



The Phonopragmatics of Resistance: A Study of Ahmed Matar's Selected Poems

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فونوبراجماتية المقاومة دراسة في قصائد أحمد مطر المختارة

Abstract

In this study, Ahmed Matar's poems are studied phonopragmatically to unveil the way pragmatic functions interwoven with sound structure. In his political poetry, the different themes such as resistance, irony and satire recur in many poems, and they are achieved through auditory and pragmatic imagery. Matar is known for his critique for authority, but less attention is paid to his sound choices and their pragmatic effect. Using phono-pragmatic lens, Matar shows that sounds are not aesthetically only, but they are used for resistance. Findings show that phonological and pragmatic integration serve as an interpretive tool for analysing political Arabic poetry. Phonological and pragmatic elements act as portrayals of oppression to represent the poet as a witness and a challenger to authority.

1. Introduction

Since the appearance of literature, its concern is human beings' issues. Literature is a mirror for depicting different human affairs; political, social, historical, etc. Many genres and styles had appeared since its emergence by the appearance of humanity. Literary schools with their styles and the major elements that each literary school is advocated of had influenced literature. Many writers and poets have written novels, stories, songs and poems in a humorous way to portray the pity of humans in the modern age.

Ahmed Matar is an Iraqi poet born in Basra who wrote poems criticizing the ruler and authority. Then, he was exiled to Kuwait and there he worked as a teacher. As a result of writing poems lampooning the Arab rulers, he has been exiled again to London in 1986 (Matar, 2016:1). Matar presents a language to show the worst reality that the Arabs live in. It is a humorous and bad reality that the Arabs live. He shows a world which can be seen not only with envy but with black humour. He writes many poems in Arabic and they have been translated into English like: "Our Leader's Esteemed Dog", "Emir of the informants", "Abba's story" and "To Whom Should We Complain?". The newly emerging



field, phono-pragmatics, has attracted different scholars as it deals with phonology from a pragmatic perspective. This study focuses primarily on phonopragmatically analysing Mattar's poems.

Language does not carry meanings only but also serves aesthetic and moral purposes. Messages are loaded with feelings, sounds and resilience in Arabic poetry. This study presents phonopragmatics—an assembly of phonology, pragmatics—as a theoretical structure for analysing Matar's poetry. The different questions to be answered in this study are; how do sound patterns serve pragmatic functions? In what ways does prosody contribute to the delivery of messages? How do phonopragmasytic elements enhance the persuasiveness of poetry? The auditory and pragmatic instruments serve as a form of resistance together with the other elements. Sound structures affect pragmatic functions to deliver the appropriate message.

2. Literature Review

Studies on Mattar's poetry has paid attention towards the pragmatic aspect of his poetry and the stylistic one. Yet, the phonological aspect is somehow has not been tackled enough. Previous studies in prosodic pragmatics (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986; Gussenhoven, 2004), stylistics by (Crystal, 1969; Leech, 2014) and pragmatic frameworks such as Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969), Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) all combined for understanding how irony implicature, and other aspects contextually work. The integration of phonology, pragmatics and stylistics leads to the centring phonopragmatics within.

2.1 Phonology

Phonology is a subfield of linguistics which studies the sound system of a language. Such a field can be defined by contrasting it with other fields such as syntax, morphology and historical linguistics (Odden, 2005). While prosody is related to emotional meaning and studies meaning beyond the traditional one (Tseng, 2006; Liebenthal, Silbersweig, & Stern, 2016; Sauter, Eisner, Calder, & Scott, 2010). Moreover, intonation is a primary suprasegmental feature delivers different strategies in communication as it represents implicit meanings. It portrays the way people rise and lower their pitch to create melodies and employed in conversations (Mahmoud & Al-Thalab, 2025).

The ToBI system- which is used in this study- is an annotation scheme for prosody categorizing used for labelling phonological tones and breaks. It is widely adopted for studying prosodic syntax (Veilleux, 1994; Price et al., 1991), semantics (Hirschberg, 2004), information structure (Grice & Savino, 1997),



dialog structure (Hirschberg, Litman, & Swerts, 2002), and segmental acoustics (Cole, Choi, Kim, & Hasegawa-Johnson, 2003).

