to turn a text into a piece of art.

In Macedonian literature, Mateja Matevski is the poet who has perfectly chosen this responsibility. *A man of measured words* who fills the spaces between the lines with emptiness. The results from this research are the look into those empty spaces, aiming to shape a new idea into the poetic speech. Every impact from the absence is, in a way, a presence. The goal is to see the reader's perception and interpretation when reading poetry

without punctuation. By emphasizing how the absence of punctuation involves the reader in the active construction of meaning. Some poets, especially modernists, intentionally break traditional punctuation rules to exceed readers' expectations. This may involve eliminating punctuation marks altogether, which means changing word order, all of which opens up new interpretations.

Punctuation in poetry, when it comes to Macedonian linguistics, is an area that is unexplored. The reason for this is possibly the fact that punctuation has both functional and artistic purposes, thus it contributes to the overall experience of the poem and to the construction of the meaning of a poem. Each punctuation mark is an opportunity for a new interpretation of the verse. Punctuation is closely related to syntax. Together, they shape the clarity and meaning of sentences. Related to this, syntax refers to the arrangement of words in a sentence, while punctuation guides the reader through the semantic structure. Without proper punctuation, even a syntactically correct sentence can bring ambiguity. And, from another perspective, ambiguity in poetic language is often deliberate and even desirable.

The absence of punctuation affects the interpretation and meaning of written text, as it removes the structural cues that guide readers through syntactic and semantic connections. In poetry in particular, punctuation serves as a visual representation of intonation, pauses, and grammatical boundaries, and also determines clarity and coherence. Thus, readers of poetry without punctuation rely on context and inference to discern meaning. This absence disrupts the natural rhythm of language and potentially opens up room for different interpretations of meaning. Unpunctuated verses can simultaneously suggest several meanings, depending on how the reader analyzes them. It should be borne in mind that poetic language is open to polysemy, hence, the layering of interpretation increases. Such an influence emphasizes the role that punctuation plays in the semantic and grammatical function of language and enhances the poetic and metalinguistic function. Consequently, the analysis of unpunctuated texts offers valuable insights for the linguistic analysis of a text.

1.1 From structure to meaning

Punctuation is a coherent, linguistic subsystem governed by rules. Rules, which in poetic language are allowed to be broken. In the Macedonian orthography, the omission of punctuation marks is allowed. However, the purpose of this paper is to observe the impact of this permission. The language of poetry is different from the language of other literary forms. That's why the grammar of poetry is also different. This refers to the fact that, on the one hand, the rules of grammar are modified to provide a certain "freedom," and on the other hand, that very freedom creates novel kinds of restrictions on linguistic units in poetry, both within and beyond the sentence level. This is why poetry cannot be analyzed separately from language, for language creates poetry, and innovations in poetry create language. Moreover, poetry cannot be fully understood without a thorough knowledge of grammar. Poetry is composed of standard language elements, but gives rise to effects that standard language does not create. So, poetry is a language that is differently ordered. Related to this, Noffal (2011) highlights Levine, who explains that linguistic analysis, when applied to poetry, shows results in which the grammar is different from the grammar that linguistic analysis of standard language would produce. The rules of poetry are made to be broken. (Leach, 1969). One example of deviation from established norms in poetry is the inversion of word order. The inversion of words can bring emotional and cognitive impact. The arrangement of words in poetry frequently defies traditional syntax, grammar, and punctuation. In fact, poetic language is marked, especially by the order of the words: "*Supstanci shto promenite gi nadzhiveale svoi nebrojni*", "*Zagledani vo senkata stopena svoja*" ("Fosili", 2005), "*Mesecot vodata ja zalazhuva nokjna*" ("Snihta", 2005). Poetic language is determined by spoken language. This means that words are rearranged to produce an effect of sound and

