

# Multicultural Moments in Poetry: The Importance of the Unique

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**Abstract:** This paper argues for the importance of poetry for the field of applied linguistics. The central argument of the article is that poetry is a discourse constructed around the epistemological principle of the unique that provides its readers with specific insights into individualized, personal human experience and linguistic expression. Poetry has particular value in promoting multiculturalism and the understanding of human diversity and can provide moments of contact among individuals living in diverse communities. For applied linguistics, a multi-generic approach is proposed in which all modes of communication and research need to be employed in order to contend with the major issue of human diversity in conservative social systems that promote unity as an ideal and function through the racist inability to differentiate between the group and the individual member of the collective. As argued in this paper, poetry can provide a counterweight to the desire to collectivize and generalize and remind us of the value of the humanly individual life.

**Résumé :** Cet article plaide l'importance de la poésie dans le domaine des linguistiques appliquées. L'hypothèse veut que la poésie soit un discours qui permet l'expression de l'exceptionnel ; la poésie est un véhicule pour un aperçu du vécu humain individuel et l'expression linguistique sous un principe épistémologique. La poésie a une valeur inestimable pour la promotion du multiculturalisme et de la compréhension de la diversité humaine ; elle peut permettre des contacts entre individus de communautés variées. L'auteur avance une approche multi-générique pour les linguistiques appliquées. Tous les moyens de communication et de recherche doivent être utilisés afin de lutter contre le problème majeur de diversité humaine au sein de systèmes sociaux conservateurs. Ces systèmes sociaux font la promotion de la diversité comme idéal et fonctionnent par l'entremise d'une incapacité raciste de différencier entre le groupe et le membre individuel de la collective. Il est soutenu dans le présent article que la poésie peut fournir un contrepois à l'envie de généraliser et de collectiviser et peut nous rappeler la valeur de la vie humaine individuelle.

**Memorial Tablet (War of 1914–18)**

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight  
 (Under Lord Derby's scheme). I died in hell –  
 (They called it Passchendale); my wound was  
 Slight  
 And I was hobbling back, and then a shell  
 Burst slick upon the duckboards; so I fell  
 Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.  
 In sermon time, while Squire is in his pew,  
 He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare;  
 For though low down upon the list, I'm there:  
 'In proud and glorious memory' – that's my due.  
 Two bleeding years I fought in France for Squire;  
 I suffered anguish that he's never guessed;  
 Once I came home on leave; and then went west.  
 What greater glory could a man desire?

– Siegfried Sassoon (1940, p. 113)

The poem that appears at the head of this paper was written in response to the horrors of the First World War. The poem situates the reader in a double discourse of the speaker's experiences and the rationalizing and euphemizing comments of the Squire. This poem does not argue with the Squire but situates the reader between two descriptions of experience. The speaker portrays the horrors of war including the circumstances of his own death – shell-struck in mud. The Squire who pressured the speaker to enter the war views a memorial tablet that describes the same scene as 'proud and glorious.' It is made abundantly clear by the last line of the poem that the realities of war have been covered by a thin veneer of national rationalization. In relation to most concepts of reality, the poem presents an impossible situation of a speaker who observes his own memorial tablet after death, but the poem, unconcerned with directly modeling realities of the world, constructs its own fictional experience for the reader. This experience is humanly accessible and significant. The poem does not convince through argumentation but rather situates the reader in the impossible situation of experiencing another's linguistically mediated experience. Quintessentially, this is what poetry does.

On this basis the current paper will argue for the importance of poetry in the field of applied linguistics which is currently attempting to contend with the racist collectivizing tendencies of a series of conservative state and international linguistically related policies. Histori-

cally, applied linguistics has used the discourse of instrumentalism and empiricism to promote its own concept of diversity and anti-racist multiculturalism. The current paper argues for the addition of poetic discourse to the genre at the field's disposal. As argued in this paper, poetry provides multileveled access to the individual and thus promotes the experience, concept, and understanding of human diversity.

