

## **Frequency Counts in South Asian Poetry; Sultan Bahu's Concept of Mystical Love**

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### **Abstract**

Word frequency methods have been used by psychologists, linguists (and of these computational linguists), etc. with a variety of purposes. In this study the frequency count method has been applied in order to find out a thematic hierarchy within a group of related texts. The particular texts chosen are a group of 70 poems of the XIII century South-Asiatic author Sultan Bahu. Sultan Bahu's poems contain his interpretation of the Beloved and human's relationship with Him. The importance of this research lies in the fact that Sultan Bahu's texts have never been thoroughly analyzed from a linguistic point of view. Through the analysis of the results of the frequency counts a hierarchy of subtopics within the main topic will be revealed. The present research paper attempts to uncover and evaluate Sultan Bahu's concept of mystical love and its components in a hierarchical manner.

**Key Words** Quantitative method, applied linguistics, computational linguistics, frequency counts, Sufi poetry, Sultan Bahu, mysticism, mystical love.

### **Introduction**

The evolution of linguistics has without any doubt developed into more quantitative methods being used in this discipline. On the other hand, the presence of metaphors in poetry is abundant and many times, the basis of poetry itself. "Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language", Lakoff & Johnson (1991, 3). For this reason, in poetry, grasping the meaning the poet is trying to convey can on many occasions become a matter of extreme complexity.

The reader of a poem can perceive the overall idea of the poem at hand simply by reading it. The interpretation of the poem is an entirely different matter. The average man may read poetry for enjoyment. A Spanish reader will have no knowledge of the fact that, for example, the word *ahora* in Spanish language constitutes a phonetic residue of the Latin ablative *hac hora* and the form *ahora* without preposition, the fossilized form. In the mind of the common reader *ahora* means *ahora* (now) in old Spanish.

Different linguistic methods exist to reveal the age of a poem. Taking the case of the eleven syllable verse in Spanish language, it is well known among literary experts and linguists that it was imported from Italy in the XVI century and the main authors are Garcilaso de la Vega and Boscán. If further we take the example of *Égloga I*, this one can

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be traced to any time between 1534 and 1536. The analyzed data indicates that it probably belongs to 1534, due to the elements present in the poem and facts of Garcilaso's life, not of pertinence for this study. In any case, according to Rafael Lapesa, the criteria of naturalness and selection did prevail during almost the complete sixteen century in Spain (1942, 302).

Similarly, other methods exist depending on the objective the linguist or the literary expert needs to achieve. The linguist will analyze every word, every punctuation sign, every capitalized term. In a sea of different topics, which continuously are being mentioned, it may seem to the average reader that all points referred to by the author would have the same level of importance, since unconsciously the brain is focused on the meaning of the poem and in the form, on its beauty.

According to Keith Johnson from Berkley "However, if you were to observe that the form was used 15 times in this manuscript but only twice in a slightly older manuscript, then these frequency counts begin to take the shape of quantified linguistic observations that can be analyzed with the same quantitative methods used in science and engineering" (2008, 4).

In this manner two systems can be related, the poetic system as well as the linguistic system. The poem will be broken down into significant parts to be analyzed as if it was lab work. This is an example of what Zwicky calls overlay systems. "With this term I will to refer to poetic forms, language games, secret languages, systems of expressive word formation, codes and ciphers, writing systems, and some conventional schemata for borrowing words from one language into another" (1986, 57).

On the other hand, if we consider frequency as a reflection of the speaker's interests, specific objectives can be achieved through frequency counts. In language acquisition, frequency plays a considerable role since it is through frequency that students learn particular terms and how to use them. Taylor states on the subject "One's first inclination, when approaching frequency data in a language, is to consider these as reflecting the interests and concerns of speakers and of the environment in which they live" (2012, 146).

To prove this method we have chosen a well-known author who has been studied mainly in India and Pakistan through literature only. The author was chosen having in consideration the lack of scientific research about his texts. For this reason the study will deliver original results.

