

# **A Stylistic Study of English**

## **Limericks**

Presented By

Asst . Prof. Nadya Khairy Muhamed Said    Asst. Instructor Amani M. Al- Attabi

Suad Satar Saleh Hussein

College of Education – Department of English/ Ibn Rushd

### **Abstract**

Limerick is a five line poem. It is meant to be funny. Yet, some limericks contain poetic devices which the present paper tries to prove. The present study sheds light on some sound stylistic features : assonance, onomatopoeia and pun in a collection of poems taken from different resources. The study shows that assonance is the most dominant poetic device in limericks which makes most of them rhythmic and easy to comprehend.

Key words: Limericks, assonance, onomatopoeia, pun.

### **1-Introduction**

Poetry can be viewed as a literary medium for recording , forming , controlling and communicating human experience.

Most forms of poetry follow a specific format for words , syllables and rhyme. Writing poetry can help gain confidence as one plays with the language and thinks creatively about specific topics. All poetry benefits from sensory words and a strong action verbs while faithful to the particular rules of the poetic form .

The main concern of this paper is to investigate English limerick poems .

In this respect , the following explains the limerick :

*The limerick is a fun five poem,  
Enjoyed by all those that known'em,  
With two rhymes up top,  
The one last to stop,  
And two in between , not below'em .*

By Jonathan Dean

A limerick is five lines long with the rhyme scheme aabba. This means that lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme with each other, and lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other. They also have a bouncing rhythm. Limericks are meant to be funny, and often employ elements of literature such as hyperbole, onomatopoeia and alliteration. The first line usually sets up the idea of the poem, and the last is generally the punch line ( Jensen, 2008:65). Although sometimes bawdy, outlandish limericks bring humor and rhyme to the world of poetry.

In this paper , the researchers have collected 40 limericks from The Penguin Book of Limericks (1984) and from Full text of “700 Limerick Lyric: A Collection of Choice Humorous Versifications (2007). These limerick poems are analyzed in terms of three stylistic devices : two are phonetic i.e., assonance and onomatopoeia and one is lexical i.e., pun.

The study aims to unveil some stylistic devices : assonaence , onomatopoeia and pun to see how much limericks cover and to identify onomatopoetic type of these limericks. Results analysis and Conclusions are drawn in the end of this paper to show the rate of occurrence of these devices..

## **2-Theoretical Background**

### **2-1 English Limerick: Definition**

Hornby (1985:493) defines limerick as “a humorous or nonsense poem of five lines.

The limerick is essentially a story in five lines of verse . There are usually nine beats in lines one , two , and five , six beats in lines three and four . The ninth beats in lines one , two and five are accentuated ; and this is called ‘anapestic rhythm or foot’ ( two short syllables and a long ) . The first line sets the scene and gives the main character ( Marsh , 1997:viii). Edward Lear is the best example:

*There was a young person of Smyrna  
Whose grandmother threatened to burn her,  
But she seized on the cat,  
and said Granny , burn that!  
You incongruous old woman of Smyrna!*

Sometimes limericist starts a limerick by thinking what he wants to say by choosing a topic ( e.g., a school friend) and then thinking what rhymes are available for that word and then creating some sort of story out of them (Ibid.)

The first line of a limerick traditionally introduces a person and a place , with the place appearing at the end of the first line and therefore establishing the rhyme scheme for the second and fifth lines . In early limerick , the last line was often essentially a repeat of the first line , although this is no longer customary ( Jensen,2008:65-66).

## **2-2 The Origin of The Limerick**

The name limerick has its reference to the country or city in Ireland by the name of limerick. The limerick as a form of poetry appears in 1880 in a New Burnswick Newspaper . The name was documented in the New English Dictionary in 1898 in England in 1902 .In America . The limerick was largely used by Edward Lear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century though the term was not used by him (Parrott ,1983: 9-10).

