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What to Expect from a Poem? The Primacy of Rhyme in College Students' Conceptions of Poetry

We report results from an exploratory study of college students' conceptions of poetry in which we asked them to name three things they expect from a poem¹. Frequency- and list-based analyses of their responses revealed that they primarily expect poems to rhyme, but they also identified a number of form-, content-, and reception-related genre expectations, which we discuss in relation to relevant previous research. We propose that rhyme's predominance in college students' genre expectations reflects its perceptual and cognitive salience during incremental poetry comprehension rather than its frequency in contemporary poetic practice. Our results characterize the genre conceptions of the population that empirical studies of poetry comprehension typically investigate, and thus provide relevant background information for the interpretation of empirical findings in this field.

Readers usually have more or less clearly defined ideas of formal and thematic properties that certain text types possess. These expectations form a crucial part of how we conceptualize genre, they influence our choice of reading materials, and help us to mentally structure and group the vast field of available texts. In particular, our previous experience with certain text types leads us to develop prototypical expectations (Beaugrande 1978; Blohm et al. 2021) which usually become increasingly varied and complex with mounting expertise (Hanauer 1996: 374; Stumberg 1928). The genre of poetry is a particularly interesting field when it comes to expectations because it contains subgenres, traditions and individual texts that are very dissimilar on a number of levels: many poems are marked by distinct formal requirements such as rhyme scheme, versification, or overall poetic structure, whereas others not only disregard these artistic requirements, but also take extreme liberties with otherwise mandatory linguistic givens, including grammaticality, orthography, word morphology, and in some extreme cases even the modification or rejection of lexical entities (for instance in sound

1 The German term for 'poem', *Gedicht*, refers to written and recited literary poetry as opposed to sung poetry (German *Lied*) or song and rap lyrics, slam poetry and related performance genres, which prefer the more general term 'text' (German *Text*).

poetry). Faced with so diverse a genre, what do people actually expect to find in a poem?

The present study investigates contemporary college students' notions of poetry to determine prevalent prototypical conceptions for the genre. This choice of participants is a key element of our study: Empirical studies of poetry reading typically rely on convenience samples of college students because they are readily available and share, at least, the same level of basic knowledge of the canon due to their secondary school education, but are, on average, no poetry experts (for a study of differences between expert and novice readers, see Hanauer 1996; Peskin 1998); they also may have access to contemporary and less canonical poetic practice at poetry slams, public readings, poetry workshops, and, not least, via audio recordings of poetry performances. Despite the fact that nearly all recent empirical evidence on poetry reading stems from samples of college students (but see e.g., Gao et al. 2019), we have little knowledge of how they tend to conceptualize poetry, and of what they expect from a poem.

Previous studies have shown that readers' prototypical genre expectations co-determine their attentional state prior to reading (Blohm et al. 2021), influence how they read and process texts (Blohm et al. 2017; Hanauer 1998; Zwaan 1991, 1994), modulate their text evaluations after reading (Blohm et al. 2017; Gibbs et al. 1991), and have an impact on what they remember from a text (Hanauer 1998; Zwaan 1994). How well readers' expectations are met in the actual aesthetic experience further influences their motivation to keep reading a text or texts of the same type: both the complete detachment of the actual experience from prior expectations (leading to confusion) and a near-complete match between expectations and the actual experience (leading to boredom) have been linked to decreased interest (Graf & Landwehr 2017; Silvia 2010). Rather than focusing on these cognitive and aesthetic effects, the present study examines the genre expectations themselves, using a simple associative naming task in which participants are prompted to name terms they associate with a conceptual domain.

Associative naming tasks are used in empirical aesthetics to shed light on how recipients conceptualize different aesthetic domains. Associative naming has been used, for instance, to examine the aesthetics of objects in general (Jacobsen et al. 2004), of music (Istók et al. 2009), of buildings, cars, clothing, faces, interior designs, landscapes, geometric shapes and patterns, and visual art (Augustin, Carbon & Wagemans 2012; Augustin, Wagemans & Carbon 2012) as well as of literature and literary genres (Knoop et al. 2016). Poetry featured among the genres studied by Knoop and colleagues (2016: 39); their participants overwhelmingly chose the adjective 'beautiful' to describe poetry. Terms common to both poetry and music (e.g., 'melodious', 'rhythmical') and emotion terms (e.g., 'sad', 'boring') also figured frequently in their data, as did some that were common to poetry and landscapes (e.g., 'harmonious'), while the only recurrent descriptions of poetic form were 'rhyming' and 'short'. The authors interpreted the focus on emotion and aesthetic judgment partly as a task effect, since they had specifically asked for adjectives describing the 'aesthetics of poetry'.