*The (ontological) status of poetry*

Within the field of applied linguistics, discussions relating to poetry have tended to be restricted to the role this type of text can play within the language classroom (Auerbach, 2000; Hanauer, 1997; Kazemek & Rigg 1995; Weinstein, 1999). In most cases, the status of poetry is addressed only in so much as it is a useful or useless tool to use in the classroom. From the viewpoint of a literary critic, many of the instrumentalist approaches to poetry usage define poetry on the basis of a position of naive realism. This position tends to perceive poetry as a form that is ontologically transparent. The naive realist approach to poetry is not representative of all the work conducted in the field of applied linguistics. There have been several genre sensitive discussions of poetic and literary discourse, such as Widdowson's (1975) classic discussion of stylistics and language teaching, Kramsch's (1993) discussion of cultural context and poetry teaching, Carter and McRae's (1996) contextualization of literary practice in the language classroom, Weinstein's demonstration of the integration of personal and professional responses to understanding poetry, and Hanauer's (2001) analysis of the meaning construction processes of advanced second language poetry readers. However, for many in the field of applied linguistics poetry, if discussed at all, is presented in purely instrumentalist terms.

In the adjacent field of literary theory, the definition of poetry is a site of dynamic and consistent strife as to its ontological status. The description and definition of poetry has a history of discussion that reflects the ideologies of different historical periods and schools of interpretation going back to the philosophers of ancient Greece. In this sense, poetry is a genre with deep historical and cultural roots. These discussions of the nature of poetry represent the archaeology of this genre in which layer upon layer of socially constructed and individually contextualized meaning has been constructed. It is interesting to note that culturally deep-rooted genre tend to be literary texts. Poetry, fables, parables, folktales, plays, and myths are all literary forms that have long histories of development and discussion. Intrinsically within literary forms are discussions of the human condition that can resonate beyond

specific times and spaces. The discussion of these forms results from the presentation of a conceptual moment of contact that is abstract and specific at the same time and thus places the observer, participant reader in the impossible situation of being and not being in the situations experienced. Such a complex moment of existence cannot pass without comment. Consider the classic narrative poem of a hero's valour: the reader, observer, or listener is situated at an apex between past and present, physical presence and alien lands, heroes and horrors, the human and the inhuman. This situation raises so many philosophical contradictions of self, time, and belief that inevitably the reflective individual is forced into the state of explicit consideration of the wondrous form that generated the contradiction in the first place.

In my introductory paragraph, I imply a certain criticism of the instrumentalist approach taken within applied linguistics to literature in general and poetry in particular. This criticism refers not so much to the usage of literature but rather the discourse that situates this usage. The concept of ontological transparency that I refer to is essentially a lack of contextualizing historical discourse that transforms a literacy object from an explicated given to a questionable potential. Interestingly, in other areas, the field of applied linguistics does not limit itself to the assumptions of naive realism. Many issues within applied linguistics are approached from the viewpoint of social, historical, and cultural contextualization. The world and objects within the world are not perceived as given entities. For example, recent developments on the issue of language testing have pushed for a recontextualization of language testing to incorporate consequential validity – a consideration of the potentially harmful outcomes of the testing process (Shohamy, 2001). This approach to language testing, termed 'critical language testing,' denies the ontologically transparent status of language tests that certain testing bodies would like to propagate. The critical language tester recognizes the need for a wider contextualizing discourse through which the test can be understood. This wider discourse directly validates the presence of a semiotically complex reality and the concept that each literacy object is contextualized within a situating discourse.

As can be inferred from previous discussions, the status of poetry as an ontologically transparent literacy object results in part from a desire for pragmatic instrumentalism in the practice and discussion of language learning and language teaching. The integration of poetry in language teaching in itself is not problematic but the discourse of instrumentalism tends to objectify the literacy objects that it employs. This objectification involves neutralizing any contextualizing discourse, leaving poetry as an unproblematic literacy object. The status of poetry

is further marginalized in the field of applied linguistics by the hierarchical status of empirical data and the perceived antithesis between poetry and empirical paradigms. It has already been noted (Hanauer, 2001) that there is very little systematic empirical data on literature and even less on poetry. Both these forces – instrumentalism and empiricism – have truly marginalized the presence and importance of poetry within applied linguistics.

