

Linguistic Analysis on the Musical Hamilton: Functions of Puns and Repetitions

Shuqing Yang

BASIS International School Guangzhou, Guangzhou 510630, China

ABSTRACT

Hamilton: The Musical, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, has quickly become globally popular after its premiere in 2015. As a hip-hop musical with quick rapping, the lyrics and language in the songs prove to be a huge part in the play. This article explores this successful musical from a linguistics perspective. Texts and lyrics in the play are analyzed here based on linguistic theories with a qualitative research method. It is found that puns and repetitions are key elements of the language used in the play. Exact puns, near puns, reprises of songs, and repetitions of words and lines are used to establish the American historical setting, portray characters, refine plot development, and deliver emotion to the audience.

KEYWORDS

Pun; Repetition; Reprise; Drama Analysis; Literature Linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hamilton: The Musical, or *Hamilton*, is a hip-hop musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda narrating the life story of America's first treasurer Alexander Hamilton. The musical became an instant hit after its debut on Broadway in 2015, winning 11 Tony awards, a Grammy Award, and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama [1]. Its immense popularity can be largely accounted for by its intricate script writing and lyric construction. The musical is almost entirely sung-through, accounting for 46 songs (47, if including "Laurens Interlude", which is not in the album) and a staggering number of 20,520 words in 2.5 hours. Combining contemporary hip-hop with American history, the verbal language in the play forms a unique style.

This article aims to delve into *Hamilton's* value and success through a linguistic lens by analyzing the characteristics of its language. To be specific, the following research questions are posed: What kinds of puns are employed? What are the effects of repetition and reprises? How do these verbal languages help complete the characters and story?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prominent elements in *Hamilton* are puns and repetitions of words, phrases, and verses throughout the play.

2.1. Pun

Scholars have yet to reach a consensus on a universally accepted definition and categorization of puns, and researchers have posed questions on widely used definitions [2]. A widely accepted definition of puns made by Koestler (1964, cited by Partington, 2009) is that "the pun is the bisociation of a single

phonetic form with two meanings – two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot” [3]. Partington (2009) distinguish exact puns – traditional homonymy and homophony with identical sound sequences – from near puns, which involves sound sequences which resemble each other phonologically or visually, presents only one of the sound strings and the hearer has to infer the joke, or plays on the syntax of the sentence [4].

Studies have also been conducted on puns in theater drama and screen plays, such as Darmawan’s (2016) analysis on puns in the Simpson series [5]. However, similar studies on the pun in the musical theater is rare.

2.2. Repetitions

Repetition of words, phrases, stanzas, sounds and other linguistic phenomena brings certain features of the text to the viewers’ attention. Its importance and impact depend on the context and the way in which words are repeated [6]. In musical theater, musical phrases constitute a large of storytelling as well as the lyrics. Repetition which occurs in the musical leitmotifs in *Hamilton* signify character development and narrate the story [7].

Reprise is one form repetition. A reprise is a repeat of something or part of something, especially a piece of music, which means repeated sections (or entire songs). The reliance on reprise for dramatic effect is a central link between Broadway musical and European Romantic opera [8]. Reprises are presented in various famous musical plays such as *Les Misérables* and *Into the Woods* (Scott, 2014; Blustein, 2020) [9]. Similarly, *Hamilton* incorporates many repetitions and reprises, achieving multiple purposes such as character building, plot development, foreshadowing, and marking major turns.

2.3. Existing Research on Hamilton

Many previous scholars had studied this hit musical from various angles. Some historians such as Isenberg (2017) argues that the musical is filled with inaccuracies and that such popular culture for entertainment does not represent serious history [10]. Studies such as Pezzillo’s (2023) focuses on how it narrates story and character developments through musical leitmotifs. In addition, Verhoeff (2021) took a sociological view and explored American identity in relation to its founding era, and race relations in America, finding that *Hamilton* appeals throughout different classes and race, providing a space for reconciliation and reexamining history [11]. Arivette (2020) analyzed how Miranda produced the work in the excellent period – the exigence of the musical world and the Kairos of contemporary politics on top of the quality content further ensured the success and fervor of the audience [12], whereas the linguistic angle in the analysis of *Hamilton* has not been explored enough.