2.2 Pragmatics

Language within context is what matters concerning pragmatics such as speech acts (Searle, 1969 and Austin, 1962), cooperative principles (Grice, 1975), and implicature. Searle (1979), speech acts are of five types; representatives, which state facts; directives, include appeals and commands; expressives, include apologies and thanks; commissives, include promises and threats; and Declarations which is related to institutional acts like marriage. In literature, pragmatic aspects define the way utterances create humour, defiance and resistance. Pragmatics, as defined by Levinson (2017), deals with how people interact using language in society, particularly how they perform specific purposes in communication. Grice (1975) proposed the Cooperative Principle that is about a successful communication follows four maxims: maxim of quantity delivers the right amount of information, maxim of quality to be honest and avoid untruths, maxim of relation – to be proper with the conversation, maxim of manner – be clear and evade vagueness.

2.3 Toward Phonopragmatics

Phonopragmatics combines two dimensions 'phonology and pragmatics into a two-dimensional framework. This amalgamation drives us to study how sounds function as both stylistic enhancement and pragmatic approach, predominantly in literary works:

- Phonological dimension: deals with sound devices (rhythm, alliteration, etc).
- Pragmatic dimension: deals with functions and how they operate on the level of context (irony, persuasion, defiance).

3. Methodology

Data are chosen depending on four selected poems by Ahmed Matar that demonstrate his political opinions and irony. The analytical framework in this study is the following:

1. Phonological dimension: is the sound devices used such as stress, meter, consonance and alliteration. Frameworks such as (Pierrehumbert, 1980) Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Theory with ToBI and PRAAT are used to show the phonological aspect.
2. Pragmatic dimension: how such sounds serve the communicative purpose (irony, satire, etc). Pragmatic frameworks such as Speech Act Theory



(Searle, 1969) and Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) are used in the pragmatic aspect.

To analyse poems, prosodic analysis using AM, ToBI, PRAAT, and pragmatic categorization used in the poems are all gathered for such an analysis.

The following poems are analysed: The following poems () are recited by the poet himself (Ahmed Mattar) and centered around political themes. The analysis scheme is as follows:

1. Data were chosen depending on their political theme, and downloaded from www.youtube.com.
2. The videos then converted to WAV format and clipped to meet the criteria of PRAAT.
3. They were played and analysed, then analysed using Autosegmental-Metrical theory.
4. The chosen parts were analysed and categorized using speech act theory.
5. The Cooperative Principle was applied to data show the maxims.
6. Finally, the results were discussed.

Poem No.1

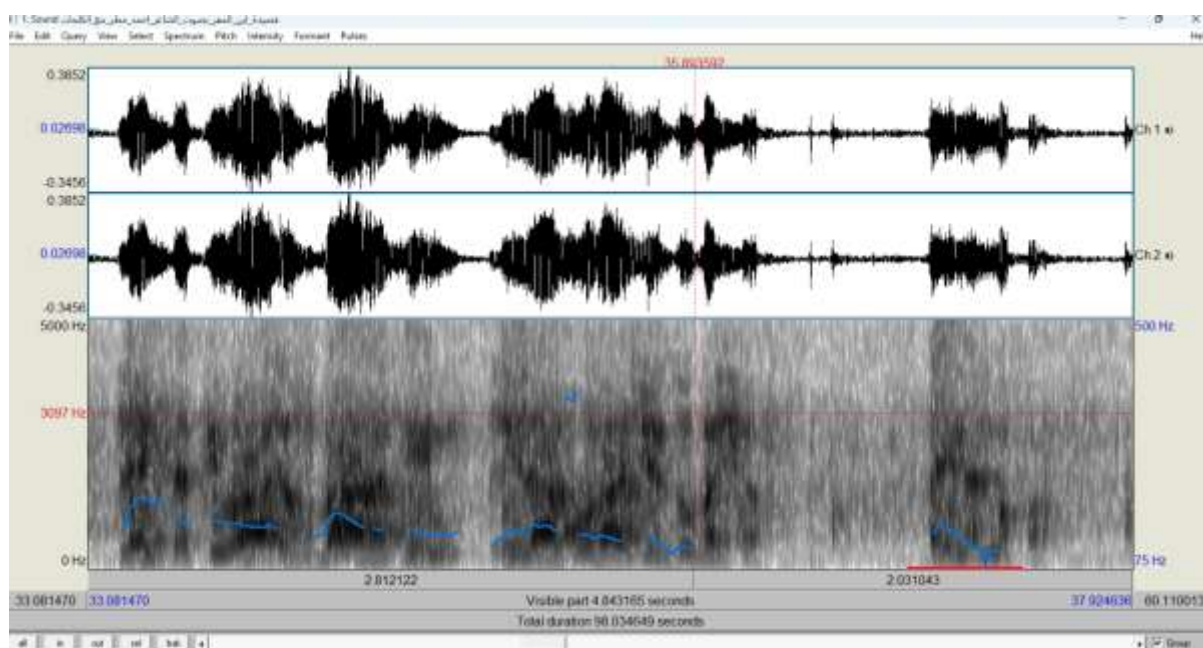
"المرء في أوطاننا
بصماته لها صور
أنفاسه لها صور
المرء في أوطاننا
أين المفر؟
أوطاننا قيامة
لا تحتوي غير سقر
وذنبه لا يغتفر
إذا أحس أو شعر
يشنقه الوالي.. قضاء
وقدر
تدهسه سيارة القصر..
قضاء وقدر
يوضع في شرابه سم
..قضاء وقدر
لا درب.. كلا لا وزر
ليس من الموت مفر
يا ربنا