*The (epistemological) status of poetry*

A functional correlate of the instrumentalist and empiricist modes of thinking is a writing style that dignifies and values the systematically explicit. Poetry and poetic writing as a style honours the associative and implicit. Both styles of writing communicate, but they communicate different core epistemological understandings. An empirical or instrumentalist paper in an applied linguistics journal is expected to convey information that can be directly replicated by the reader if so desired and has already been internally replicated by the writer/researcher as a central part of the research design and writing process. Replication in this sense means the direct transportation and translation of conceptual and physical objects over time and place in such a way that their intrinsic nature is retained. The empirical concept of reliability refers to the ability of the testing measure to be repeated and yet still yield the same result. The empirical concept of validity refers to the ability of the written discourse and reported procedures to capture and thus replicate the essential nature of the phenomena they describe. In instrumentalist papers, replication refers to the reader's ability to replicate the described method within their own educational system. In all these usages, the core epistemological understanding of this discourse is of a linguistic system that can retain and transmit a replicable meaning. Hence, there is an emphasis on the explicit style of communication. Epistemologically, the style is a mode of transport that safely carries a distinct meaning that can be (and is) divorced from the transporting agent. The transporter, the instrumentalist, and empirical style of writing is systematically explicit so as to allow consistent replication. In this mode of thinking, science and teaching, as styles of writing, replicate the world.

Poetic writing intrinsically views the linguistic system as a source of aesthetic value achieved through cognitive and linguistic awareness. Early positions of this type, valued the aesthetic perception but presented the linguistic system as divorced from the world content that is explored in the discourse. Thus they ignored the metacognitive and metalinguistic role of poetic discourse that underpinned the aesthetic

perception that they valued. In the eighteenth century a position of this type was formulated by a great English poet of the same period – Alexander Pope. In the famed *Essay on Criticism* first published in 1711, Pope in an argument differentiating between good and bad poetry states the following:

Poets like painters, thus, unskill'd to trace  
 The naked nature and the living grace,  
 With gold and jewels cover ev'ry part  
 And hide with ornaments their want of art.  
 True wit is nature to advantage dress'd,  
 What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;  
 Something, whose truth convinc'd at sight we find,  
 That gives us back the image of our mind.

Pope's essential argument is that good poetry is judged by its ability to delight through its use of the linguistic system. Good poetry uses language to express the artist's thoughts in a way that brings aesthetic pleasure and thus is an appropriate adornment to the original thought. Notice that Pope's stated position differentiates between the conceptual content of the poem and the expression of that content and further focuses the definition of poetry on a particular way of expressing and not on the conceptual content itself. According to Pope, the conceptual content of a poem could be presented in plain prose and it would not be a poem but rather a textbook. What makes a poem a poem is the delight derived from the use of language.

The above explication and paraphrase of Pope's lines of poetry distinguishes between the linguistic system used to present the poem and the content that it conveys. Ontologically the claim would be that the poem exists on two planes that differentiate form and content. And yet, even a simplistic comparison between my explication and the lines of poetry themselves reveals an interesting contradiction to the proposed statement of distance. We can state what the poem means but it is not the same as the poem itself. The principle of replication faces a serious challenge, as does the idea of a double existence that divorces form and content.

The Russian Formalist critic Roman Jakobson further enhances this problem by proposing a theory that explains the aesthetic functioning of poetry in relation to its linguistic presence. For the linguist Jakobson, poetry was to be studied as an inherent part of the linguistic system. Jakobson (1960) specified six major functions for language that derive from an analysis of the components of the communicative act. One of

these functions is termed the 'poetic function.' Jakobson defined the poetic function in the following terms: 'The set towards the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake is the poetic function of language' (Jakobson, 1960, p. 356). Put simply, the poetic function involves a focus on the linguistic features of the text itself. The 'palpable' presence of the linguistic features of the text is the poetic function. In cognitive terms, this palpable presence directs the reader, observer, or participant's attention to the presence of the linguistic system. The reader is forced into the physical, cognitive and metalinguistic modes of language perception. As a genre poetry is defined as a group of texts in which the poetic function is most clearly dominant. Accordingly, the 'palpable presence of the linguistic system' is considered an intrinsic quality of poetry.

According to Jakobson, the form of perception found in poetry is achieved through the unique way language is constructed in the poetic function. As stated by Jakobson: 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (Jakobson, 1960, p. 358). Equivalence or sameness is used as the major means of constructing the whole poem. On all levels of their linguistic features, poems display an overall structure of similarities and contrasts. For the other functions of language, equivalence plays a significant role only for the axis of selection in that a choice is made of the appropriate linguistic element from a repertoire of equivalent items. However, in the poetic function of language, equivalence is also used as a way of combining linguistic elements. In poems, the formal features of the text display a system of similarities, regularities, and repetitions such as the repetition of syllables, regularities in stress patterns, or similarity in grammatical category. The poem is a hierarchically structured set of patterns of similarity and contrast. When the principle of equivalence is used as a principle of combination, the text is no longer a linear string but is subdivided and reconstructed according to the patterns of similarity and contrast of the formal features of the text. This process of construction produces an individual utterance that foregrounds its own linguistic presence.