Unlike previous studies, we opted for a more open answer format (Jacobsen et al. 2004; Istók et al. 2009; Knoop et al. 2016, restricted the answers to ‘adjectives’ only, while Augustin et al. 2012, asked for individual ‘words’). We also did not ask for ‘descriptions’ as the prior studies did, nor did we focus on the aesthetics of poetry only. Instead, we prompted our participants to name ‘things’ they expect from a poem. However, unlike the previous studies we did restrict the number of answers to three only, hoping to elicit each participant’s most prototypical expectations.

Methods

We recruited 224 participants from the University of Frankfurt community, either on campus or at the lab of our research institute, to volunteer as participants in our study. Participation usually took less than a minute; participants received no compensation. All participants were native speakers of German according to self-report (start of acquisition no later than age three); no further demographic data were collected. Each participant received a pen and a sheet of paper containing the instruction to ‘please name three things you expect from a poem’² as well as three blank lines, leaving sufficient space to respond in phrases or short sentences.

We entered responses into a spreadsheet and manually corrected typos for automatic text processing using the software *R* (R Core Team 2019) and its text-mining package *tm* (Feinerer et al. 2008). After converting responses to lowercase, we removed function words, numbers, punctuation, and whitespaces. Having converted word forms into word stems using Porter’s stemming algorithm, we inspected and manually corrected resulting word stems; stemming allowed us to count identical concepts across word forms and word classes, e.g., the responses ‘rhyme’, ‘rhyming’ and ‘that it rhymes’ all count as instances of ‘rhyme’.

For each term that was named by more than 5% of respondents (Knoop et al. 2016: 38, 43), we then calculated the Cognitive Salience Index (Sutrop 2001), which quantifies the prototypicality of a concept for a conceptual domain. The Cognitive Salience Index (CSI) corresponds to the relative frequency of a term divided by its mean list rank and is scaled between 0 and 1; the maximal score of 1 indicates that the respective term is what everybody named first (=maximal cognitive salience) whereas the minimal score of 0 reflects that the respective term has not been named at all and thus forms no part of a given concept (=minimal cognitive salience).

2 German instruction: ‘Bitte nennen Sie drei Dinge, die Sie von einem Gedicht erwarten.’

Results and Discussion

Participants mostly provided single-word responses (61%) despite the open response format; multi-word responses were on average 3.2 words ($SD = 1.74$) long. We obtained 336 unique terms, 15 of which were named by more than 5% of all respondents (see Table 1); on average, each term was named by 1.3% ($SD = 2.8\%$) of respondents. Our set of frequent terms showed considerable overlap with those that Knoop et al. (2016: 39) identified as central to the aesthetic evaluation of poetry. Eight of our 15 most frequent concepts can also be found in their top 18 (Knoop et al.'s CSI ranks in parentheses): 'beauty' (1), 'rhythm' (4), 'sound' (6), 'rhyme' (9), 'feeling' (10), 'emotion' (13), 'aesthetics' (16), and 'brevity' (17).

Table 1. Terms named by more than 5% of respondents ($N = 224$). Cognitive Salience Index ($0 \geq CSI \geq 1$), relative term frequency in percent of respondents, and average list rank ($1 \geq rank \geq 3$). Frequently named German words and their word classes: N = noun, V = verb, Adj = adjective.

