

# The Use of Language in Haiku

by Jim Kacian

Haiku is not about language, but experience. The nature of this experience may be such that it defies language, that it informs us wordlessly, or at least before we try to fit words to it. It has a language of its own, an emotive and sensuous language, and there is no very good correspondence between it and the spoken and written languages of the world. It might be said that the very best haiku, then, are wordless, that they don't require words to achieve their goals. This is true of the private experience of a moment of revelation, but it is not true of the shared experience of haiku. All haiku is, in this sense, translation.

Poetry, on the other hand, is about language, and poetry is the ultimate standard for haiku. So it is a measure of how we succeed with language that will determine how well we are seen to be successful with haiku. Does this matter? Chances are good that you would not be reading an article on how to write haiku if the private experience was sufficient to you. And this is not a bad thing - it is human to wish to share one's experiences with others. Haiku is one way to share some of our deepest moments, perhaps even our wordless moments, in the most immediate fashion possible.

The way this is achieved is to be as direct as possible in our treatment of the images and syntax of the words we use to convey our moment. In other words, it is the language which creates content. It is easy to forget that the moment is not the words, but that the words are only pointing to something beyond themselves. Getting the words right is essential to helping others get the experience right.

## **The Poetry of the Real**

Haiku is the poetry of the real. That is, it is the poetry which seeks to convey as clearly as possible the actual events of an experience so that the reader may come to find the same experience in himself, and therefore share the insight which the experience prompted. Anything which diverts the reader from that moment works against the purpose of the poem. So it follows that the language in haiku should be chosen with an eye toward making the expression of the experience, the haiku moment, as clear as it possibly can be.

As a result, haiku employs a diction which is often very different from other Western forms of poetry. In fact, it is not far wrong to suggest that haiku is poetry written without what many people consider to be poetic language. However, there is a tradition of poetry in the West, beginning with the Imagists and carrying through William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost to the present with Ted Kooser and Alice Notley and many others, which advocates similar qualities of diction.

Pound said it this way: "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" and ". . . use absolutely no word that [does] not contribute to the presentation" and "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". It is no surprise that Imagism, of which Pound was founder and theorist, is the poetry most like haiku in our tradition.

All language carries its packet of energy, and all writers seek to encapsulate as much of this energy as possible into their work. It is the ability of certain combinations of words to maintain their energy over time that gives a poem durability. Take, as an example, the following collection of words: about, fire, her, she, stirs, stirs, that, the, when.

As a list, nothing special. But arrange it so: “. . . the fire that stirs about her, when she stirs . . .” It has lost nothing in the hundred years since its author discovered it. It holds weight beyond the assemblage of its constituent words. The words come together in a specific pattern which holds the energy in. We may liken it to a knot. If the knot is untied-that is, if we take the words out of their order, as in the list above-the energy drains away.

There are thousands of such knots into which we pour our truths, our lies, our culture, and which we recognise as retaining some portion of the original energy which forged them. “Let us go then, you and I”- how seductive beyond its simplicity of phrasing; but then, its author tells us, “genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood”.

- so much depends/upon//a red wheel/barrow//glazed with rain/water//beside the white/chickens.
- Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.
- Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
- The pure products of America go crazy.
- the hills/release the summer clouds/one by one by one.

Effects perhaps “too subtle for the intellect”, but powerful to the intuition. What these phrases have in common is worth noting: simple language suggestive of much more complex interior states of being. Phanopoeia - Pound again - meaning the throwing of the image on to the visual imagination. Certainly these phrases cannot be divorced from their context for their full significance, but even apart they convey some of the weight of the larger works in which they appear: the question of being, the valuing of life and death, the purposeful passage between.

Haiku strive for similar knottings of language. They do not seek to poeticise, which is to enhance or alter an object or event. Instead, they seek this same

phanopeoia. A rose is a rose is a rose in haiku – it may also be a symbol of love, or beauty, or decay, or the royal houses of England, but first and foremost it must be a rose, with all that a real rose brings with it-thorn and petal, scent and colour, earth and rain and sun.

deeper and deeper  
into the evening  
the damask rose

Here we have nouns – a rose, a [summer] evening – and an action – deepening [as in the fading of light]. Haiku is a poetry of nouns-things-and not just things, but the essence of things, and the unexpected but imminent consequences of those essences.