2.4. Research Gaps

Regarding verbal language, previous studies have researched puns and repetition in literature and drama. The musicality of reprises has been examined, and some of these studies narrow on particular famous plays. Other scholars in fields such as history, social science, and music as analyzed *Hamilton*.

However, there is yet an analysis to put the two together and examine the linguistic success of the show. Lyrics in the show contributed to the wide influence and huge appeal to diverse groups of audiences, and this article centers on two of the most prominent elements of *Hamilton's* verbal language – puns and repetitions.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This essay is a qualitative study based on the lyrics (and spoken lines) of *Hamilton*. The data source of this research is mainly the official Broadway Original Cast album and the Disney+ recording of

Hamilton. This research also uses scripts from *Hamilton: The Revolution*, the book written by Miranda and McCarter, as a reference for the lyrics and footnotes from Miranda the lyricist. The researcher went over the official recording and lyrics of the two acts, then noted down lines where analysis can be applied. The excerpts are double-checked with the definition used in this article, ensuring that it does support its categorization and analysis. This study does not take into all accounts of all wordplays or theatrical brilliance but takes certain excerpts that clearly illustrate the defined categories and theories.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Puns in Hamilton

This show employs exact puns and near puns. The former is playing with homophones and homonyms. Homophone is when two words have the same sound which then causes ambiguity and subsequent effects. For example, Miranda rhymes “You punched the bursar?” with “Aaron Burr, sir”. The historical Hamilton never punched the bursar, but Miranda felt that it is too good a rhyme to pass out [13]. With the deadpanned delivery and well-timed pauses, this line added much humor while also establishing Hamilton’s reckless and stubborn personality. Similarly, the following two lines play on the sounds of words:

ANGELICA: Burr, you disgust me.

BURR: Ah, so you’ve discussed me.

“Disgust” and “discussed” are two words with different spelling but very similar sound in English, and Burr’s response creates a playful and slightly flirtatious tone.

In addition, homonymy is common and effective in the lyrics. The word “shot” appears multiple times in the play with various meanings. Miranda mainly plays with two meanings of the word, using it as a noun to indicate (1) firing a gun or another weapon and (2) an attempt to do or achieve something that you have not done before.

The song “My Shot” is the kind of “I want” song in *Hamilton*, where Alexander Hamilton raps about his life experiences and ambition to make an impact and leave a legacy. In the central line “I am not throwing away my shot”, “shot” takes the meaning (2), and the line expresses Hamilton’s eagerness to grab his opportunity to achieve what he wants.

Near the end of the play, the expression becomes literal. Hamilton asks himself in his monologue (in the song “The World Was Wide Enough”) when he makes the choice of aiming towards the sky “If I throw away my shot, is this how you remember me?” He wastes his bullet, his shot, by giving up his chance of winning the duel against his opponent Burr, matching meaning (1).

The homonym of “shot” establishes both character and plot. The meaning of the song “My Shot” builds Hamilton’s eager and ambitious character, claiming his desire of achieving lasting legacy with every opportunity. The other literal meaning of “throwing away my shot” (in terms of shooting with a weapon) reinforces the context of the plot, which involves war, combat in battles, and duels. The two interpretations of the same expression tie together to form a cohesive and continuous narrative of Hamilton’s life story. The single word is short yet concise, containing so much information and association with other ideas relating to the plot. This pun makes *Hamilton* memorable, with themes condensed to words and short phrases.

Besides, the ambiguity of homonyms is used purposefully to intrigue the audience. In the opening number “Alexander Hamilton”, all the actors and actresses, including all lead roles and ensembles, wear similar, light-colored clothes. The only distinguishable characters are Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. Therefore, when characters are briefly introduced to the audience in the show, most first-

time viewers would not keep track of each person and their description. The introduction is very brief as followed:

MULLIGAN, LAFAYETTE: We fought with him.

LAURENS: Me? I died for him.

WASHINGTON: Me? I trusted him.