Edward Lear did not invent the limerick. Although he may have played some part in popularizing the limerick form of poetry in his “Book of Nonsense” which was published in 1845 and later in another book in 1872 Lear’s 212 Limerick as termed as nonsense verse (Ibid.) . The concluding line of the limerick usually ended with the final word of the first line:

*There once was an old man from Peru*

*His poor llamas came down with the flu*

*In the valley he passed*

*All the people who gasped*

*At the beast that was uttering “moo”*

After Lear, most limericks followed suit: they are generally composed of three metrical feet in the first, second, and fifth lines, with two metrical feet in the third and fourth, but deviations from the pattern can be diverting, as in: (Weissmann, 2008:2603)

*There was a young man from Japan*

*Whose limericks never would scan*

*When they said it was so*

*He replied, “Yes, I know,*

*But I always try to get as many words into the last line as*

*ever I possibly can.”*

In Mary Cooper’s 1744 book , “Tommy Thumb’s Pretty Song Book”, the following poem in limerick form appears and is the first example in print of an illustrated limerick. It remains well-known today, in various forms: (Jensen,2008:64)

*Hickere, Dickere Dock,*

*A Mouse ran up the Clock,*

*The Clock Struck One,*

*The Mouse fell down,*

*And Hickere Dickere Dock.*

### **3- Stylistic Features**

#### **3- 1 Onomatopoeia**

Trask (1996:247) says that this term refers to the coining or use of a word that attempts to represent a non-linguistic sound by a combination of appropriate segments selected from the ordinary phoneme inventory of the language. Examples are ( rat , cock , a- doodle , tinkle )

Chalker(1996: 219)) speaks of onomatopoeia as “sound symbolism” ; she adds that “the sounds or meanings[...] where whole words imitate ‘ real-world’ sounds e.g., ‘toot’ ; the relation is often termed “onomatopoeia” .

#### **3-1-1 Types of Onomatopoeia**

Berdin (1996:557-563) mentions that onomatopoeia is classified into three categories. “Direct onomatopoeia” , words which are similar to the actual sound they refer to . Typical Examples are (bang , zoom , hiss ). “Associative onomatopoeia” , because of associations , not because they resemble the object or the action they represent. Examples are (cuckoo is the bird’s name but the resemblance refers to the song it produces and does not have anything

to do with the bird itself. The third type is “exemplary onomatopoeia” , is based upon the amount and character of the physical work done by the speaker in uttering the word . Different work require different muscular effort. Words such as ‘nimble’ and ‘dart’ require less effort than ‘sluggish’ and ‘slothful’. Thus the resemblance between the sound and the concept it refers to is to be found in implications and associated ideas .

### **3-2 Assonance**

A mark of the poetic line . The relationship between words with different consonants immediately preceding and following the last accented vowels , which vowels have identical sounds (hit/will ,disturb/bird , go/know, undoing /construing) (Depriez,1991:72).

Furthermore (Myers and Wukasch,2008:122 ) state that the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds – especially stressed syllables – in a sequence of words close to one another is “assonance” . A. is one of the elements of rhyme : the words (lake and bait) assonate , while (lake and bake rhyme). Thus ,a. is often used as a substitute for end rhyme in Dickson and many later poets , and is also used like alliteration , as a musical device within the line. Assonance used to create ‘Tone Colour’. Consider the following example by Parker Wiest:

*A dragon flies through the night sky*

*Not to be seen by a mortals eye*

*They fly so high not to be seen*

*Whoever can see one has eyes that are keen*

*People try to see them in the great night*

### **3-3 Pun**

The term "pun" is a common literary device that can be defined as "a play on words" (Crystal,2004:408). This definition is to be understood as "using words in an amusing and tricky manner, make a pun".

The pun, also called paronomasia, is a form of word play that suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect( Alexander,1997:5).

These ambiguities can arise from the intentional use of homophonic, homographic, metonymic, or metaphorical language. Henri Bergson defined a pun as a sentence or utterance in which "two different sets of ideas are expressed, and we are confronted with only one series of words".Puns may be regarded as in-jokes or idiomatic constructions (Fontaine,2010:23).

Pun falls into several types . The following are the major ones:

#### **3.3.1 Homophonic or Phonological Pun**

It occurs when words differ in the way they are written, orthographic difference, but pronounced alike (Leach,1969:210-11) :

*I am too sore enpierced with his shaft  
To soar with his light feather , and so bound  
[ Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet ,I .iv]*

Both "sore" and "soar" are pronounced as /so:/ in the above example although there is no etymological relationship between the homophonic words.