meaning. The aesthetic function of poetry is not achieved by correct syntax or by a logical arrangement of thoughts, but by shifting those boundaries. Of all the elements necessary to make a statement meaningful, the most powerful is syntax, which controls the order in which impressions are received and conveys mental relationships into sequences of words. Longenbach claims that syntax is the basis of the poet's art. Poetry is a sound organized into verses. (Longenbach, 2008). Verse – visual, phonic, and tactile – follows the form of thought. He writes that great poems “do not describe the movement of thought,” but rather shape and complicate that movement “through the relationship of syntax and verse” because verse (unlike punctuation) “cannot be related to the way we speak.” Longenbach emphasizes that poetry is a form of punctuation and suggests that perceiving the operation of verse in a contemporary poem allows one to experience the entire history of poetry anew. Punctuation plays a key part in the way in which the poetic thought is developed. According to Longenbach, punctuation is not just a tool for grammatical accuracy, it is an integral part of how a poet communicates meaning, emotion, and rhythm. He explains that punctuation marks, such as the comma, period, and dash, can either stop or advance the flow of a poem, depending on how (and whether) they are used. A comma is not just a pause, “a comma is a pause with meaning” (Longenbach, 2008). Here, the author emphasizes that punctuation marks, specifically the comma, do more than signal a brief pause. They carry an inherent meaning. The choice to use a comma or any other punctuation mark induces a subtle change in the way a sentence, i.e., a line, is understood. A comma in poetry, for example, can create suspense or develop connections between different ideas. Furthermore, “The period is often the most dramatic punctuation in a poem, signaling a complete pause or a definitive statement.” In poetry, the period can be especially effective when used at key moments and to create a sense of closure. “In the right hands, a comma can make the difference between a thought hanging in the air and one moving too quickly for the reader to catch” (Longenbach, 2008). Also, “the question mark is not just a tool for questioning, it is a punctuation of doubt, a way of signaling that the world of the poem is not fully resolved or understood” (Longenbach, 2008). Longenbach discusses how punctuation interacts with the technique of moving from one line to the next without a pause. This technique is clearly evident in Matevski's poetry. Typically, a change in line is announced by a dash, a sign that can create a sense of drama or change the direction of the poem's meaning. Most free verse writers like to mix up lines to create an individual sound and ensure surprise. Hence, syntax provides the opportunity for variations in pitch, tempo, and rhythm. Rhythm and syntax define the tone of voice far more than vocabulary and word placement, and tone conditions the reader's experience. Verse is closely linked to syntax, and syntax is intertwined with rhythm. The greater the variety of sentences that can be written, the broader poetry can be, whether measured or free. Syntax creates both grammar and logic, although in the end, the music always wins. (Bell, 2009) The absence of punctuation can be just as significant as its presence. Without punctuation, readers are constrained to rely more on syntax, context, and personal inferences to construct meaning. This is supported by Mervin's (2017) argument that when you leave something out, it can often speak louder than a statement. Punctuation creates a kind of openness or void that puts readers in a position to engage with the poem. And the poem, therefore, would not end in the way one would expect if punctuation were present. (Mervin, 2017). Punctuation in poetry is functional, not conventional. The absence of punctuation marks in Matevski's poems means fulfilling the thematic and literal *Longing for Entirety* by deliberately departing from conventional punctuation rules. In this way, Mateja has created a poetic form that reflects the essence of human longing. By resisting conventional closures, grammatically made with punctuation marks, each poem disrupts the classical sense of wholeness. This artistic decision leaves the structure of the poem incomplete and in a form that is constantly open. The absence of punctuation becomes a metaphorical concept, reflecting the existential, unfulfilled desire for wholeness. Thus, the author's choice to leave the poems “incomplete” is an approach that emphasizes the deep

connection between form and theme. Matevski, with his *“Longing for Clarity”*, too, wants to make the reading as boundless as possible. He’s doing that, most importantly, without disturbing the clarity. Almost every time, he uses a capital letter, and in that way, he announces endings or new beginnings. The importance of this aspect is also confirmed by Jakobson's theory, which states that the poetic function of language focuses on message, structure, and form, and syntax, in poetry, often takes on this function (Jakobson, 1960).

1.2. Longing for Entirety

The longing for entirety, Matevski portrays through the verses that are not bound by punctuation. As if he is intentionally avoiding the whole, and perhaps this is a way in which he opposes conventionality as a whole. If we experience the whole as the ultimate goal of linguistic creation, then the incomplete structure of the standard or usual form of verse is an indirect way in which Matevski speaks about freedom. Freedom, expressed through the liberation of the verses from punctuation. Matevski's linguistic mastery is shown by several characteristic lines. To begin with, by separating the words by syllables throughout the verses, for example, **Dozh-do-vi** and **Vr-ne Vr-ne** (“Nirvana”, 2005). By separating words into syllables, the author draws attention to phonetic elements and adds musicality to the text. Inversion is also a significant linguistic element of Matevski and further enhances this effect. Matevski disrupts the conventional word order and, at key points, foregrounds inversion. With this procedure, he prioritizes the interpretive focus. These techniques not only demonstrate the author’s innovation, but also emphasize the endless potential of language. The use of antonyms, next, reveals a deep layer of the paradoxical nature of human experience. By bringing together opposites, he creates linguistic units that evoke conventional associations. This interplay of contrasts intensifies the experience of poetry, as opposing words intertwine to evoke complex and contradictory states of existence. *That voice from the quiet, rambling silence, empty fulfillment, dream without dreams, filled with emptiness (Toj glas od shtama, zborlesto molchenje, prazna ispolnetost, son bez sonishta, ispolneti so praznina)*. Unobtrusive and unattractive, they reflected the process of patient, painstaking self-measurement on the path to their own poetic sound. Measured and tamed, but restless and anxious, refusing to be reduced to the figures of emotion. (Gjurchinov, 2008)