لا تلم الميت في أوطاننا
إذا انتحر
حتى القضاء والقدر!"

Phonopragmatic Analysis & Discussion

“**1. Phonological Layer:** prosodic repetition of “ with a low pitch 130Hz evokes inevitability using plosives such as /q/, /t/, /d/ and mimic beatings of prisons and executions. High vs. low pitch shows the contrast between which uttered with a low tone (questions such as (“) are uttered لا درب.. كلا لا وزر to show hopelessness with a 122Hz. Declarations (“ with a contrasted pitch high-low then low-high which show oppression and “ as the poet tries to convey وقدر despair. The poet emphasizes the words “ his feelings of hopelessness using low pattern. The words which end with /r/ are all pronounced with high and end with a low pitch to indicate finality.



“), **2. Pragmatic Layer:** speech acts such as assertives (“المرء في أوطاننا ليس سوى اضبارة غلافها جلد بشر”) assert the inescapability of a person (“) is repeated by the poet to indirectly from him/herself. Directives such as (“يا ربنا لا تلم الميت), (يا ربنا لا تلم الميت) calls for hopelessness. Expressives such as (“) is repeated to appeal for divine justice. Commissives/Declarations (“) show how authorities declare events as ‘fate’. The Maxims such as quality is (“) and the poet flouted as the regime surveys people (“) as it emphasize the idea. Maxim of quantity is violated by repeating (“) signals irony. The relevance maxim is called here as concepts of ‘fate, sin, hell’



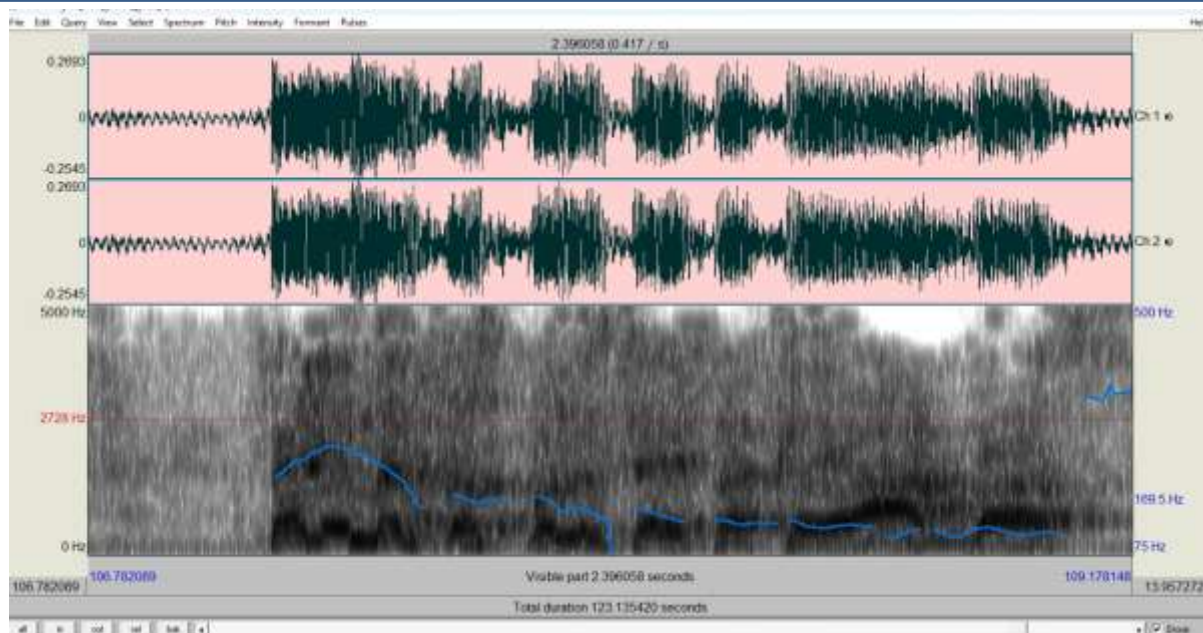
) are politically employed to produce sarcasm. Manner maxim is in (which is a direct question with no violation of the maxim to highlight urgency.