Term	CSI	Frequency	Rank	German original
<i>rhyme</i>	.22	34.38%	1.56	'Reim' (N), 'reimen' (V)
<i>beauty</i>	.08	16.96%	2.00	'schön' (Adj), 'Schönheit' (N)
<i>language</i>	.07	14.73%	2.09	'Sprache' (N), 'sprachlich' (Adj)
<i>sense/meaning</i>	.06	12.50%	2.14	'Sinn' (N), 'sinnvoll' (Adj), 'Bedeutung' (N)
<i>content</i>	.06	12.50%	1.93	'Inhalt' (N), 'inhaltlich' (Adj)
<i>brevity</i>	.05	11.16%	2.40	'kurz' (Adj), 'Kürze' (N)
<i>emotion</i>	.05	8.48%	1.79	'Emotion' (N), 'emotional' (Adj)
<i>word</i>	.05	8.48%	1.84	'Wort' (N), 'Wortwahl' (N)
<i>rhythm</i>	.04	9.38%	2.19	'Rhythmus' (N), 'rhythmisch' (Adj)
<i>theme</i>	.04	8.48%	2.42	'Thema' (N), 'thematisch' (Adj)
<i>sound</i>	.04	8.48%	1.89	'Klang' (N), 'klingen' (V), 'klangvoll' (Adj)
<i>aesthetics</i>	.04	8.04%	2.00	'Ästhetik' (N), 'ästhetisch' (Adj)
<i>form</i>	.04	8.04%	1.94	'Form' (N), 'formal' (Adj)
<i>depth</i>	.04	7.59%	2.12	'Tiefe' (N), 'tief' (Adj)
<i>image</i>	.03	6.70%	2.00	'Bild' (N), 'bildlich' (Adj)
<i>feeling</i>	.03	6.25%	1.93	'Gefühl' (N)

We further conducted exploratory analyses of frequent word-stem bigrams, i.e., two-word expressions that appeared across responses, such as 'provoke thoughts'. Note that only multi-word responses were included in this analysis, i.e., ~40% of the original responses. Consequently, absolute bigram frequencies are quite low (maximum frequency: 8) and estimates of relative frequency and mean list rank are based on too few observations to yield reliable estimates of cognitive salience, which reflects (a) that our instruction ('three things') biased participants towards single-word responses and (b) that we had recruited an insufficient number of participants to conduct proper bigram analyses. We therefore consider the set of frequent bigrams, presented in Table 2 along with their relative frequency, as a mere supplement to the set of most frequent terms.

Table 2. Most frequent bigrams. Frequency = percentage of respondents who gave multi-word responses (n = 140).

Bigram	Frequency	German original
<i>provoke thoughts</i>	5.7%	'nachdenken anregen'
<i>beautiful sound</i>	5.0%	'schöner Klang'
<i>deeper meaning</i>	4.3%	'tieferer Sinn'
<i>interesting theme</i>	3.6%	'interessantes Thema'
<i>beautiful language</i>	2.9%	'schöne Sprache'
<i>beautiful words</i>	2.9%	'schöne Wörter'
<i>verbal image</i>	2.9%	'sprachliche Bilder'
<i>word choice</i>	2.9%	'Wortwahl'
<i>images [in my] head</i>	2.9%	'Bilder [in meinem] Kopf'

RHYME (CSI = .22)

Rhyme is by far students' primary genre expectation (see Figure 1), named by approximately a third of all respondents. In the vast majority of cases these responses clearly referred to the general expectation that poetry features (systematic) rhyme (e.g., 'rhyme scheme'), but in a few instances, they also expressed the expectation that rhyme is used in poetry with particular ability and originality.

But why is the expectation of (systematic) rhyme so central to college students' conception of poetry? To begin with, we can rule out the simple explanation that 'rhyme' is basically a synonym of 'poetry', which is, to some degree, the case in the English poetic tradition but not in the German one (the only frequent exception being children's poems that are often called *Kinderreime* – but not unless they do indeed rhyme). The predominance of rhyme also does not reflect current poetic practice because the ornamental use of systematic rhyme in German poetry has declined considerably in the past century. But could the salient expectation of rhyme simply reflect its frequency in the poetic canon, some of which college students have been exposed to at school and, possibly, at university? Of course, what readers have been exposed to is what drives genre expectations. For the individual reader, genres are generalizations across one's individual corpus of previously encountered texts. Examining genre conceptions at the population level, e.g., among college students, aims to describe the commonalities of individual readers' generalized genre categories, dissociating idiosyncratic notions from shared ones. What German college students share is a secondary school education during which canonical texts of traditional poetry have been presented to them as prototypical exemplars of their genre, including poems by Goethe, Schiller, Eichendorff, Fontane, and Rilke. But this is, to some degree, also true for more recent but by now canonical poems and poets that have abandoned the strict constraints of rhyme and/or systematic metre, such as Celan, Enzensberger and Fried. However, the more traditional type of regulated verse might be considered more prototypical because of its strong emphasis on sound and form that differs so clearly from literary prose and casual speech. Thus, the apparent focus on canonical poetry is, in fact, an expectable by-product and limitation of random participant sampling in empirical studies that reveal what is common while largely disregarding what is unique. In experimental studies of poetry reading, too,



Figure 1. Most frequently named genre expectations. Font size indicates cognitive salience; $N = 224$.

large-enough participant samples help to dissociate systematic responses from idiosyncratic ones.