#### **3.3.2 Homonymic Pun**

This type is resulted from using distinct words spelt and pronounced alike (Leach , 1969 : 209 – 10 ). An example on this pun is taken to extremes in a piece of dialogue from Shakespeare's " Richard II " :

*Surrey thou liest  
Dishonorable boy*

*That lie shall so heave in my sword,  
That it shall render vengeance and revenge ,*

*Till thou the lie – giver and that lie do lie  
In earth as quiet as they father's skull [IV. i]*

Leech ( ibid) observes that the homonymy of the two words 'lie' ( as in ' lie down ') and 'lie' (as in 'tell lies ') is the cause of pun.

### **3.3.3 Polysemic or Semantic Pun**

This type occurs when one polysemic word (i.e. having various dissimilar senses ) recurs with two dissimilar senses . This type of pun is explicit . As an example the polysemic word 'neck' could have the following dissimilar meanings : part of the body, type of a shirt and part of a bottle ( Leech , 1969:209 – 14) .

### **3.3.4 Parody Pun**

Parody pun is based on the needs expressed in the form of the structure of parody well – known as aphorisms, proverbs or so on ( Chengming , 2004 : 89). This type of pun is an existing social , cultural knowledge – based .

### **3.3.5 Phonetic Pun**

In spoken language phonetic pun results from the phonetic structure of the sentence . It depends upon the acoustic breath group unit of speech , not the individual word, i.e. two units of two breath–groups as units of speech made up of different words become phonetically ambiguous , e.g.

"near" could be confused with " an ear " , and " an aim " could be confused with 'a name', and, as in the example below, 'an arrow' could be heard as " a narrow "(Ulmann , 1967 : 156 ).



### **3.3.6 Morphological Pun**

To Crystal (2004 : 408 ) , Morphological pun results from the manipulation of the elements of word structure, such as affixes , or dividing words in unusual places , e.g. - What do you call a man with a shovel sitting at the bottom of a hole ? Doug . - And What do you call a man with a shovel sitting at the bottom of a smaller hole ?Douglas[Doug-less].

### **4-Results and Conclusions:**

As a phonetic stylistic feature ,the paper shows that the highest rate with a total number of 32 instances out of 40 are “assonance” , whereas “onomatopoeia” records 15 instances out of 40 . “Pun” records 11 instances out of the total number of the limericks. The following table is to show the rate of occurrence of these stylistic features:

Stylistic Feature	Rate of Occurrence	%
Assonance	32	80
Onomatopoeia	15	37.5
Pun	11	27.5

#### Occurrence of stylistic Features

In the following limericks , the underlined are to indicate assonance :

There was a toddler named Charlee  
 Whose dad liked to watch Guthrie and Farley  
 She'd squeal , clap and *giggle*,  
 Walk and crawl with a wiggle,  
 As her grandma rides up on a Harely

By Val Kolle

Here the word “giggle” explains the sound of laugh with a nervous. This is an ‘exemplary’ onomatopoeia.

Edward Lear includes onomatopoeia in his limericks . Consider the following examples:

There was an old lady of France,  
Who taught little ducklings to dance;  
When she said, “*Tick-a-Tack*”!  
They only said “*Quack*”!  
Which grieved that old lady of France

There was an old Man in a tree  
Who was horribly bored by a Bee;  
When they said “Does it *buzz*?”  
He replied, “yes it does”  
It’s a regular brute of a Bee!

In these limericks , Lear exemplifies the sound of the bell by “tick a tack” and the sound of a duck with “quack” ( associative onomatopoeia). Whereas , the sound of a continuous humming sound is represented by the word “buzz”. Onomatopoeia here is ‘direct’.

There was an old man who could *piss*  
Through a ring – and what’s more , nervous miss  
People came by the score  
And bellowed: “Encore”!  
Won’t you do it again , Sir? Bis! Bis!

By Norman Douglas

“Piss” is pronounced as an onomatopoeia that mimics the sound of someone (pissing). “Piss” is an ‘exemplary’ onomatopoeia in this limerick. ‘Bis’ is used here to indicate ‘twice’.

A sailor boy named Happy Jack

At school did his cranium *crack*

To elevate pupils

And having few scruples

He wickedly tried a new track!

By Eleonor Maclean

Here the sound of break or cause to break is exemplified by the word “crack”. This is a ‘direct’ onomatopoeia.