Another characteristic of Matevski's language is his stream-of-consciousness writing. This aspect of his style reflects the inspiration, obviously, drawn from James Joyce, whose technique in this narrative style revolutionized modernist literature. Like Joyce, Matevski uses an uninterrupted stream of thought, mimicking the natural rhythm of human cognition and capturing the nonlinear nature of consciousness. This approach is evident in the frequent shifts between internal monologue and external description, as well as the deliberate lack of punctuation, which blurs the boundaries of structured syntax. The following selection provides examples of these linguistic and stylistic elements: two poems titled *“Towards the Theme of Ulysses”* and *“On the Theme of Ulysses 3”*. Furthermore, in *“Poem One”*, Matevski writes: *“The path is long in the circle but it is reached more quickly”*. (*“Patot e dolg vo kruzhenjeto no pobrgu se stasuva”*). In this context, Joyce in *“Ulysses”*, wrote *“The longest way around is the shortest way home.”* This is connected to Lukuc's explanation that Matevski is an innovator, without ceasing to be a continuer of the tradition of Macedonian literature. He did not entirely gratify tradition, although he did not betray it. For he preserved the soul, the archetype of the Macedonian poem, sentiment without sentimentality. (Lukić, 1976) Matevski, besides deviating from punctuation, tends to go beyond expectations. This means that, even when there is obvious space for rhyme, he avoids it. He writes, *“I taka ne delejkji ja crtata na smeata od bolot nitu stihijata na neboto od stihijata na zborovite.”* And when reading, it naturally comes to rhyme “bolot” with the word **zborot**. Or, *“Vo presret na mugrata moja shto postojano ja sozdavame chovekot, nokjta I jas.”* The poetic would have an overtone when the verse ended like, *chovekot jas I nokjta*. Matevski's free verse has greater

melody than many sonnets by other poets. One passes imperceptibly from open to closed form. (Lukić, 1976) Mateja Matevski, in most of his poetry, writes without punctuation, especially in the poetry collection *Longing for Entirety* (Kopnezh po celina, 2005). This book has seventy-two poems and all of them are written **without a single punctuation mark**.

*Zashto se shto se sluchuva
zbidnatoto kon jasnost stremi
A ima tolku neshta bliski I zginati
so vedra neizvesnost
(“Kopnezh po jasnost”, 2005)*

This can be noticed, too, in the following poetry collections: *“Preparations for journey”* (*“Podgotovki za patuvanje”*), *“The night within us and around us”* (*“Nokhta vo nas I okolu nas”*), *“On the shore a city lies”* (*“Na bregot lezhi grad”*), *“Equinox”* (*“Ramnodenica”*)...

*Ti damna odish po krugot a toj ti se izviva molcum
po tajni I neznajni patishta slatki spirali na nevratkata
rojot od dzvezdi ti go zashemetuva sonot
I ti go odreduva begstvoto niz shumni vrtoglavici
(“Podgotovki za patuvanje”, 1987)*