So we may take for granted that – at the level of the population, not the individual – college students’ genre expectations emphasize their shared education and thus highlight canonical poetry. Moreover, their idea of ‘canonical’ evolves around the strictly regulated verse of earlier periods, since especially distinctive and frequent text features like metre and rhyme are particularly prototypical. But this fails to capture that rhyme is particularly salient, whereas metre has been named by less than 5% of all respondents. This is particularly surprising insofar as metre is even more frequent than rhyme: metred poetry without rhyme is not uncommon, whereas rhymed poetry without metre is fairly marginal. In line with this descriptive generalization, recent neurophysiological evidence corroborates the idea that systematic rhyme is in fact closely coupled with metre, demonstrating that facilitating effects of rhyme on word processing occur only in rhythmically regular verse contexts (Obermeier et al. 2016). So why is rhyme so much more salient than metre if it does not even work properly without it?

We suggest that rhyme’s conceptual salience reflects its perceptual and cognitive salience during poetry comprehension, as well as the effects of rhyme-based expectations on the cognitive processing (e.g., Chen et al. 2016; Fechino et al. 2020; Hoorn 1996; Menninghaus & Wallot 2021) and on the aesthetic evaluation of poetry (Menninghaus et al. 2017; Obermeier et al. 2013; Wassiliwizky et al. 2017). Its perceptual salience arises from the interaction of (a) the relatively large degree of phonetic similarity between rhyme words (compared to the subtle similarity of prosodic patterns of metre or the phonetic overlap in alliteration or assonance), (b) its periodic recurrence, (c) its occurrence in the concluding positions of verse lines or half-lines (Fechino et al. 2020), and (d) the melodious recurrence of vowels at the end of intonational units, i.e., verse lines, which resembles the return to the tonic in music (Lanz 1926; Menninghaus et al. 2018; Schramm 1935a, 1935b). Rhyme’s exceptional perceptual prominence is substantiated by

phonetic evidence indicating that rhyme is prosodically highlighted during the oral performance of verse (Breen 2018; Fitzroy & Breen 2019). Its cognitive salience during poetry reception appears to derive from the lexical expectations and predictions that systematic end rhyme permits when its phonological constraints (prosodic and phonemic) combine with mounting syntactic and discourse-semantic contextual constraints to restrict the set of possible continuations during the incremental comprehension of verse (Bower & Bolton 1969; Rubin & Wallace 1989). As mentioned above, the rhythmic regularity that metre provides is crucial for the rhyme prediction because it allows to predict *when* the rhyme will occur. The varying combination of these constraints creates a playground of expectations, predictions, tension, resolution and surprise that captures much of the cognitive resources during the incremental comprehension of verbal art. Metre, on the other hand, is perceptually less salient because it only shares the prosodic constraints of rhyme but not its phonemic identity/similarity constraint. Constraints on word prosody alone are too weak to considerably limit the set of matching words in recipients' mental lexicon, and, thus, to sufficiently restrict the set of possible continuations.

BEAUTY (CSI = .08)

The concept of beauty that clearly dominates the aesthetic evaluation of poetry (Knoop et al. 2016: 41), in line with the primacy of beauty in aesthetic judgments more generally (Jacobsen et al. 2004), ranked only second in the present study. It was named both as a general expectation and as an expected quality of the verbal material and its arrangement, e.g., 'beautiful sound', 'beautiful language' or 'beautiful words' (see Table 2).

LANGUAGE (CSI = .07)

At first sight, it may seem redundant to name language as a property of one particular text type. However, the multi-word responses revealed three facets of distinctively poetic language use: 1) 'beautiful language', a notion which seems to refer to the idea that language in poetry is more than just a vehicle of meaning (cf. Jakobson 1960), 2) 'verbal imagery', which seems to highlight that poetry is expected to convey significance beyond plain sense (Gibbs et al. 1991); 3) 'artistic/ poetic/ lyrical/ unusual language', which underscores the notion that the language of poetry may deviate from the norms and conventions of most spoken and written registers (Mukařovský 1964).