## **Brevity**

A haiku is the essential sketch of a single moment. But more than this, it practically is a moment. This is not to underestimate its significance: a life may be changed in a moment. But it is fitting that the form of haiku imitate its duration: it is what it does, and does what it is.

And so the intent is not to be exhaustive, but to offer sufficient information that the reader might imagine the moment for himself, and in so doing, share the insight of the poet. A haiku, then, is a joint creation between the poet who offers the situation in sufficiency, and the reader who imaginatively recreates the moment. This is an important aspect of all poetry, but never more important than in haiku.

As a result, the haiku poet is compelled to use his few words as a good artist sketches with a minimum of strokes. What results is a clarity of expression, and a compression of language-only the words needed to convey the moment, nothing more:

**not**

**dark**

**yet**

**firefly**

– John S. O’Connor

Another way in which compression is achieved is through the avoidance of self-reference in haiku. This may be reflective of the scarcity of use of the first person pronoun in the Japanese language, but even in English it makes good sense, not only in tightening the poem, but also broadening its meaning and impact. This is not simply a philosophical point: consider the following example.

Icy April night

I see my ah-breath rising

toward the comet

With a little revision, this becomes:

**Icy April night**

**my ah-breath rising**

**toward the comet**

– Phyllis Walsh

The poem opens up when the personal reference is removed, and the reader as a result may enter more directly into the experience himself. There are times when self-reference is important to a haiku, as when the poet uses his presence in an objective way to humanise a moment. But in most cases where such reference is reflex, this extra element which the reader must consider is best discarded.

Yet another way in which compression of language has been achieved has been through the use of keywords, notably season words. Keywords function as a kind of shorthand, giving us important cues about the environment in which the haiku moment took place, and invoking directly our sensory response to them. We can hardly read a haiku such as

**edge of the marsh –**

**the wind from rising geese**

**in our hair**

– Ebba Story

without involving ourselves directly: the smell of the marsh, the taste of it upon the wind, the sounds within it, and so on. We need not write all this directly into the poem, since it is all implicit. It's a common experience for most of us, and it is the keyword which unlocks this shared experience and permits the reader to find his personal response to it, shared with the poet.

Brevity is also achieved as a matter of style. Writing with concision, but also with an eye and ear toward the rhythm and music of the phrase, contributes to a smoothness which permits a poem to flow more readily and occupy less time. Brevity is not always achieved simply by reduction, but sometimes by the quality of the elements included. See how this 5 – 7 – 5 haiku reads more quickly and lightly than many much shorter poems:

**September morning –**

**Water going through water**

**As the bucket fills.**

– Peter Meister

Finally, haiku are kept brief syntactically – that is, by eliminating words and

usage that might otherwise turn them into complete sentences. What constitutes completeness in a grammatical structure is not the same as what constitutes completeness of comprehension. In many cases we may remove most articles, some or all punctuation, the occasional preposition of a poem without destroying its meaning. We would also seek to rid the poem of all “padding” – repeated words or phrases, or words which add nothing to the recollecting of the moment by the reader – so that all that remains is what is required to convey the truth of the moment.

looking to the vanishing point  
we hear the lark’s song  
even beyond it

This becomes, with a little excision:

**vanishing point**

**the lark song**

**beyond it**

– Ernest J. Berry

Be careful, though, not to chop away so much that your language becomes stilted, especially by removing articles and adjectives that are essential to a naturalness of phrasing and a clarity of image. To do so usually results in “Tarzan English”, which is distracting and will mar the effect of your poem. What we seek is the same as the sculptor seeks: to carve a tiger from stone, remove all the parts of stone that are not tiger. The very best haiku are so contrived that to subtract anything more would be to begin to lose meaning. Paradoxically, anything more added would have the same effect.

**the river**

**the river makes**

## **of the moon**

– Jim Kacian

## **Word Choice**

When we seek the essence of things, and let these things speak for themselves, we discover the power inherent in the naming process. English is particularly rich in specific nouns, and this gives us great potential for our haiku. Each bird differs from every other bird, each tree varies from all other trees, and each carries within it its own habits, context, understandings. To name is to conjure whole.