2. Broader research context

Punctuation in literature has not received enough attention when it comes to linguistic research. Also, there has been no attempt to present this perspective from Mateja Matevski's poetry. Only in the past three decades has punctuation been examined within linguistic research, separate from considerations of normative usage. The reluctance of modern linguistics to make punctuation a focus for linguistic research stems from the reality that it is an extraverbal phenomenon. Although there is almost no applied research related to the research question of this paper, a large number of researchers have discussed the influence of punctuation in text. Doyle Calhoun (2015) cites the research of B. Say and V. Akman. According to them, punctuation contributes to the information conveyed by a sentence. In addition, a purely formal description of punctuation eliminates certain features of punctuation that are characteristic of literature, and especially poetry. Such features of literary punctuation include its functions in poetic language. They describe punctuation as a subsystem of the language that is general enough to deal with additional factors based on the context in which it is used (or not) (Say, Akman, 1997). A critically responsible approach to punctuation in poetry, Calhoun writes, recognizes that reading verses guided by punctuation marks limits the interpretive stance. Marvin Bell says that syntax provides the opportunity for verses to meaningfully conclude (both visually and semantically) with a punctuation mark. Poetry, through its careful structure, of which punctuation is a part, provides clarity in chaos. Punctuation works together with grammar to create clarity, guiding the reader through the flow of the poem. (Frost, 1972). Whereas, the absence of punctuation allows for a more subtle interaction with the text, where the lack of finality and certainty invites interpretation and emotional response. (Merwin, 2017). Additionally, Truss (2004) makes it clear that in written text, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader, it does more than that – it tells the reader how to experience the melody. Nunberg explains the syntax and semantics of punctuation. He argues that the punctuation system is, first, linguistic in the sense that it respects principles and constraints, and second, it is a special linguistic subsystem that cannot be reduced to principles of phonology or syntax. (Nunberg, 1990). And considering that interpretation is preceded by a thought process, research in the field of cognitive poetics is important, and so, Zur emphasizes that reading poetry is an active process. The reader's mind, he says, works in tandem with the structures of the text,

especially with syntactic features, to build meaning. This interaction is dynamic and involves cognitive processing of linguistic elements. (Zur, 1992). Research conducted in the world theoretically confirms that punctuation affects the overall perception of the text, since it is accompanied by other categories of language.

3. Research methodology

To determine whether the absence of punctuation marks affects readers, an interview was conducted to collect quantitative data on the effect. The interview included various types of questions, followed by a selection of poems from the poetry collection "*Longing for Entirery*". Starting with simple and short questions, to determine whether readers noticed any impact from the lack of punctuation. Furthermore, based on the responses, four different categories of impact emerged: emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and interpretive. The methodology is consistent with Thomas's theory (Thomas, 2006) in its use of unprocessed data to identify underlying concepts and patterns. The theoretical constructs are developed through systematic data interpretation. Categories are derived directly from the data and substantiated with supporting quotations. The responses that informed these categories provided delicate insights into the readers' experiences. This methodological approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the complex effects that the absence of punctuation exerts on readers' interpretation.

4. Analysis, results and discussion

In order to answer the research question and to observe the effect of punctuation in poetry, an interview was conducted with general speakers of the Macedonian language. The interview was composed of questions that are directly related to the presented excerpts from Mateja Matevski's poetry. The structured questions aimed for open-ended responses from the readers, for most reliable results.

The results of the research show that the absence of punctuation **has an impact on readers** in different ways. When reading the interviews, the research revealed four categories. The first one is the impact on the **cognitive level**. In an excerpt from the poem "Longing for Enterity", from the poetry collection of the same name, respondents say that: "The lack of punctuation marks has an impact on the overall coherence of the poem." and that "When reading the poem, ideas and events come together, and there are often temporal shifts, for example, from past to present, then future." The answers also reveal an impact during reading, with the answer that "While reading a poem without punctuation, I read more slowly than usual.", which is somewhat surprising. Paradoxically, punctuation, and especially the comma and the period, should slow down reading because of the indicated pauses. But this proves that punctuation is not only placed to direct the flow of reading. Although the verse is free from boundaries and pauses, readers, due to the need for greater attentiveness, slower than their usual pace. Adding to the unusual tone is the answer that says "The absence of punctuation gives me a limit". So, indeed, the space that is free, sometimes, can set a limit. Next, the study found that most readers noticed a **linguistic impact** when reading. "While reading, I group words into sentences naturally, based on their meaning, and I found a difficult time identifying sentence boundaries, so I ignored sentence structure and read with a continuous stream of consciousness." It is also important to point out that readers approached the poems in different ways. Some readers focused on taking an intuitive pause while reading. Others paid attention to the context to get to the meaning, and many relied on the visual breaks in the verses. Significant for this research is that the majority of answers agree with the fact that "Throughout reading, I faced grammatical ambiguity," so it was very expected to see that after reading, readers take pleasure from the endless possible meanings, without deciding on one. Some readers indicated that they would choose the interpretation