The emphasis on the formal features of the poem itself and the non-linear hierarchical structure of those features brings into question the relationship between the linguistic and non-linguistic sign. The illusion of a direct relationship between the linguistic and non-linguistic sign is broken by the perceptible presence of the formal features of the poem. By emphasizing the illusory nature of the relationship between the linguistic and non-linguistic sign and by situating the linguistic sign within a structure of other linguistic signs, a multiplicity of potential

meanings is achieved within the poem. For example, in poems, similarity in sound may be taken as a similarity in meaning or the connotative associations (rather than denotative precision) of a particular linguistic sign is used for meaning construction in poems. As presented by Jakobson, a poem is a structural whole in which all the formal features of language play a role. The whole poem can only be understood in relation to its parts and its parts can only be understood in relation to the whole poem. Epistemologically, Jakobson's theory views poetry as a self-referential construct that unifies the planes of explicit content, associative memory, linguistic expression and the linguistic system itself. Rather than a principle of replication, a principle of uniqueness is valued in this discourse type. Uniqueness in this sense relates to the process of construction as well as the process of reception. Meaning is constructed as a potential through the auspices of a cognizant linguistic presence that cannot be ignored, situating the reader in the presence of a linguistic system that directs a series of self-referential relations. The utterance itself is formed around individual connections making a unique self-addressing and revealing linguistic form.

Uniqueness, as constructed within poetic writing, is an aspect of the linguistic expression that makes the reader, observer, or participant notice. This noticing generates aesthetic pleasure but also directs multileveled cognition. As constituted by the theory of Aesthetic Cognitivism (Gordon, 1997) all art, including poetry, is a form of understanding. The role of art in society, and the causal explanation of why art exists in all cultures, is that art provides physically and emotionally secure access to first-hand experience in the world. This experiential access is a directed exercise in noticing potential meanings in artistically experienced events. Within the constructed artistic world, experience of the complexities of life takes place.

Following Gordon's (1997) lead, the literary, empiricist researcher Hanauer (in press) proposes that 'poetry is a literary text that presents the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the writer through a self-referential use of language that creates for the reader and writer a new understanding of the experience, thought, or feeling related to in the text.' In this position the principle of uniqueness is applied to linguistically directed cognition and used as the defining marker of poetic writing. In poetic writing, linguistic uniqueness embodies cognitive attention that activates associative potential meaning, emotional response, and compensatory sensual perception and thus creates an artistic experience for the participant, reader, or observer. This experience is a new, fictional, and unique experience. Essentially linguistic



uniqueness in poetic writing embodies cognitive uniqueness. In poetic writing, the linguistic system is not a transparent medium that merely transfers the author's message; nor is it a mere adornment to the poet's message: the unique expression of the poem is the message and experience. The meaning of a poem cannot be paraphrased and stay the same. The central feature of a poetic writing is the unique construction of a personally meaningful cognition of an artistic experience, thought, or feeling. The core epistemological understanding of poetic discourse is that of unique, multileveled, experiential activation. Whereas instrumentalist and empirical styles of writing function through the transmission of a replicable meaning, poetic writing constructs unique linguistic and cognitive experiences. Poetic writing does not model the world; it constructs the experience of its own fictional world.

*The 'unique' in applied linguistics*

The question that needs to be addressed at this point is the relevance of poetry for applied linguistics. Or to be more exact: Does the field of applied linguistics require a discourse that revels in the linguistically and cognitively unique? As stated above, the general direction of most writing and thinking in the field is instrumentalist and empirical. This has to a certain extent diachronic roots. Historically, applied linguistics has been deeply concerned with the issue of how second languages are acquired, learned, and taught. However, current positions on applied linguistics, while keeping the historical perspective as a core position, present a much wider field of interest. It is common at an applied linguistics conference to hear papers which deal with such diverse issues as first language acquisition, social functions of language, the linguistic rights of minorities, and psycholinguistic processes. Gone are the days where applied linguistics could be reduced to language teaching.