Mystical poetry has existed since the times of Rumi, Sa'di, Hafiz and perhaps even before that. It has existed and exists across many religions. Nevertheless, the topic of this study is not religion, neither Sufism. Rather, this investigation is related to finding out the hierarchy of different topics in the mind of a particular author. The frequency count method can be applied to any type of text in order to uncover those particular elements of most importance.

## Method

The method of this investigation is an analysis of the most frequent terms used in 70 poems of the poet Sultan Bahu from the 115 poems present in the book *Death Before Dying*. The

Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu, with the purpose of establishing the main topic and a hierarchy of subtopics.

A linguistic excel table was created where the most frequent terms were displayed horizontally. In the first column, the poem numbers were set so that if a specific term was present in a poem an x can be placed on the row for that specific poem and in the column which belongs to a specific term. The table in question will record the number of times the author makes reference to a particular point within the main topic. Terms which have been implied through metaphors have been computed as well.

Once the terms from each poem were compiled, the results were analyzed in order to reveal the complete concept of mystical love hidden behind the poetry of Sultan Bahu.

### **Analysis of the Data**

In order to carry out a complete analysis of the data the first step is to identify the genre, then place the poem within a historical context. Once this information is present the study will continue by proceeding to roughly identify the most repeated terms in the texts. Afterwards, the importance will be established. For this purpose a table will be created in order to record the frequency counts.

### **Genre**

The title of the book is *Death before Dying*. The Sufi poems of Sultan Bahu. Through the title it is obvious that the texts belong to Islamic mystical poetry. In consequence, its literary genre is mysticism and its literary form is verse.

The language in which the poems are written is Punjabi. Every poem is isolated in one page with an English translation underneath.

### **Historical context**

The author dates to circa 1628 until 1691. Sultan Bahu was a Sufi scholar born in Anga, located in the Soon Valley in the now Punjab province of what at that time was India. The date of his birth is not clear and the authors state different periods from 1628 to 1639.

Some literary authors state that his saintly qualities were obvious even during his childhood. His education was left at the care of his mother Rasti, who according to different authors was pious and spiritual. Mystical love is common to many religions. In Sufism it was introduced by a woman. Her name was Rābi‘ah al-Baṣrī (717–801). Anna Marie Schimmel says in regards to this topic “As mothers, many mystically inclined women have deeply influenced their sons who in turn became leading masters of the Path thanks to their early education” (1982, 145). This was the case of Sultan Bahu, whom about his mother writes:

“Bliss of God for Rasti be  
For with truth is gifted she”

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The meaning of Rasti in Persian language is actually 'Truth'. In another instance he writes: Mercy of Allah be on Rasti who named me Bad-Hu. In fact, it seems that 'Ba Hu's' meaning is 'with Allah'.

As an author, he wrote in Punjabi as well as in Persian. In these books he analyzes specific topics of Islam and Islamic mysticism. He, as a norm, wrote books in Persian. Nevertheless, Sultan Bahu's Punjabi poetry is responsible for his extensive fame, since many of his verses have been utilized in different types of Sufi music, such as qawwali and kafi.

The total number of the books written by Sultan Bahu is not actually known, although approximately thirty can be attributed to him with certainty.

His life occurred during the ruling period of the Mughals, specifically during the reign of Shah Jehan. It is perhaps coincidental that this particular ruler upheld Islamic laws while others such as Akbar propagated liberty and freedom in religious practices. The following ruler was Aurangzeb, according to historians of impeccable character and about whom Sultan Bahu wrote the book *Aurang-Shahi*, where he speaks about a meeting between him and the Indian king. Chronicles state that Bahu used to teach him and while doing so, a servant of the king used to write down his lessons. This actually became the before-mentioned *Aurang-Shahi*.

Mystic love has similar features across religions. In *Love is a Fire*, Llevellyn Vaughan-Lee explains how the mystics are attracted to the fountain of love being unsatisfied with superficial configurations of it. "They seek a purer wine, a more potent passion" (2000, xi). In this quote, a purer wine is a metaphor for a purer love, (wine is not permissible under Islamic law). And so, in Sultan Bahu we find an extreme passion enflamed love for God.