Consider for a moment how indistinct we can be using apparently clear English. We just wrote “Each bird differs from every other bird . . .”. Consider the many ways in which it is possible to respond: did you broadly conceptualise some general form of bird? Then a poem where “bird” occurs will have available to it only the most general sorts of information such as is true for all birds, or at least of the type that you envisioned. Some, for example, don’t fly, and some swim, but you might not have included these attributes in your generalised bird. How much more clearly you can recreate the moment of the poem if instead of “bird” I write “sparrow”. And how much clearer yet if I write “sitting sparrow”. This descriptive addition may tell me other pertinent facts concerning, say, the time of year (and so we can consider this a keyphrase). In fact, this last is a terrific first or last line for a haiku (provided it corresponds somehow with your moment): it suggests a clear image, as well as a context. How different this is from, simply, “bird”.

**Bitter morning:**

**sparrows sitting**

**without necks.**



– James W. Hackett

Of course, while this specificity is a powerful tool, it can also be a misleading one. It is not always in the best interest of the poem, or its poetic truth, that such a specified image be employed, and when it is beside the point, it can actually clutter up the mind with details that are not important to realising the moment. It is critical that the poet know what it is he is trying to achieve, and use the appropriate tool.

**after he goes**

**the birds go**

**nameless**

– Raymond Roseliep

Here the specific term would delay the reader with information not needed to share the moment, whereas the more general “bird” allows the reader to move on with ease. What is given up is a precision wholly outside the needs of the moment, or the moment recollecting it, and what is gained is the immediacy needed for the moment to be shared.

Besides words that are technically specific, such as species names, it is important to use words that are appropriate to the action or meaning of a haiku, especially when such action is critical to the precise way in which a moment comes about.

**through broken slats**

**of the garden fence**

**striped cushaws**

– John Wills

Here, cushaw is exactly right – to try to get by with a synonym would

diminish the power of the poem. Consider the poem with “melon” or “squash” instead of the word selected. Notice the difference in power, tone and impact selecting the precise word has made.

Sometimes choosing precisely will mean that you must opt for a word that is less common. This might mean that some readers will not grasp the poem immediately since they don't have the requisite vocabulary. There is a temptation at times to settle for a simpler but less evocative or exact word. This is, however, a mistake: your moment deserves its integrity, and should get exact treatment. If your work is sufficiently interesting, the reader will look up the unfamiliar word. However, once the poem is exposed in a less precise fashion, its integrity has been compromised, and one cannot expect the reader to come to it as clearly as if he had been offered its best version. A good rule of thumb, then, is to treat the poem, and your reader, with the greatest respect, by choosing exactly the words you need to convey the moment in its best form.

This is not license, of course, to be intentionally obscure. Anything so delicate as a moment of revelation will not suffer repeated disengagements from the poem to allow the reader to rifle through a dictionary in order to discover the meaning of a word. Worse still is when the word which interrupts the flow of the moment, yet once comprehended does not add in some significant way to the way the poem works, and might easily have been replaced by a more familiar and equally effective one. Precision is one thing, opacity quite another.

## **Punctuation and Grammar**

Haiku are not sentences, and since they are not, they need not embody the trappings of sentences. Specifically, there is no need to capitalise the first letter of the poem, nor to append a full-stop at the end. These formal

elements in a haiku serve to isolate a haiku moment from the flow of the rest of its context, as though we had put brackets around the experience. It makes us think that the moment functioned as the sentence does: with a beginning, a movement through, and a final stop, with some sort of logical grammar holding the whole of it together. But haiku are not logical, nor do they exist over time, but rather in a moment, or outside of it. Logical sentence structure is at odds with the reality of how the moment actually and psychologically functions.

Poems shaped as sentences are usually simple to rectify.

a wren follows  
the sunshine into  
the morning meadow

easily becomes

**morning meadow –**

**a wren follows**

**the sunshine in**

– Jeff Witkin

More integral to the way in which a haiku functions are the stops within the poem, known generally as caesura. Classical Japanese haiku poets have employed a kind of verbalised punctuation called kireji, which indicates a variety of stops and related moods. English lacks an exact analogue, but has instead a flexible and subtle system of punctuation which is capable of producing the range of caesura needed in haiku.