As currently conceptualized and practiced, applied linguistics coordinates between theoretical and empirical theories of language and the usage of language in a wide variety of personal and social contexts. A legacy of the field's historical roots and a projective assumption about hierarchical value, however, has created a bias in favour of the empirical and instrumentalist. The historical roots, styles of writing, and modes of research do provide an economic or pragmatic justification for funding and external explication of this direction of linguistic research, but changes in the social reality that we live in have directed the need for new approaches to research, writing, and thinking. To borrow a metaphor from the field of applied linguistics, the argument here is going to be that of 'additive bilingualism.' In addition to the empirical and the

instrumentalist approach to applied linguistics, I propose that the unique take a more active role in promoting understanding of human diversity.

Primarily, the issue of human diversity stands at the centre of my perception of the major challenges facing applied linguistics. The development of qualitative research methods within the field of applied linguistics can be seen as part of a wider movement within the field that recognizes the diversification and pluralization of society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Essentially, there is an understanding that we live in a world in which there is ever-increasing 'individualization of ways of living and biographical patterns' (Beck, 1992). This shift in social perception has directed a re-evaluation of the type of information that is needed to understand phenomena such as language learning, linguistic practice, and social experience. Essentially, the study of the individual subjective understanding of experience, once shunned by linguistic researchers who were concerned with issues of abstract linguistic structure, has become a central concern for many applied linguists.

The rise of narrative as a research method is a good example of this shift in research perception. Narrative was at one time considered to be a literary genre that was beyond the realm of systematic research. However, through the 1980s and 1990s a wide series of approaches to the use of narrative developed and the field of narrative research was well established, with journals and books directed exclusively at this research method (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The advantage of narrative as a research method is that it presents a subjective reworking of the individual's biographical concept and thus allows the researcher an insight into the hidden conceptual and emotional world of the individual. This method has been successfully employed for the investigation of migration experiences, concepts of emotional life, experiences of language learning, life as a member of a linguistic minority, and many other issues of interest to the field of applied linguistics.

The establishment of narrative as a mainstream discourse of self-representation that can be utilized as data by researchers in the field of applied linguistics is at odds with the marginalization of other literary forms and the literary corpus itself. As argued above, poetic writing provides a non-paraphraseable utterance of a personal understanding. It is a unique linguistic statement that creates a specific experience for the participant, observer, or reader. The value of the unique in this formulation is that it is a point of entrance into a multileveled experience of human significance.

The issue of human diversity poses a tension between the social grouping and the individual existence. Even in discussions directed at promoting social equality, this tension is played out through the grouping of individuals around centralist classifying concepts. While this grouping is inevitable so as to avoid simplistic, colour-neutral positions on society that negate the presence and mechanisms of discrimination, this grouping is also problematic. We are influenced by our cultural surroundings but can never be reduced to the level of a unitary identity between self and cultural surroundings. The cognitive system is, after all, autonomous and indirectly influenced by exposure in specific cultural frames. In other words, we are all unique, at least to the extent of our own experience of self. It is essentially this understanding that poetic discourse expresses.

The additive bilingualism argument in relation to poetic writing is that while the empirical may be an excellent discourse for exploring and explaining group constructs and generalizations, there is a need for a qualifying expression of the individual and the unique. Poetic discourse, constructed around the principle of the unique, provides access to individual experience on a personal direct level that is connected to but distinct from the wider social frame. Poetic discourse promotes understanding of individual experience and thus can play a role in advancing concepts of human diversity.

*Multicultural moments in poetry*

On the institutional and governmental level, dominant groups in society usually propose an explicit policy in relation to migrant minorities. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) differentiate between two basic types of response to the presence of minority groups within dominant societies: a monocultural, or a multicultural response. The monocultural response is defined by its explicit and implicit belief of the superiority of the dominant culture. The policy of assimilation is a central monocultural policy. This policy views the language and culture of the minority as an impediment. The migrant has a cultural lack. The solution to this problem is total assimilation within the dominant culture and the erasure of their own linguistic and cultural heritage. Another monocultural policy is integration. This policy also views the language and culture of the minority as an impediment. The problem of the migrant is presented as a lack of opportunity. The migrant has not had the social or educational opportunities to acquire the dominant culture. The solution to this problem is to provide opportunities in which the deficient minority culture can acquire the dominant culture. Only those

aspects of the minority culture that overlap the dominant culture are recognized by the dominant group. In all forms of monocultural response, the collective value of the classificatory group is completely erased and by default the individual loses any option of self-expression of difference.