Poem No.2

عباس وراء المتراس ،
 يقظ منتبه حساس ،
 ضرب الأخماس بأسداس ،
 لملم عباس ذخيرته والمتراس ،
 ومضى يصقل سيفه ،
 صرخت زوجة عباس: " أبناؤك
 قتلى، عباس،
 ضيفك راودني، عباس ،
 قم أنقذني يا عباس " ،
 عباس - اليقظ الحساس - منتبه لم
 يسمع شيئاً،
 قلب عباس القرطاس ، ضرب
 الأخماس بأسداس ،
 فلمن تصقل سيفك يا عباس " ؟
 إذا ، اصقل سيفك يا عباس

Phonopragmatic Analysis & Discussion

“ is repeated to show how ironic his عباس 1. **Phonological Layer:** The name “
 “ the /s/ is also يقظ منتبه حساس character is, as he does nothing with 166 Hz. In “
 repeated to give false impression and with high-low tone and a mean pitch of 142
 “ to mimic confusion ضرب الأخماس بأسداس HZ. Fricatives and sibilants are here in “
 and the tone keep and low with a sudden high pitch of 176 Hz. The ironic
 “ is produced with a low tone to show how فلمن تصقل سيفك يا عباس؟ “
 expectation and reality are contrasted.



”) shows عباس وراء المتراس **2. Pragmatic Layer:** speech acts such as assertives (“”) to do أنقذني يا عباس attentiveness. Directives are shown in Abbas’s wife cries (“”) an action. Expressives are shown in Abbas’s wife despair, while declarations (“”) is a telegram of threat with no perlocutionary act. Maxim of تهديد (“”) quality is in irony as it breaks truthfulness while quantity maxim is violated by “”) gives more information than the necessary ones. يقط منتبه حساس (e.g., “”) Relation Maxim is violated in which Abbas focuses on polishing his sword while enemies commit crimes. Pragmatically speaking, false heroism is exposed using violated maxims and speech acts.

Poem No.3

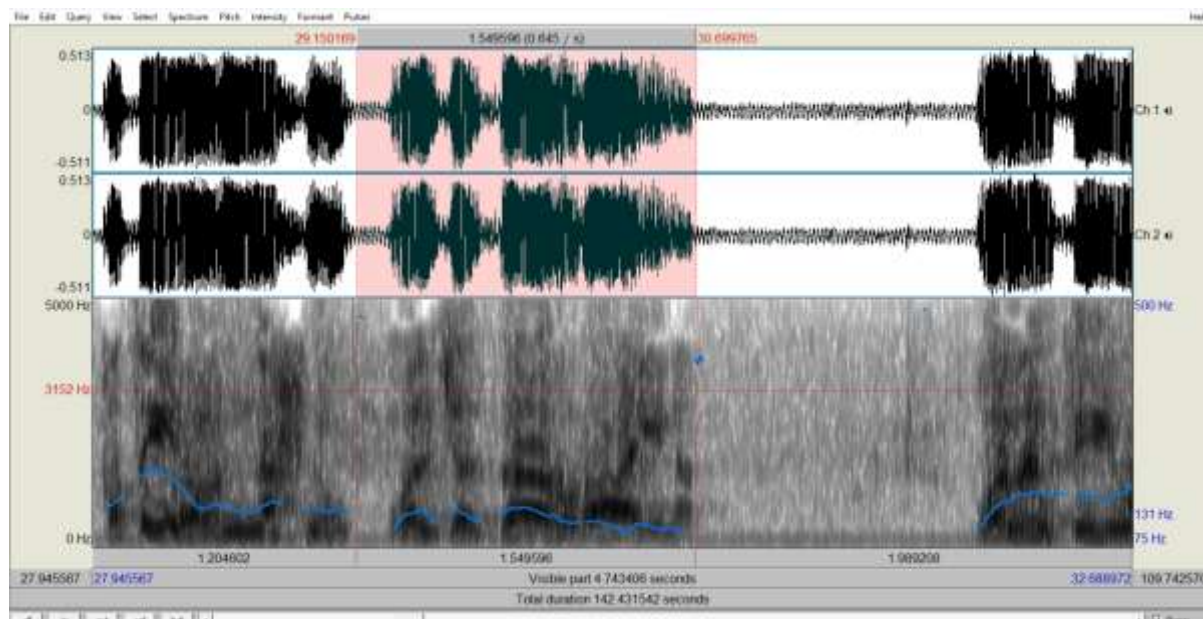
لمن نشكو مآسينا ؟
ومن يصغي لشكوانا، ويجدنا ؟
أنشكو موتنا ذلاً لوالينا ؟
وهل موت سيحيينا ؟
قطيع نحن والجزار راعينا ؛
ومنفيون نمشي في أراضينا ؛
ونحمل نعشنا قسراً بأيدينا ؛
ونعرب عن تعازينا لنا فينا ؛
فوالينا ، أدام الله والينا،
وحققتم أمانينا ،
ففي تنديدكم حيناً ،