The most basic and important of these stops is the line break. Line breaks often account for the entirety of the stops and pauses required in a given haiku. We generally read any particular line of poetry straight through

(minding the punctuation within it, of course), but then observe a pause before proceeding to the next line, usually of the duration slightly longer than a comma. This brief pause usually is arranged around the natural grouping of phrases and figures in English. As a result we generally do not break lines after prepositions or articles. This leaves the reader unsure of what it is that ought to be carried over. Also, if the end of the line is obviously part of a phrase, there is a greater inclination in the reader to proceed directly on to the next line. Again, clarity is the goal of haiku, and our pauses ought to be used to help the reader achieve the clearest picture possible.

**late autumn –**

**the butterfly lands**

**on what's left**

– Alexius Burgess

The various punctuation marks carry the same function in haiku as they do in general usage. The most commonly used marks are the dash, the ellipsis, the comma, the colon, and the semi-colon. Each functions a bit differently from the others, and these subtle differences provide a great range of possibilities in nuance and mood.

A dash indicates a full stop, and implies the introduction of unexpected material. This seems to suit the function of haiku perfectly, since haiku relies upon this unexpected turn for its effect. This is perhaps why it has become the most used of the punctuation marks.

**daylight fading –**

**a curlew's cry**

**lengthens the hill**

– Caroline Gourlay

Occasionally a dash will be used to precede a line rather than follow one. This makes the reader stop, and then stop again. This is very effective when this is desirable, but should be avoided except when that is exactly what you wish the reader to do. Since the reader's intention is to read further when proceeding to the next line, being stopped a second time can be exasperating unless handled very well, and to a point.

### **Dark porch**

– **sound of someone**

### **snapping beans**

– Matthew Louviere

The ellipsis indicates a stop, and also suggests the passage of time. Hence, haiku of reminiscence often employ this mark. Also, ellipses are used to indicate the omission of a word or words which might be essential to grammatical completeness, but are unnecessary to the completeness of its sense.

### **The old man**

**Comes too soon to gaze at**

### **Plum blossoms . . .**

– David Lloyd

A colon is another complete stop, but its particular effect is to cause the phrase which follows it to be taken as an equivalent of the phrase which preceded it: a kind of grammatical equal sign. This can suggest metaphor, and since metaphor is generally eschewed in haiku, the colon is not so often used as the preceding marks.

### **warm rain before dawn:**

**my milk flows into her**

**unseen**

– Ruth Yarrow

The semi-colon suggests an equal weight to the phrases on either side of it, but does not imply equality as the colon does. It is most often employed to divide equal but different quantities in a long sentence. In haiku it is used more for its sense of duration: longer than a comma, but not so final as a period.

**Dusk over the lake;**

**a turtle's head emerges**

**then silently sinks**

– Virgil Hutton

The comma is used to create pauses within lines, and to direct emphasis.

**Deepening the red**

**of late December roses**

**snowflakes, as they melt**

– William Scott Galasso

It is only occasionally used to end a line, since a line break would carry its own pause.

**In deep wilderness,**

**a solitary signpost –**

**the words worn away**

– Hina

Very occasionally we encounter haiku which ask questions, and of course in

that case a question mark is definitely called for:

**a cloud of blossoms –**

**that bell: is it Ueno?**

**is it Asakusa?**

– Basho

And at one time it was the fashion to write or translate haiku with a great many exclamation marks, though they are generally eschewed today. There are appropriate times to use such punctuation, as below, but in general such usage indicates, at the least, a lack of subtlety. Since most haiku contain something of a surprise element, it is overkill to draw attention to it in such a broad fashion: if the writing doesn't do this on its own, no amount of exclamation on the part of the poet will make up for it.

**an empty coke bottle**

**left on a half-painted fence –**

**the heat!**

– Sharon Lee Shafii

## **Rhyme**

Rhyme is a powerful poetic device in English. It derives its power in part from the fact that English has relatively few rhymes compared with, for example, Italian. There is as a result a relative scarcity of synchronous sounds, and when these occur they tend to be all the more memorable for it. The other side of this, of course, is that since there are fewer rhymes available in general, the usual patterns of rhyme have been exhaustively mined and much of the original energy to be gained by such a device has been dissipated.

Nevertheless, rhyme remains such a compelling device that its presence in this fragile form is often overpowering. End rhyme in particular tends to overshadow the other elements in a haiku, since there are relatively few other words besides those which rhyme, and therefore an insufficient variety of sound. Also, the finality of end rhyme in haiku works against seeing it within the context of the flow of time, just as the period does. As a result, end rhyme has not been a featured element since very early in the history of English-language haiku.