Mystical love is a perpetual attribute of mysticism, starting from Judaism which dates, not as one may assume, to the beginning of times, but rather, according to Jewish writers only to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The historian H. Graetz (1817-1891) of German-Jewish origin is a well-known supporter of this view. He attributes the origins of Jewish mysticism to Isaac Ben Abraham de Posquière, a French Rabbi who lived during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, also known as Isaac the Blind (1913, 8).

The author of the book *Jewish Mysticism*, J. Abelson, says about mysticism "Mystical religion does, of course, transcend all the barriers which separate race from race and religion from religion. The mystic is a cosmopolitan, and, to him, the differences between the demands and beliefs and observances of one creed and those of another are entirely obliterated in his one all-absorbing and all-overshadowing passion for union with Reality" (1913, 3). Noting the capitalization of the term "Reality" it is necessary to consider that it refers to a divine entity.

The array of mystics in Christianity upholds numerous well respected names such the Spanish Catholics, Teresa de Ávila and Juan de la Cruz who writes:

¡Oh noche que guíaste!

¡oh noche amable más que la alborada!;

¡oh noche que juntaste

Amado con amada

amada en el Amado transformada!(1994:483-4).

In this case it is interesting to note how *amada* (loved, in Spanish language an adjective of feminine gender, as the adjective has to be coherent with the noun *soul*, in Spanish *alma*, also a feminine noun) is not written in capital letter which indicates that the soul of the lover is human and mortal while *Amado* (Loved, God- Dios in Spanish a term of masculine gender) is written with capital letter indicating divinity. The joining of the feminine and the masculine does not indicate traditional love, rather, the soul is the feminine being in this case as the language implies.

There were others, such as Rosa de Lima who in her vows included virginity, fasting, scourging herself until bleeding and spent a life of mortification in order to prepare for her marriage with Christ (2004 , 3).

Mysticism without any doubt possesses similar pillars in every religion (except for the scourging which is a characteristic of a personal nature). In any case, considering the personality and training of those who practice it, it may pose slight differences.

The corpus is composed by 70 of those of his poems included in *Death Before Dying*. The Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu by Jamal J. Elias in order to reveal Sultan Bahu's concept of mystical love. Elias mentions in his book "Bahu is emphasizing a central tenet of Sufism: that an absolute love for and devotion to God can result in the experience of losing oneself within the divine" (1998, 2). This devotion that Elias mentions is actually present in Bahu's poetry and in this case each poem will be analyzed to locate those elements which establish the basis of the love for the Beloved, the main tenet of Sufism.

His Punjabi poetry had and to some extent still has a widespread appeal through Asia, and his verses are sung in various genres of Sufi music, mentioned before. Traditionally, the poems of this author are recited or sang in an extremely unique style which has become tradition.

Other contemporary poets and also wrote Punjabi poetry were Shah Hussein, Saleem Muhammad Safoori and Bulleh Shah, another famous mystic.

## **Preliminary Readings**

During the preliminary readings certain aspects were distinguished within the poems. The massive presence of the references to love and God reveal the main theme as it was expected of mystical poetry.

It was during these preliminary readings phase that the tenets of the concept of mystical love were established, based on observation and rough calculation of frequency.

## **Frequency Count**

The next step is establishing importance. Computational analysis of poetry can be useful for analyzing poetic features such as rhyme and meter (Greene et al. 2010; Hayward 1996, etc.) as well as others.

Frequency counts have been used in many disciplines. For the purpose of our study they can be used to measure the frequency of a specific term within a text. It is an easy

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procedure even the simplest programs such as Word and Adobe perform for the average user through the find and search features available in the programs. There is as well a free feature available on internet with the name of Write Words ([http://www.writewords.org.uk/word\\_count.asp](http://www.writewords.org.uk/word_count.asp)) where a text is introduced and the results are delivered showing terms from highest frequency until those terms with lowest frequency. There are other word counters available online, like the Online Word Counter (<http://www.textfixer.com/tools/online-word-counter.php>). When we tested it, the results were delivered showing a count of the most frequent nouns first classified under non-common words and then the common words later with their frequency and a percentage of use next to it.