وفي تهديدكم حيناً ،
 سحبتم أنف أمريكا ،
 فلم تنقل سفارتها ،
 ولو نقلت - معاذ الله لو نقلت - لضيعنا
 فلسطين ؛
 تهانينا.

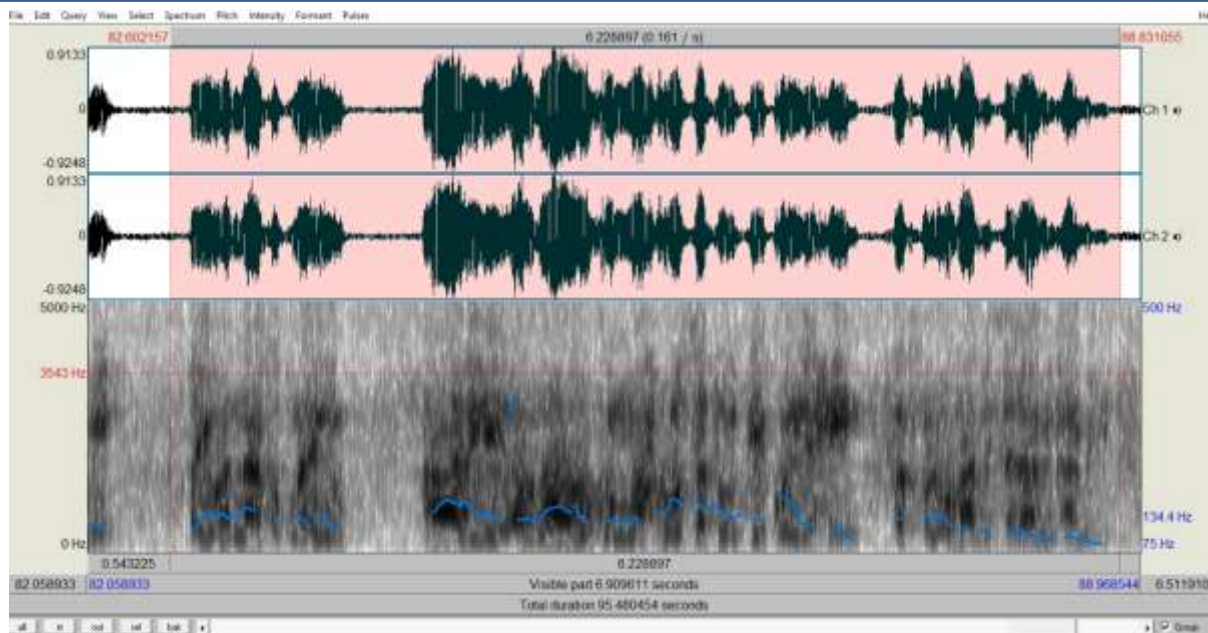
Phonopragmatic Analysis & Discussion

1. Phonological Layer: The sound /na/ ending in “...” are repeated to create a low tone with a relatively similar mean pitch of 142Hz. The uselessness is shown in the aforementioned words as it mimics mourning. The oppressor and the oppressed share the same ending /na/ in (of people ” to display slaughter (قطع، جزار، قسار). Words like “مأسينا، أيدينا” (metaphorically with a high to low tone, and lines “...” create a rhythm to show emptiness with a sudden high tone at the end as it ends with mean pitch of 189 Hz. Mocking is apparent in using long vowels as in “تهانينا” and “أمانينا” to imitate false congratulations.