Multicultural responses are based on the understanding that society is multi-ethnic and pluralist. Benevolent (pluralist) multiculturalism views the language and culture of the minority as important and highly values ethnic identity. The emphasis of this policy is on the lifestyles of minorities, and on inter-group learning about minority cultural material. Diversity is recognized; however, there is no structural incorporation of minority values or positions. The power relations between dominant and minority groups are left unchanged. Critical (anti-racist) multiculturalism is an additional option for multicultural policy. This policy views the language and culture of the minority as important. However, the culture of the minority cannot be understood without an analysis of the structural relations between minority and dominant groups. Structural inequalities need to be addressed and minority values and positions incorporated within the power structure. It is believed that the negotiation between dominant and minority groups will change the social structure.

In multicultural responses to human diversity in society there is an understanding of difference. But the role of the individual has not been significantly addressed. Most multicultural experiences are on a day-to-day level and involve minor (social) acts of discrimination. The protagonists do not essentially view themselves or their actions as racist. Personal preferences and bureaucratic requirements are usually used as the explanation of the offensive behaviour. Essentially the protagonists have no experience of the ramifications on the individual of racist action, however minor. In the field of applied linguistic research, the role of the individual has been addressed through qualitative research and especially narrative research. Poetry reading, although a discourse distinct from empiricism, offers an insight into the individual multicultural experience and hence can promote the understanding of diversity.

Consider the following poem by the Iranian-American poet Zara Houshmand:

### **Another Day and Counting**

October 22, 2001

It's routine now:

I drive my son to school,  
the sun just breaking through Pacific mist.

Driving home, I listen to the news  
and quietly cry.  
My son won't listen anymore:  
'All opinions, hot air. Call me when they find some facts.'  
Proud and fragile privilege of youth:  
demand the truth.  
The sky recedes, ashamed.  
What passes now for truth on this cold ball?  
The sky is pink with shame  
beyond the concrete ribbons where commuters crawl.  
What's in that microscopic dust  
that bends our light to post-card pretty pinks?  
Dust of concrete hopes exploded,  
dust of homes of sun-baked brick,  
complex chains of human dust  
and dust of promises to youth.  
Tonight my cheeseburger arrives  
with a flag poked proudly in the bun.  
The tiny paper stars and stripes seem far away,  
victory through the wrong end of the telescope,  
moon-landing on the circle of my plate.  
The waitress smiles broadly,  
but the food tastes bad,  
or maybe I've just lost my appetite.

(Houshmand, 2001)

In the immediate aftermath of the terrible events of September 11 2001, the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York took on mythic proportions. As often happens when a larger number of human beings are killed suddenly in an act of violence, the collective is personified and analyses of national psyche become common. This jump to the collective brings with it a series of racist collectivist accusations. Following the attack in New York, the terms terrorism, Islam, Muslim, and Arab became synonyms meaning large groups of people who have directly or indirectly attacked America. In short, these groups of people were considered at best suspect, and more than likely, active enemies of the state. These assumptions were not held by all American citizens and residents, and there were undoubtedly a number of public and personal statements deploring racist attacks against Arabs and Muslims. But the public policy enacted by the state was defined by a racist inability to differentiate between groups and individuals, threats to America, and victim of racist stereotyping. It is in this atmosphere that Zara Houshmand wrote her poem 'Another Day and Counting.'

The poem depicts three scenes from everyday life that together constitute one whole day in the life of the speaker and her family. The poem is contextualized by the date of October 22, 2001 specified at the top of the poem and the publishing source. This poem first appeared in an e-journal directed at the Iranian-American community in the United States called *The Iranian*. The date places the poem less than two months after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