Spike Milligan share his limerick poem to represent the sound of a short loud noise of a woman by “bang”. Here is a ‘direct’ type of onomatopoeia as follows:

A combustible woman from Thang

Exploded one day with a *bang*

The maid then rushed in

And said with a grin

Pardon me , madam – you rang?

It is interesting to find that Graham Lester was fond of onomatopoeia in his collection of limericks :

What a limerick is a *crunch*

Is a bit like a loonly’s light lunch

Though it briefly delights

It’s just four nutty bites

Swallowed down with a ludicrous punch

Here the word “crunch” represents the sound of chewing noises. This is associative onomatopoeia.

An ambitious young fellow named Matt  
 Tried to parachute using his hat  
 Folks below looked so small  
 As he started to fall,  
 Then got bigger and bigger and *splat*!

The word “splat” represents the sound of food. It is an associative type of onomatopoeia.

A native of Chalamazug  
Once fell overboard from a tug.  
 He cried, “Ding-dong boller  
 Doo jango zong zoller,”  
 Which means “*Glug-glug glug glug-glug glug.*”

In this limerick , Graham Lester exemplifies the sound of pouring a liquid by “glug”. This type of onomatopoeia is ‘exemplary’.

A mouse in her room woke Miss Dowd  
She was frightened, it must be allowed,  
 Soon a happy thought hit her  
 To scare off the critter  
 She sat up in bed and *meowed*

Onomatopoeia is shown in the word “meowed” to represent the sound of a cat . “Meowed” shares ‘direct’ onomatopoeia.

In the following , the limericist indicates that the word “toot” represents the sound of a flute . As for two meanings which implied at the same time , to tutor : ‘two tooters to toot’ . There is a play on homophone pair ‘tutor’ – to teach and ‘tooter’ : someone playing a musical instrument. This type of onomatopoeia is ‘direct’.

A tutor who tooted a flute  
Tried to teach two young tooters to toot  
Said the two to the tutor,  
"Is it harder to toot, or . . .  
To tutor two tooters to toot?"

By Carolyn Wells

There was an old man from Crewe  
Who wanted to know how to moo.  
He studied a cow  
To try and learn how  
But all he could do was boo.

By Michael Rosen

In this limerick, “moo” and “boo” are onomatopoeias .The sound of a cow is “ moo” and “boo” expresses the sound of frighten when said abruptly. Both of these two sounds represent ‘direct’ onomatopoeia.

A bespectacled artist called Lear  
First perfected this smile in a *sneer*  
He was clever and witty;  
He gave life to this ditty –  
That original author called Lear

By Erica Jong

The word ‘sneer’ is onomatopoeia and shares the sound of laugh in a manner to show scorn: associative onomatopoeia.

The following limericks in this paper are to explain pun and their identifications :

Dennis’s basketball gang ,

Are all in the way to Pyongyang ,  
To take on some short ,  
Left wing people in sport ,  
The odds are they'll win with a *bang*

By John Maynes

Here “bang” refers to either a sound of action i.e., the sound of loud burst or to the idea ( they win with a bank). The type of pun is phonological.

The bottle of perfume that Willie sent  
Was highly displeasing to Millicent  
Her thanks were so cold  
They quarreled , I am told  
Through that silly scent Willie sent Millicent

Again , John Maynes shares the idea of sending the perfume to each others (Willie ,Silly , Millicent). Though , the word ‘silly’ here may refer to a name of a person who sent to Willie a perfume . Willie sent to Milli and Milli also sent a perfume . The whole idea here provides ambiguity to the actual meaning of the limerick. Pun here is phonetic.

A crossword compiler named Moss  
Who found himself quite a loss  
When asked ‘why so blue’?  
Said ‘ I haven’t a clue  
I am 2 down to put 1 across’

By Lewis Faye Copeland

The play in the word here is represented by the use of the number 2 which refers to ‘too’ down and means ‘upset’ . This type of pun is phonological.

There was a young fellow named Hall  
Who died in the spring in the fall  
Twould have been a bad thing  
Had he died in the spring  
But he didn't – he died in the fall

By Jerry Merchant

The limericist here resembles the word fall into a 'falling down' . The young fellow died either in the Fall season or by falling down . The word also spring refers to either the Spring season or he died in a leap. There is a polysemic type of pun in this limerick.