In this case we measured the most frequent thematic aspects of 70 poems contained in the above mention work of Sultan Bahu. Computational methods of measuring frequency will automatically be oblivious of the hidden concepts behind metaphors, double speech, personifications, secret language, etc., as well as relationships and interactions among terms. This means that implied concepts will not be computed.

In addition, the poems were not in digital form, rather in a soft cover bound book which made it almost impossible to introduce the texts into Write Words or Online Word Counter or to have any type of computerized count of a specific element within the poem in a swift manner. For this reason the count was made manually. With more time available perhaps introducing each poem into a counter would have produced interpretable preliminary results to be analyzed later, not just about the thematic hierarchy we intend to reveal in this study but also about other features present in the poems such as number or articles, prepositions, conjunctions, nouns, verbs, proper nouns, etc. Since this was not the objective of our research a simpler and swifter manner was required and thus, the manual method seemed more suited for this purpose since interpretation of every tenet of the concept was additionally needed.

For this purpose an excel table was created which included the following elements:

### Frequency table:

FREQUENCY TABLE													
POEMS	GUIDE	LOVE	MEMBRAN	UNITY	FAITH	/THE MYS	DEATH	LOVED/CC	PAIN	VING/ALI	H/GOD/Y	HEART	
1	x	x			x		x						4
2			x										1
3			x					x	X				3
4											x		1

- a. Poems: the poems were numbered from 1-70 underneath this header.
- b. Guide
- c. Love
- d. Remembrance
- e. Unity
- f. Faith
- g. Sacrifice/The Mystic Path
- h. Death
- i. Lover/Beloved/Companion
- j. Pain/Grief

- k. Lord/Allah, God/Truth,
- l. Heart

Then underneath each header in the correspondent poem cell an x was placed in case a term was present in a specific poem.

The results of the frequency count revealed a hierarchical system of tenets where the related terms with higher presence within the poems are understood of more interest to the author. The following are those in order of importance according to the frequency count in raw data form:

Results of the frequency table		
TENETS		FREQUENCY
1.	EFFECTS OF LOVE	105
2.	UNITY	100
3.	GOD	49
4.	SACRIFICE	20
5.	FAITH	18
6.	VISIBILITY OF THE LOVE	18
7.	REMEMBRANCE	13
8.	THE GUIDE	11

### Analysis of the Results

The frequency counts revealed the following hierarchy within the main topic:

#### The Effects of Love

It is the basis and main topic of the analyzed texts. The most frequent point that Bahu makes in his poems is the effects of LOVE. Love in Bahu’s view produces PAIN. The Lover is unreachable and unattainable. Sultan Bahu himself feels the effects of love which in the third poem is expressed through the words battlefield and fire. In the last line he manifests his willingness to sacrifice his physical life for those who step into the fire for the love of Allah.

In many of the poems Bahu continues with the previous thematic. The heart enlightened by love suffers from pain and other illnesses of the heart. If a person is not in continuous search for the Beloved, sacrificing precious worldly treasures, he or she will never be close to Him. For example in poem number 47 the depiction of love is extremely vibrant. Love is so painful that is compared to the process of churning milk and yoghurt. In the case of those who love God, their bodies are on fire, their spirits keeps on boiling while they suffer from heartache and sorrow. According to Bahu this is the definition of the true mystics.

In spite of producing extreme pain through the love, benefits can be reaped as well. The benefits of the love are greater than any physical honor from this world, even greater than scholarship. The term “love” is the second most repeated term in Bahu’s poetry with 38 frequency counts, followed by the terms “loved, beloved, companion” with 37 counts. The next term in line is “heart” as well as derived terms and its varieties such as “heartache”

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(which is also a reference to pain), which are present with 30 frequency counts. All these related terms make up the very first tenet of Sultan Bahu's concept of mystical love which is LOVE FOR ALLAH with a collective frequency count of 105 times.

### **Unity (Death, Life the Ecstasy)**

The mystic is in pain until he attains the ultimate goal, complete unity with Allah 'Unless you attain Allah, Bahu, this world is but a game' (1998, 29).