CONTENT (CSI = .06)

The concept of content was frequently mentioned as a single-word response, i.e., without modification or explanation, so that it remains somewhat unclear what exactly participants expect from it. However, the multi-word responses revealed a variety of expectable properties of a poem's content, ranging from mere comprehensibility to meaningfulness and even hidden significance. Furthermore, in a few instances, the respondents highlighted the particular relation between content and form in poetry.

SENSE/MEANING (CSI = .06)

We conflated the terms 'sense' and 'meaning' (German 'Sinn' and 'Bedeutung') into a single category, because they are frequently used interchangeably in everyday speech. Our participants' responses mostly seemed to refer to polyvalence (more than one meaning) and, again, significance beyond plain sense (a 'deeper sense/meaning'; cf. Table 2). Notably, adjectives relating to both 'sense/meaning' and 'content' were absent from the most frequent aesthetic terms collected by Knoop and colleagues (2016: 39). This most likely reflects that readers do expect poems to have non-trivial content and meaning, but do not consider this an aesthetic property.

BREVITY (CSI = .05)

Readers expect poems to be relatively short; in how far artful conciseness is also included in the notion of brevity remains unclear. This term also features among the most frequent aesthetic terms for poetry and short stories (Knoop et al. 2016: 39), indicating that the mere length is a basic text property that fairly reliably distinguishes some literary genres.

WORD (CSI = .05)

Participants expressed their expectations that words in poetry have aesthetic qualities (e.g., 'beautiful words'; cf. Jacobs 2017), that words are carefully selected during verse composition ('word choice'; cf. Table 2), and that individual words may be archaic or newly coined.

RHYTHM (CSI = .04)

We treated 'rhythm' and 'metre' as distinct terms, as we did not want to impose the assumption that our participants did not distinguish the two concepts; palpable 'rhythm' was a cognitively more salient expectation than the more abstract concept of 'metre' (CSI = .02). However, several respondents mentioned 'rhythmics', i.e., the theory of rhythm, rather than 'rhythm', which seems to allude to the systematicity of rhythmic patterns that is characteristic of metred verse. A few responses explicitly stated the relation between rhythm and reading fluency (German: *Lesefluss*) that has been revealed in empirical studies of poetry reading (Menninghaus et al. 2014; Menninghaus & Wallot 2021); note that rhythmic regularity is also a prerequisite for facilitative processing effects of rhyme (Obermeier et al. 2016). The frequent anticipation of rhyme and/or rhythm, which coincides with the findings by Knoop et al. (2016: 38, 42, 44), reveals that our participants tend to expect a type of poem for which German Romantic lyric may be seen as the prototype; incidentally, that prototype features prominently in German secondary school curricula.

SOUND (CSI = .04)

The concept of sound was frequently linked to the concept of beauty ('beautiful sound'; see Table 2), as well as to the melodious qualities of poetry ('melodious sound', 'euphony'; for similar findings see Knoop et al. 2016: 38), but also to clear-cut quality judgments ('good sound'). This is interesting insofar as Knoop et al. (2016: 42) did not find any statistically relevant

judgments of ‘good’ (or ‘bad’) throughout their data. This may be due to the fact that, again, our question regarding expectations was less limiting than the task to ‘describe the aesthetics of poetry’ and therefore allowed participants to include these answers which contain a clearer judgment, but no specifics as to what makes something a ‘good’ poem (or, in this case, a ‘good sound’).

THEME ($CSI = .04$)

The concept of theme was sometimes mentioned without further explanation, and therefore, like ‘content’ remained enigmatic to an extent. However, answers with multiple words suggest that our participants mainly expect poems to feature ‘interesting themes’ (cf. Table 2) that appeal to them personally – an expectation deemed central to aesthetics since Diderot and Friedrich Schlegel. Hence, while the double meaning of ‘expectation’ as both normative (what should a poem be like) and descriptive (what will a poem be like) cannot be teased apart for many of the responses, the concept of theme appears to refer near exclusively to desirable appeal dimensions of the poem, i.e., the normative meaning of ‘expectation’. Knoop et al. (2016: 41) found very low scores for ‘interesting’ in their poetry data, while it featured prominently for the narrative and theatrical genres. Apparently, poetry is normatively expected to be interesting, but, evidently, people oftentimes find that it is not. Of course, this may have to do with the apparent focus of participants on prototypical rhymed and metred poetry of a certain length, which regularly goes along with a limited number of conventional themes.