The first scene consists of the speaker taking her son to school. The poem starts with the words 'It's routine now.' This beginning is in sharp contrast to the context of the events of September 11. This first line raises the issue of the sense of disparity between everyday life and the experience of horror. This is an experience that every witness of an atrocity or anyone who has experienced grief is aware of. Thousands of people have died (or even one person) and yet the world has not stopped. In fact, as specified in this opening line, the routine just continues. The speaker, we are told, is driving her son to school and listening to the news on the radio. This everyday event produces two very different responses. The speaker responds to the news with a feeling of personal sorrow while her son responds with feelings of indignation. At the time of the publication of this poem, the news was filled with accusations against a plethora of Arab and Muslim groups. Although Al-Qaeda was accused, the evidence was such that other parties were seen as being involved. Mainstream American public discourse seemed to be directed against any Arab or Muslim group. The speaker demonstrates her own feelings by 'quietly crying.' Her son demands 'facts' and is objecting to the stereotyping and accusation directed at all Muslims.

The second stanza presents an extended metaphor of the sky. The speaker of the poem looks out of her car window and sees the pink colour of the sky. In the poem, the sky is personified as the being 'ashamed' and 'pink with shame.' The metaphor is based on the physical colour of the sky as pink, which is figuratively referred to as the sign of shame, blushing. This shame is directly connected to two things: the issue of truth referred to by the speaker's son and the presence of dust in the sky. On a physical level the cause of the pink sky is microscopic dust. But in the poem this dust is once again related to metaphorically. The dust is 'dust of concrete hopes exploded,' 'dust of homes of sun-baked brick,' 'complex chains of human dust' and 'dust of promises to youth.' In this complex, extended metaphor the dust, which is the cause of the sky's shame, has four sources. The first source is the explosion of the Twin Towers that produced an enormous dust cloud. Notice that the Twin Towers are referred to as an exploded hope. This seems to refer to

a potential positive role that these buildings symbolized such as the hope of economic development. The destruction of these buildings produces in the speaker a sense of shame and of being ashamed. The second source of the dust is the destruction of 'sun-baked homes.' This seems to be a reference to the homes of Afghani citizens and the actions of the American armed forces in response to the events of September 11. The third source of the dust is the horrific image that nearly 3,000 people were incinerated and literally turned to dust in the terrorist attack. This image is directly reminiscent of the Holocaust, in which people were burnt in crematoriums and the dust fell upon the surroundings. Finally, the last source of dust is the figurative destruction of 'promises to youth.' The implication seems to be that following the events of September 11 and the response of the American people, hopes and promises of a better future have been crushed. It seems to represent a severe sense of despair. The horrific description of the source and ramifications of the dust is directly juxtaposed with the vision of the pink sky as 'post-card pretty pink.'

In this extended metaphor we are made to face the complexity of the speaker's feelings and understandings. She is horrified by the events of September 11 and the way America is responding to these events. She despairs at human thought that could lead to such an atrocity and at the results of these actions. She is deeply grieved by the destruction of human life and of the dreams of a better future. She is a double victim. She has been hurt as every other American by the atrocity of the September 11 attack and at the same time she and her son are the victims of American stereotyping of anyone who has any connection with Islam, the Middle East, or Arabs.

The last stanza of the poem is situated at the end of the day in what seems to be an American diner. The speaker orders the most American of all meals - a cheeseburger. The cheeseburger arrives with a patriotic symbol, a small Stars and Stripes, stuck in the bun. This image is figuratively transposed to one of the most patriotic and symbolically important acts of American self-esteem - the first moon landing. The bun of the cheeseburger is the moon and the flag is a sign of victory in the space race. Unfortunately, this small and rather meaningless act of patriotism in the restaurant is experienced by the speaker as an act of alienation. Rather than bringing her closer to others who also are suffering from the aftermath of September 11, the presence of the flag distance her from the society she lives in. The flag is seen 'through the wrong end of a telescope,' an image of a tool that can be used to bring views closer and into perspective, but here is used to increase the distance and enhance the feelings of society alienating the speaker. This

minor act of patriotism is accompanied by a smiling waitress completely oblivious to the ramifications of her offering. Not surprisingly, our speaker loses her appetite for the cheeseburger. The poem literally and figuratively leaves us with a bad taste representing the complexities of life as an American-Iranian in the United States at the end of 2001.