2. Pragmatic Layer: “...” is an expressive speech act for complaining. “...” is a directive speech act for complaining. “...” is a declarative speech act showing how plea ends in despair. “...” mimics official speeches which mocks blessing. The maxim of quantity is violated by over-elaborating (“... حقتم أمانينا”) as it exceeds truth to produce sarcasm. Maxim of quality is violated by mentioning a false statement

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2. Pragmatic Layer: is pragmatically expressive satiric المخبرين أمير الله حفظ الله utterance to curse the figure of authority. Directive speech act احسن to mimic surveillance as they do not lead to a friend's house. The last mocks the propaganda where security is promised nut بسلام آمنين expressive nothing happened only surveillance. The assertives “فقد describe the social situation in the poet's land. The maxim “اتخم بالامن بلاد المسلمين” of quality is flouted “ادخلوها بسلام آمنين ... اطمئنا ...” of quantity is violated by mentioning the direction which provides more information than the necessary.

Statistical Analysis

Poem	Layer	Feature Count	Avg. Intensity (1–5)	Key Features / Examples	Integrated Effect
1 – Fate & Resistance “قضاء وقدر / أين المفر؟”	Phonological	4	4.5	Repetition of “قضاء وقدر” (low pitch 122–130Hz), plosives /q/, /t/, /d/ mimic beatings, final /r/ intonation closure, contrastive pitch in questions and declarations	Inevitable oppression; low pitch conveys despair; soundscape imitates imprisonment



	Pragmatic	6	4.6	Assertives (“معتقل في”), Directives (“جلده”), Expressives (“ربنا”), الميث Commissives/Declarations (“قضاء وقد ر”, Gricean maxims flouted (quality, quantity, relevance)	Speech acts + irony = hopelessness framed as “fate”
2 – False Heroism (عباس والمتراس)	Phonological	4	4.5	Repetition of “عباس” (166Hz), sibilants /s/, fricatives in “أسداس”, ironic question “فلمن تصقل سيفك” in low pitch (176Hz)	Soundscape mocks vigilance; rhythm shows futility; irony through pitch contrasts
	Pragmatic	4	4.5	Assertives (“المتراس”), Directives (“أنقذني”), Expressives (wife’s despair), Declarations (“برقية تهديد”, maxims violated (quality, relation, quantity)	Pragmatic irony experiences cowardice and false attention
3 – Lament & Hollow Praise (“مأسينا... تهانينا”)	Phonological	4	4.5	na/ rhyme (“أيدينا”, mock cadence, long vowels in “تهانينا”, tonal shifts from low mourning to high mocking (142–189Hz)	Mourning intonation undermined by exaggerated rhythm.
	Pragmatic	6	4.6	Expressives (“مأسينا”), Directives (“ومن”), Parodied يصغي declaratives (“خير”, maxims flouted (quantity, quality,	Ritual praise exposed as hypocrisy; pragmatic irony creates biting satire



				relevance)	
4 – Surveillance (المخبرين / بيت صديقي)	Phonological	5	4.8	/m/ & /kh/ repetition ”), rhythmic (مخبر، المسلمين escalation (الاول، البادي، intonation parody in ”), tonal “فادخلوها بسلام آمنين contrast high→low (165Hz→109Hz)	Nasal + fricative sounds mimic suffocation; parody of sacred tone → oppression
	Pragmatic	3	4.5	Assertives (“ستر خلفك بعض المخبرين”) Directives (“امش يساراً”), Expressives (“بسلام آمنين”), maxims violated (quality, quantity)	Directive speech acts parody state surveillance; irony reveals authoritarian suffocation

5. Conclusions

The analyses reveal that:

1. This study contributes to the analysis of Arabic poetry and how it functions as an act of resistance.
2. Sound devices in Matar’s poetry are systematically tied to pragmatic effects which lead to the final effect.
3. Phonological elements are not merely acoustic but they act as portrayals of oppression.
4. The statistical analysis shows how elements are distributed across the poems yet the violations of maxims are employed by Mattar more than other elements.
5. Pragmatic elements show the poet as a witness to the events and a challenger to the authority.
6. The poems when analysed by the collective layers construct a meaningful image.

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