that makes the most grammatical sense. Also, many of them noticed a difference in the syntax, one where there are no punctuation marks compared to a typical sentence. Moving on, the respondents were given the opportunity to place punctuation marks by themselves in a part of the poem “First Song” in places where they thought it would fit best. In this way, the result provides a written form of how syntax is created individually by each reader. The purpose of this type of question was to portray the thought (the flow of reading) visually. This means that when a poem is unpunctuated, everyone reads it differently. This phenomenon is studied in detail in cognitive poetics. It embraces how readers perceive and process poetic texts. Zur's theory explains how syntax creates certain thought effects, through specific structural choices. Coherence in poetry is not just a logical flow of ideas, but a cognitive processing of how words and syntactic structures are mentally organized to provide a seamless experience for the reader (Zur, 1992). When the poet interrupts the expected syntactic flow, the break between subject and action forces us to pause and reassess the meaning of the sentence, this moment adds artistic value to the poem. It can be concluded that reading is an individual process and differs for almost everyone. This is confirmed by the fact that each respondent placed punctuation marks in different places, thereby structuring the stanza's syntax. For example:

1) Patot e dolg vo kruzhenjeto,
no pobrgu se stasuva koga se zatrchani dvajca
ili
koga se papsani dvajca.
A nie, bevme –
dvajca.
A nokjta beshe –
edna.
I niz nea trebashe, da se izleze vo senka.
2) Patot e dolg, vo kruzhenjeto,
no pobrgu se stasuva.
Koga se zatrchani dvajca ili koga se papsani dvajca
a, nie bevme dvajca
a, nokjta beshe edna
I niz nea trebashe da se izleze.
Vo senka.

The way in which almost everyone placed punctuation in different places clearly shows that the lack of punctuation **affects the interpretation**. The respondents shared their own interpretation, and almost every view was different. Towards the verses:

*Svetlina slepa Temnina sjajna e
patot kon ednostavnosta*

Kako vrvica tajna shto potechuv

I ne gine vo shumata nedoodna na govorot

Respondents say that punctuation is important “Because it opens up possibilities for different interpretations.” Furthermore, this is supported by the opinion: “I understand these verses in a way that Light and Darkness are an integral part of life – a never-ending journey, accompanied by speech and words.” That closely resonates with the idea that: “Composing two opposites, light can also be darkness, nothing is ever constant, and so is speech, and so is interpretation and meaning. Change is the non-arrival of speech.” *Knots*, for some of the respondents, symbolize complexity: Intertwined thoughts or emotions that require “untying” in order to be understood. “Blind lightness The darkness is bright”, readers point out, that there are hidden truths and that opposites can have unexpected similar characteristics, mutual opponents that replace each other's properties. “The path to simplicity”, for most of the readers is the complexity that leads to clarity, discovering the beauty of simple matter. Whereas „the path towards the simple and unambiguous happiness is all over us, yet very

sacred, far from the words (the wood untrodden from speech). “The forest represents the complexity and mystery of language, which hides deep meanings.” Additionally, readers say that the absence of punctuation affects the way they feel the poems, so there is an evident **emotional impact**. Related to this, when it comes to determining the tone of the poems, respondents shared different answers, including: “The experience is calm and reflective,” “There is chaos and unpredictability,” “The tone is neutral and balanced.” When asked whether the lack of punctuation enhances or detracts from the overall experience of the poem, the answers were divided. They state that “The deliberate absence of punctuation enhances the experience.” and for many, the quality of the experience is reduced, because they spend more time focusing on trying to “define” the structure (and thus the meaning) of the poem, instead of enjoying it. On the other hand, for some, the absence “is “predictable” and it is obvious what is missing, and there is no such interpretive freedom because the reader intuitively adds punctuation himself.” And finally, for some respondents, the lack of punctuation enhances the experience: “That way, each reader can experience the poem in their own, delicate way.” Overall, the results of the research show that the absence of punctuation in Matevski’s poetry has a linguistic, interpretive, cognitive, and emotional impact.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, the absence of punctuation in Mateja Matevski’s poetry significantly affects readers. Linguistically, it challenges the rules and creates an open space for diverse syntactic forms and different ways to place punctuation. On an interpretive level, it engages readers to be direct creators of meaning through their own frames of thought and emotional experiences.

This kind of linguistic experimentation emphasizes the capacity of poetry to transcend conventional grammatical boundaries. Finally, the research reaffirms the power of language as a tool, not only for conveying meaning, but also for inviting readers to be active creators of meaning.

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