AESTHETICS ($CSI = .04$)

Where participants qualified their expectation that poems be ‘aesthetic’, they referred primarily to aspects of linguistic and poetic form (‘aesthetic form/language/syntax/wording’), coinciding with the finding by Knoop et al. (2016: 42) that student participants do not usually subsume semantic aspects of poetry under the term ‘aesthetics’. This understanding of aesthetics as merely form-based, while not necessarily in line with aesthetic theory, certainly conforms with everyday uses of the term in contemporary German.

FORM ($CSI = .04$)

The expectation of form appears to encompass both linguistic and poetic form. In particular, participants referred to the layout and structure of poetry, including poetic syntax, rhyme schemata, and the organization of verse into stanzas. Somewhat surprisingly, the verse line (German: *Vers*) – arguably the defining formal characteristic of poetry (Fabb 2015) – was mentioned by less than 5% of all respondents ($CSI = .02$).

IMAGE ($CSI = .03$)

The expectation of verbal imagery was cognitively more salient than the expectation of poetic metaphor ($CSI = .02$), which was named by less than 5% of all respondents. Participants indicated that they expect poetry to ‘evoke images’ and specifically referred to ‘images [in my] head’ (see Table 2). This expectation is consistent with the observation that the vividness of imagery

is a strong contributor to aesthetic pleasure during verse comprehension (Belfi et al. 2018).

DEPTH (CSI = .04)

Participants frequently linked the concept of depth to sense/meaning ('deeper meaning'; see Table 2), in line with empirical results indicating that recipients invest additional interpretive effort for poetry (Gibbs et al. 1991; Peskin 1998, 2007), particularly if statements appear semantically incongruent (Blohm et al. 2017). This finding is also consistent with participants' aforementioned tendency to expect several layers of meaning as well as hidden significance in poetry.

EMOTION (CSI = .05) AND FEELING (CSI = .03)

Similar to the mention of emotion terms in Knoop et al. (2016: 38), 'emotion' appears to have been named with respect to frequent prototypical poetic themes and subject matters. More specifically, participants expected poetry to 'provoke emotion' and to 'express/convey/arouse feelings'.

Conclusion and Outlook

We employed an associative-naming task to explore college students' conceptions of poetry, asking participants to write down three things they expect from a poem. For the most frequently expressed concepts that were named by at least one in twenty students, we calculated a Cognitive Salience Index which takes into account how often and in which rank of their three-item lists respondents had named the respective terms. We restricted neither the word class nor the length of participants' responses, which required very basic digital text processing before responses could be analysed. We reasoned that multi-word responses are potentially more informative than single words when it comes to recipients' expectations regarding their cognitive and affective responses to poetry. An exploratory bigram analysis partly confirmed this assumption, revealing collocations that would have gone unnoticed in single-term analyses, such as the expectation that poems 'provoke thoughts'. Moreover, multiword-responses revealed facets of meaning that clarified abstract concepts and ambiguous terms named in single-word responses. We conclude that associative naming provides a simple method to explore genre conceptions and expectations of actual readers, allowing, for instance, to contrast different literary genres and to compare populations of recipients (e.g., novices vs. experts); more open response formats may reveal conceptual components that potentially remain obscure in strictly constrained responses.

Contrary to prior findings, our results revealed that rhyme is, by far, college students' primary genre expectation. Further formal expectations included brevity and rhythm, whereas content-related expectations included interesting themes, semantic polyvalence and verbal imagery. College students further suppose that poetry affects them, expecting that a poem

arouses emotions and feelings, evokes vivid images in their heads, and provokes their thoughts.

We proposed that the predominance of rhyme partly reflects college students' shared reading experience, including compulsory canonical texts read during secondary school education. We further argued that the primacy of rhyme cannot hinge on its frequency in canonical poetry alone, but seems to additionally reflect its perceptual prominence as well as the cognitively salient lexical predictions it permits during the incremental comprehension of poetry.

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