ELIZA, ANGELICA, MARIA REYNOLDS: Me? I loved him.

Hamilton has four pairs of double roles played by the same actor or actress. Specifically, Mulligan and Madison, Lafayette and Jefferson, Laurens and Philip, and Maria and Peggy – each pair listed are played by one person. It is challenging for setting the linguistic features of the actor or actress. The same actor or actress needs to distinguish the relationship and attitudes towards Hamilton. For instance, “to fight with” said by Mulligan/Lafayette means both “to fight against (someone or something)” and “to fight on the same side as (someone or something)”. Mulligan and Lafayette are Hamilton’s comrades in the revolutionary war, and the three are certainly fighting on the same side against the British crown. Meanwhile, the two actors also play Madison and Jefferson, who are Democratic Republicans, often working with opposite goals against Hamilton. Hence, they are also fighting against Hamilton and his Federalist party. The single line introduces four characters, or rather, gives a brief impression to what is about to happen for the audience. This kind of introduction brings about the ambiguity of homonyms. It can be seen that “to fight with” is an exact pun which makes full use of homonyms that are the words with same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings.

Similarly, “I died for/trusted/ loved him” employ homonyms to realize an exact pun where the same word can be applied to both character that the actor or actress portrays. For example, love is delivered by three actresses (only actresses with prominent characters). The three women each loves Hamilton in her own way. Eliza loves as Alexander’s wife; Angelica loves as a friend; and Maria loves under desire and force from her husband. English does not distinguish romantic love from platonic love as Greek has (“Philia” and “Eros”), therefore “love” can be applied to all these characters. This further enhances a purposefully vague.

Near puns are present in the play as well. Punctuations help to realize near puns by changing the part of speech of words. In “Take a Break”, Angelica says that Hamilton has added an extra comma in the letter he sent her, that he has written “My dearest, Angelica” instead of “My dearest Angelica”. When “dearest” is used as noun instead of an adjective, it is no longer a common greeting at the start of a letter. Instead, it indicates that Angelica is the “dearest” in an exclusive way. The musical places romantic hints between Alexander and his sister-in-law. Angelica clicked with Alexander at once, but she loves her sister more so that she supports his marriage with Eliza. Although this is not a historically accurate event (in fact historically Angelica wrote “Indeed my dear, Sir” to Alexander who picks up her curious use of comma and Angelica married before meeting Hamilton [14], the use of “dearest, Angelica” and “dearest Angelica” bring out the subtle sentiment. The play on syntax contributes to portraying these two characters as clever and understanding each other from such detail in words.

Besides, near puns could be realized by the order of words. For instance, “Are we a nation of states? What’s the state of our nation?” is spoken by Hamilton in his rant in the song “My Shot”. The line adopts chiasmus, which is an inversion of syntactic element. Because of the word play on “nation” and “state”, it is also antimetabole, a form of chiasmus in which the two parts are the same both before and after inversion. The structure of each question is the same, consisting of a noun and preposition phrase with “of”, indicating possession. In addition, “are” and “our” have very similar sound when spoken in such quick rap, which makes the two matching halves more symmetric, exemplifying a syntagmatic pun. Yet these two parts each pose an important question for Hamilton: “Are we a nation of states?” refers to the difficulties of uniting colonies separated by many differences; “What’s the state of our nation?”, on the other hand, refers to Hamilton’s concern about the colonies and their

relationship with Britain. “State” in the second case no longer has the meaning of territory but takes on the meaning of a condition of being. As one of the founding fathers of USA and the first secretary of states, Alexander Hamilton contemplates about the developing America. With so few words used, the line conveys his rapid thoughts and care about building the country.