Lovers drawn in divine unity Bahu, see their incredible end! In this verse Sultan Bahu explains that the ecstasy of love is found for those who love Allah in His closeness or union. Only this way will they find paradise. This term is counted 10 times in an explicit or implied manner. In this sense the mystic spends his or her complete life trying to attain the union with the Almighty. This is the living death, Bahu, the divine secret (1998, 79).

Even the title of the book *Death before Dying* refers to this union. The term death which in Bahu is a metaphor for union appears 9 times at the same time that terms referring to living appear 9 times as well, the term unity appears 12 times which makes for a frequency count of 30 times.

Interestingly, an original feature (rarely found in poetry and which ensures authorship) with a frequency of 70, that is once in every poem, is the presence of the name of the author, Bahu, in the last line of every poem like this: This pain shall remain forever, Bahu, I will die crying.

It has been classified under the unity theme due to the fact that it means 'with God', in consequence it refers to the union of the poet with the divinity. The total frequency count of the terms classified under the unity is then of 100.

### **Allah**

Sultan Bahu in his poems refers to Allah through different terms. These are the Lord, Allah, God, You, Truth, The Friend, etc. Especially important is poem number 35 in which the word Lord is repeated five times and the term He capitalized, is repeated four times. The total frequency count of references to God in this poem is of 11 times.

In this poem Bahu emphasizes an interesting point. As he states "The Lord is only found by those, Bahu, whose intentions are good." (1998, 55). Terms referring to God appear 49 times in 70 poems.

### **Sacrifice**

Bahu continues with the previous thematic. The heart enlightened by love suffers from pain and other illnesses of the heart. If a person is not in continuous search for the Beloved, sacrificing precious worldly things, he or she will never be close to Him. In their quest for Love, lovers give up every material pursuit and feel no other physical need as they surrender themselves to God. "The Lord is only found by those, Bahu, whose intentions are



good” (1998, 55). Through the good purposes or intentions, people can join with Allah. Referring terms to the sacrifice and the pain are present 20 times.

### **Faith (Difference between Faith and Love)**

In Bahu’s view, love for the Beloved is as necessary as faith and it transports the one who loves to places known only to those who have it. However, faith without love is empty in his view, and throughout the poems he keeps on emphasizing the importance of the love stating that whoever only has faith does not really understand it.

In his poems Sultan Bahu elucidates the difference between faith and love. After knowing God well he was afflicted by love and it is this love which provides him strength to continue day and night showing him the path to follow. The mystic love contains flames, fuel and smoke which are a metaphor for the uncontrollable feelings of passion the love provokes in him. In spite of knowing God well, he was only able to find his Beloved when love struck him.

“Fourteen levels has the creed: the Qur’an, books, all sciences. They shape reeds into pens, but the pens cannot write it! Bahu, my master taught me this creed, and now no pain remains” (1998, 41).

And then exactly twenty pages later, he again relates faith to love.

“Fourteen levels has the heart, where love has pitched its tent. Those who are the heart’s confidants, Bahu, only they recognize the Lord.” (1998, 61). The faith grows in him and for this he praises his guide (1998, 37) in poems 17 and 41. The term faith appears explicitly or in an implied manner 18 times.

### **Visibility of the love (the mystics)**

“Love and musk cannot remain hidden; they must show themselves. They are the true mystics, Bahu, whose place is no place” (1998, 31). Love, as the beautiful smell of musk, is impossible to hide. The mystics are the ones who attain the highest level of love when in meditation their soul wanders. Through the behavior, actions and teachings of the mystics the love is visible. Reference to the mystics is made 18 times.

### **Early in the research the importance of THE GUIDE became evident**

Bahu reiterates the importance of a guide time and time again. In order to be a complete and devoted lover of Allah one must have a guide to direct faith, learning and procedures. The Sufis can obtain every type of knowledge from their guide. In one occasion the guide appears in capital letters so it is known that in this case the ultimate Guide is God. It is not a

reference to the human teacher of religion, rather the divine. 13 references are made to the guide.

