

Is the human brain hardwired to appreciate poetry?

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In 1932 T.S. Eliot famously argued, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

In a recent article published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*,

Professor Guillaume Thierry and colleagues at Bangor University have demonstrated that we do indeed appear to have an unconscious appreciation of poetic construction.

"Poetry", explains Professor Thierry "is a particular type of literary expression that conveys feelings, thoughts and ideas by accentuating metric constraints, rhyme and alliteration."

However, can we appreciate the musical sound of poetry independent of its literary meaning?

To address this question the authors created sentence sample sets that either conformed or violated poetic construction rules of Cynghanedd - a traditional form of Welsh poetry. These [sentences](#) were randomly presented to study participants; all of whom were native welsh speakers but had no prior knowledge of Cynghanedd poetic form.

Initially participants were asked to rate sentences as either "good" or "not good" depending on whether or not they found them aesthetically pleasing to the ear. The study revealed that the participants' brains implicitly categorized Cynghanedd-orthodox sentences as sounding "good" compared to sentences violating its construction rules.

The authors also mapped Event-Related Brain Potential (ERP) in participants a fraction of a second after they heard the final word in a poetic construction. These elegant results reveal an electrophysiological response in the brain when participants were exposed to consonantal repetition and stress patterns that are characteristic of Cynghanedd, but not when such patterns were violated.

Interestingly the positive responses from the brain to Cynghanedd were present even though [participants](#) could not explicitly tell which of the sentences were correct and which featured errors of rhythm or sound

repetitions.

Professor Thierry concludes, "It is the first time that we show unconscious processing of poetic constructs by the brain, and of course, it is extremely exciting to think that one can inspire the human mind without being noticed!"

So when you read a poem, if you feel something special but you cannot really pinpoint what it is, make no mistake, your [brain](#) loves it even if you don't really know why.

More information: Awel Vaughan-Evans et al, Implicit Detection of Poetic Harmony by the Naïve Brain, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016).
[DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01859](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01859)

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