Internal and off-rhyme is a bit easier to accommodate, it being less powerful and final, and a good rule of thumb is to allow rhyme or off-rhyme to stand in a poem if it comes to the poem unbidden, and does not overpower the other elements in the poem.

**heat lightning**

**the night**

**jumps silently**

– David Gershator

## **Musicality**

Music is a significant attribute of all poetry, specifically the elements of rhythm, timbre and melody of composition. The language of poetry is essentially different from the language of music, so there is not an exactness of relationship. Every language prizes different musical elements. This makes the music of poetry infinitely varied and interesting, and a challenge to each poet to find the music that best suits his work.

The most basic musical consideration, and also the one most intrinsically bound up with poetry, is rhythm. In English, which is a stressed language, the syllable is the basic unit. A syllable may be stressed or unstressed, but it is



rare to consider a single syllable by itself. More usually we group syllables into metric feet (for example, iambs or anapests) which in turn are gathered into the poetic line. As we have discussed, haiku generally uses three poetic lines, although this varies between one and four in some cases. And within each of the lines of a haiku there is a rhythm determined by the kinds of stresses present within the metric feet.

When creating a long poem designed to impart information, as was the practice in, say, the Augustan age, a uniformity of line and regularity of rhythm was greatly desired. However, in such a brief poem as a haiku, what matters much more is that the rhythm be suggestive of the experience, that it contain the energy of the moment and attract the reader to it. In the haiku it is unusual to have fewer than one or more than three stresses per line, and therefore the range of stresses would be somewhere between three and nine in any given poem. The average would be six or seven, divided more or less evenly into the three lines available, two or three stresses per line.

**Just audible,  
that trickling of moonlight  
crossing the meadow**

– Foster Jewell

Notice how the stresses occupy the centre of attention in each line, and how the unstressed syllables serve to bridge the time between these stressed moments, creating a rhythm specific to the poem. A sensitivity to this rhythm permits the poet to shape the poem with movement and pauses which are part of the intuitive experience of the poem.

Timbre is the tonal quality of sound: some syllables are sussurant, some percussive, some nasal. The combination of sound qualities across the duration of the haiku account for its timbre.

If we were to write a poem about the fluid motion of a river, then we would probably choose sounds which slide easily across each other; if, on the other hand, we want to emphasise the constriction of that flow by the rocks jutting out of its surface, we might choose hard and arresting sounds. Or we might opt for sibilant sounds to capture the rush of the turbulence. In each case, we are choosing words not just for meaning, but for tonal quality.

### **onrushing rapids**

#### **the sound**

#### **never passes**

– Herb Barrett

We may also consider the differences in all the various sounds within a language as contributing to its timbre. Sometimes we choose words which “sound better” because of assonance or alliteration, but sometimes it is for the quality inherent in the arrangement of sounds within them.

### **in afternoon heat –**

#### **a blur of bee wings**

#### **stirs the columbine**

– Richard Crist

Melody is the movement of language in two directions: horizontally through time (rhythm) and vertically across inflection (timbre). This combination of musical elements accounts for the sound of a poem, for which one trains one’s ear. Compare the very different melodies of these poems, and how the precise wording of each captures the music of the moment as well as the sense:

**thunder**

**woodshavings roll**

**along the veranda**

– Dee Evetts

**longest night:**

**in a glass paperweight**

**snow slowly settles**

– Anna Holley

**In my ordinary clothes**

**thinking ordinary thoughts –**

**peach blossoms**

– Ayaki Hosomi

When we are writing, we are attentive to the content of the moment and try to incorporate this into the poem. But often we are attempting to give voice to the wordless, and it is only through mastery of the musical elements of a poem that we can approximate the effect of the experience upon us. Ezra Pound, once again: “. . . compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome”. This advice has never been bettered.

In addition, the control of music in a poem identifies a poet’s voice as no other single aspect of haiku.

**Down to dark leaf-mold**

**the falling dogwood-petal**

**carries its moonlight**

– O. Mabson Southard

It is usually the music of the treatment that we mean when we say we recognise a poet's style. We may all have had the same experience, and may all have attempted to find the right words to express it. And in many common experiences, such poems can be remarkably similar. But when handled in a musically distinctive fashion, this moment becomes unmistakably Southard's poem.

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