## **Remembrance**

Union with God is achieved through another important tenet of the love, the remembrance of Allah (zikhr). In many occasions, such in this case, Bahu utilizes metaphors to explain his points of view. In poem number 17 he explains that God's faith was instilled in him by his guide and enforced by the recitation of Shahada (negation and affirmation There is no God but God). "The creed resoundswithin me, the creed that love taught me". In this case Bahu speaks of the declaration of faith "La ilaha ill-lah". He learnt it through love, the love for Allah. Through remembrance (zikh), all pains of the heart are removed and then Allah can only be recognized through the love that accompanies the faith. Bahu says in poem number 2 "Apart from recollection of the Lord, Bahu, all else is idle chatter". Such is the importance of this tenet. Apart from this verse, remembrance is always implied in the verses of Bahu, for example in negation and affirmation in poem number 17 referring to the declaration of faith with the meaning there is no God but God, another pillar of the remembrance. The term remembrance or referring terms appear 11 times.

## **Conclusion**

The frequency method applied to these poems can be applied to any type of text, prose or poetry, with the purpose of revealing the hierarchy of the importance of sub-topics within the main topic in the mind of the author which in the text may be randomly distributed. In this case, the analysis resulted in eight important points, revealing the factual concept of mystical love in the mind of the poet.

1. The principal tenet is the LOVE for God and its effects, manifested through terms such as love, heart, lover, Lover, Beloved, Companion, etc. This tenet is massively repeated throughout the poems establishing itself as the main topic of the group of poems.
2. Closely following in frequency is the UNITY, the very first sub-topic and the ultimate goal of love in Bahu's mind. It is the unity with the Beloved for which the mystic strives incessantly and when it is not achieved causes pain. Only in the unity with God the pain is relieved. This facet is beautifully expressed in Bahu's poems through elements of extreme originality such as his signature feature at the last verse of every poem, which additionally ensures authorship, that is, his own name, Bahu. This element has been computed as being related and a characteristic of the unity due to the fact that the meaning of it is 'with God'. This clearly exhibits an obvious manifestation of the willingness to unite with the divinity, not only in the poems but also as an indicator of his family's closeness to God.
3. The existence of Allah, (to whom Bahu refers as Allah, the Friend, Lord, God, Truth, He, You, etc.) is the next pillar of Bahu's mystical love. Without this tenet

the rest cannot exist. God is the basis. Terms which make reference to God appear 49 times although in every poem the topic is ultimately directed or related to the original main basis of the book, which is the love for the divine entity.

4. The sacrifice and the pain is the tenet that follows. The material world and its pursuits need to be abandoned in search of the previously mentioned unity and submission to God.
5. Bahu makes a clear difference between faith and love giving more importance to the latter. This is the next pillar of Bahu's mystical love.
6. Subsequently, the love for Allah cannot remain hidden, and so, it is visible to others through the mystics, their actions and their behaviors. The love is manifested visibly in this manner.
7. God, from a mystical point of view is loved through a specific procedure and method. The average religious person is far from this knowledge. For this reason in mystical Islam there is a guide, a teacher, through whom a person can learn the mystic path or the path of love for the Beloved.
8. The last tenet of Bahu's love is the remembrance of the Lord, performed through prayers and repetition of God's names, which leads to the ecstasy as well as the unity.

To conclude, it has been proven that by obtaining the most frequent terms within a poem or group of related poems the main topic as well as sub-topics can be revealed. The method provides a platform for discovery of certain features of sophistication and originality within the poem which would have been hidden otherwise.

## **Future Guidelines**

The above hierarchy is the result of the frequency count. While our approach revealed patterns of originality, elements of sophistication, secret language, etc. a computational program able to identify the meaning of certain metaphors, ambiguities, and so far unidentifiable elements within the poem, is needed for a better understanding of the constituents in it. In addition, this method needs to be tested further in order to improve on it. Furthermore, as far as the work of Sultan Bahu is concerned, deeper linguistic analysis of his texts is needed. The main obstacle being faced in this regard is the fact that the majority of the local languages departments in Pakistani universities only address local languages from a literary perspective, rather than a linguistic point of view.

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