4.2. Reprises and Repetitions in Hamilton

This section discusses some lines that are repeated multiple times in different songs. *Hamilton* opens with the words “How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore...”, an iconic line with iconic rhythm that is almost the signature of the musical. This line and its variations are repeated by Burr five times in total throughout the whole show to describe Hamilton. It establishes Burr’s long-term fixed relation with Hamilton. Burr and Hamilton have been friends but ended with being enemy. This repeated line seems to express Burr’s displeasure of having someone like Hamilton achieving more than himself. Except the first appearance in the first song, this line appears at critical political points for both male characters:

- (1) After Washington appointed Hamilton as his “right hand man” and dismissed Burr;
- (2) When Hamilton purposes his plan for a strong government and a national bank which resulted in huge disagreements within the cabinet;
- (3) During Hamilton’s conflict with John Adams after Washington’s resignation;
- (4) Before the duel when Hamilton prevented Burr from becoming the president.

(1) and (4) are cases where Hamilton outcompetes Burr, and Burr uses insulting words to retaliate; (2) and (3) are where Burr could be said to be enjoying the trouble that Hamilton has caused onto himself. The line and its memorable rhythm bring the audience back to aware the rivalry between the two men, knitting the development between them tightly together even in this show with so many different interwoven themes and relationships.

In addition to repetition of lines, reprises of entire section of songs also demonstrate great effect on the audience. The three consecutive songs “Blow Us All Away”, “Stay Alive (Reprise)”, and “It’s Quiet Uptown” form what probably the most heart wrenching part of the plot. Reprises are essential in making the section such a “tear-jerker”.

“Blow Us All Away” is the song that reintroduces Philip as a young and proud adult like his father, and he proceeds to a duel in defense of his father’s reputation. The title “Blow Us All Away” first appears in the Act I song “Dear Theodosia”, in which Hamilton gushes over his newborn son Philip, and says that someday “you will blow us all away”, presumably surprising everyone with brilliance. However, in the second act, Hamilton says that Philip “knocked me out, I fall apart” by his sudden death. The usage of “blow away” in the context of the plot changes significantly. The audience are reminded of the hope experienced earlier in the play, and this repetition easily evokes grief and regret from all of what might have been.

Hit by a bullet, Philip dies in the number “Stay Alive (Reprise)”. “Stay Alive” is a song in the first act, where Hamilton is reminded to “stay alive” during the revolutionary war. Eliza’s plea for her loved ones to stay alive is repeated in the reprise, as well as her earlier interaction with little Philip. Philip (nine-year-old) first appears on stage while learning French and piano with his mother, and their exchange of counting from 1 to 9 in French is repeated as Philip dies. The reprised passage easily re-establishes the love between parents and child, which makes the scene even more heart-breaking.

“It’s Quiet Uptown” is the song in which Eliza and Alexander struggle to hold onto each other and finally find each other again. In the first act, Eliza has a song named “That Would Be Enough” from the song “It’s Quiet Uptown”, in which she conveys that Hamilton should keep himself safe for his family, especially his unborn child at the time, and that they are already very lucky to get to their

current place. This plea for a steady lifestyle contrasts with young Alexander's choices. He wants glory and a legacy in history; he had nothing to lose and is willing to abandon everything to rise from his low background. However, in "It's Quiet Uptown" from the second act, Hamilton is so shaken by his son's death. He picks up Eliza's words and melodies and reprises a section from "That Would Be Enough". This is an important turning point for Hamilton's character from reckless to more reserved, causing his final moment of giving up his shot which would be against his younger self's advice. Hamilton using Eliza's words also shows how the two characters finally try to understand each other through going through grief together.

Reprises made it easier to take in for the audience, since the material being used has already been introduced earlier in the play, which, and the connection between different parts of the play also amplifies the emotion.

5. CONCLUSION

This article centers around the puns and repetitions in the musical *Hamilton* to examine the show's success from a linguistic angle. As a hip-hop musical, the play incorporates numerous puns and exceptional rhymes, and this study selects some of the most representative excerpts to analyze the impact of these language choices. Puns contribute to humoring and intriguing the audience, and skillful puns in drama also helps to develop character and plot. Repetitions and reprises are similar as well, as they emphasize information and evokes previous plot and ideas. Miranda takes the central themes of the story and successfully enforces them with language. Although this study is limited in only examining two elements of verbal language, further research could be done on other aspects of the lyrics. It also paves the way for more research on puns and reprises in drama and musical theater.

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