This poem is quintessentially a multicultural poem that posits the individual experience of the minority member in a perceived hostile majority setting with those of the reader, participant, or observer. Human diversity is promoted by the creation of a situation in which the reader of this poem is faced by presence of an individually expressed understanding and experience. For the observer with similar experiences it is an expression of self. For the observer with different experiences it is a point of contact with the experience of otherness. The role poetry plays here is to allow Zara Houshmand the option of expressing her individual understanding of the complexity of her life and to explore the shifting sands of personal belief and identification. She takes into account her community but speaks for herself. Anyone who reads this poem and has the language ability and knowledge to interpret it comes into contact with the multicultural essence of the speaker of this poem. Zara Houshmand presents us with the option of exploring her world and gaining insight into what it means to be Iranian-American. This poem is a multicultural moment of contact between the observer, participant, or reader and the uniqueness of the linguistic expression, thought, and situation of the poet/speaker. This is the potential role of poetry in the promotion of human diversity.

In this paper I have proposed extending the usage of poetry within applied linguistics. As demonstrated in the poem above, the principal directing this proposed extension is the presence of a potential moment of linguistically negotiated contact that is both multicultural and individual at the same time. This potential moment of contact has significance for applied linguistic research as well as pedagogy. From a research viewpoint, this proposal is an extension of the qualitative approach to research focusing on personal understanding. In principle, poetry can be used as a source text for analysis, elicitation method, or stimulus item for response. In all these cases, the interest should be on the presence of an individual mind linguistically negotiating personal meaning. As argued in this paper, poetry, constructed around the principle of the linguistically and cognitively unique, allows the entrance of the individual understanding of the world and the linguistic system. For qualitative questions directed at experiential knowledge and the participant's perspective, poetry seems one of several potential literary genre that are suitable. Of particular importance here is the potential of



personal understanding in research to qualify over-generalized collectivist positions and facilitate the expression of individual diversity within wider cultural frames.

For applied linguistic pedagogy, poetry offers the opportunity of the entry of cross-cultural personal understanding as well as the site of explicit negotiation of linguistic structures. In a manifestation of what has been called here the epistemological principle of the unique, Widdowson (1984) has termed poetry as 'deviant discourse.' This concept expresses the concern of many language teachers that poetry, as a linguistically and cognitively unique construct, will counter the linguistic regularities present within their classes. As such, poetry may be considered subversive as well as inappropriate. But many teachers recognize that language learning goes beyond learning linguistic regularities. Communicative context, cultural understanding, and pragmatic knowledge are widely recognized as significant for the language classroom. Poetry extends this approach by providing a site for the discussion of humanly significant, individual meaning, and linguistic structure in relation to wider cultural frames. After all, by definition the foreign and second language learner is in an individual position in relation to the new linguistic system and cultural context. Only they have had their particular development of interlanguage and cultural development. Entrance into a linguistic community against the backdrop of an existing but different linguistic system and cultural experience ultimately involves diversification of the target linguistic community. Rather than avoided, the language teacher can revel in this opportunity for individualized meaning construction, linguistic negotiation, and personal cultural understanding. Poetry used in the language classroom can bring personalized human experience with all its ambiguities and multileveled meanings to the forefront of the language learning process. Poetry can facilitate the expression of individualized human experience in a new linguistic and cultural system and allow the entrance into the language classroom of diverse human experience and points of personal, cross-cultural contact.

#### *Final remarks*

The classic historical role of poetry resides on the border between the uniquely personal and the humanly significant. As described in this paper, poetry, a discourse constructed around the epistemological principle of the unique, has the potential for promoting experience of the individual life and as such can provide moments of contact among individuals living in diverse communities. These moments of multicul-

tural contact construct experience of otherness. For applied linguistics, this is a multi-generic approach in which all modes of communication and research need to be employed in order to contend with the major issue of human diversity in conservative social systems that promote unity as an ideal and function through the racist inability to differentiate between the group and the individual member of the collective. Poetry can provide a counterweight to the desire to collectivize and generalize, and remind us of the value of the humanly individual life.

**David Ian Hanauer's** research employs theoretical, qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry and focuses on the connections between reading authentic texts and social functions in first and second languages. Among other issues, his research has investigated the genre specific aspects of poetry reading in L1 and L2, cognitive aspects of literary education, cross-cultural understandings of fable reading and academic literacy across disciplines. His articles have been published in *Applied Linguistics*, *Discourse Processes*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Awareness*, *Cognitive Linguistics*, *Poetics*, and *Poetics Today*. His books include *Poetry and the Meaning of Life* and *The Balanced Approach to Reading Instruction*.

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