The youth who frequent picture palaces  
Have no need for psychoanalysis  
And thought Dr. Freud  
Is distinctly annoyed  
They cling to their long –lasting fallacies

By James Dunn

The pun here lies in the idea that the picture of palaces is a matter of fallacies. This pun category is parody.

There was a fair maid who would sigh  
“Ah, love, is a tourture ! she'd cry  
Said her Pa “Tommyrot!”  
Tisn't love that you've got  
Tis a mixture – pork , pudding' and pie”

By Stanton Vaughn

Here the mixture of food (pork , pudding and pie ) refers to the maid's care for food : she does not care for love but she actually cares for food. Pun is parody in this limerick.

A girl who was quite an adept

As to Reginald's elbow she crept

*Whispered* into his ear ,

"This is leap year , my dear;

Don't you think you could leap? – And he "lept"

By Dixon Merritt

Word play here is with 'leap' and 'leap year'. 'Leap' means to jump, while a leap year means a year with 366 days. "Whispered" here refers to a low rustling sound(direct onomatopoeia). Pun here is homonymic.

There was once a poet named Immerick,

Who worked forty days on a "limerick,"

At the end of which time.

He remarked of his rhyme,

"There's a limp in the limb of my limerick."

By John Updike

Funny image in this limerick: while he walks limbing there is also alimp which means a difficulty in the way he walks: unsteadily walking. This is a phonological pun.

In the following , the last line indicates two opposite ideas : it is either that the limericks are falling (as a stream) from his head or the limerick is poor or lacking in a specified quality in his head. Pun here is polysemic.

There once was a young man who said ;

"I have always been bored when I've read,



Poems Byronic,  
So I find it ironic,  
When limericks pour from my head”.

By Richard C. Long

A canner exceedingly canny  
One morning remarked to his granny  
“ A canner can can  
Any thing that he can  
But a canner can't can a can , can he?”

By Carolyn Wells

In this limerick , the writer indicates that the canner can can anything he would like but he can't can the small tins. There is homonymic pun .

Don't talk to me of the busy bee,  
Improving each shining minute,  
With the fly that waits  
For hairless pates  
  
That bee is no way in it

By Henry Moore

Pun here is a mockery that bold heads are crazy i.e., their heads are empty of hair and of thoughts. This limerick is based upon a proverb which states that bees do not stand upon the empty flowers . Pun is parody in this limerick

## **5-Conclusions**

In the light of previous analysis , the following points emerge :

First , English limericists tend to use a special kind of language : there are harmony of sounds which provides pleasing effect to the ear . This flow of sound patterns is also has to do with euphony.

Second, assonance makes limericks catchy and easy . Choosing agreeing vowel sound gives a line of poetry a sort of streamlined sound that can be more accessible to readers with a ‘musical ear’. The depict of sounds were clear in writing English limericks because the sound can convey source-indicating qualities.

Third , writers of limericks enjoy using onomatopoeia that it is so descriptive and helps to imagine what is happening in the story of the limerick. “Direct Onomatopoeia” records the highest rate in this paper.

Finally ,it is realized that the writers sometimes tend to make the last line of a good limerick contains the punchline . This is for purely comedic effect ( wordpaly) . Pun of the types of phonological and parody shares the highest occurrence in these limericks.

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## دراسة اسلوبية للميركيات الانكليزية

بحث قام به :

ا.م نادية خيري محمد سعيد      م.م امانى مهدي العتابي

سعاد ستار صلاح حسين

كلية التربية – ابن رشد – قسم اللغة الانكليزية

### الملخص

الليمركية هي قصيدة ذات خمس أبيات غرضها المرح. وعلى الرغم من إثارتها للمرح فان القصيدة الليمركية تحتوي أيضا على أدوات شعرية يحاول البحث الحالي إثباتها. فضلا عن ذلك تسلط الدراسة الحالية الضوء على بعض الميزات الاسلوبية منها السجع والمسميات المشتقة من أصواتها والتورية في مجموعة من القصائد مأخوذة من مصاد مختلفة. وقد بينت الدراسة أن السجع هو الوسيلة الشعرية الطاغية في الليمركيات مما جعل اغلب الليمركيات متناغمة وسهلة الفهم.