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# Muhammad Ali: The Poet Laureate Of Boxing

Muhammad Ali - one of the most well-known athletes to have walked this earth. He is also often regarded as one of 'the greatest' athletes to have ever existed. Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Clay was an African - American heavyweight boxer. In the ring, he was a fierce fighter, but outside of the ring he was known for his braggadocio and trash-talking, thus, resulting in the name of 'the Louisville lip'. With the odds undoubtedly against him, as a black man in the 1960's, being Muslim and refusing to be drafted for the army; how did Ali create such an avid following? Ali knew his audience and how to use language to gain their attention and as a result, support. He had his own brand of speech, which used in all different settings to promote himself and infamously, to trash talk his opponents. He effortlessly talked in rhyme and brutally attacked his opponents verbally before matches. This allowed him to 'get into their heads' and to establish dominance, giving him control and the ability to take advantage of the situation.

## Personality

Referred to as 'The Louisville Lip,' he was funny and quotable and employed one-liner poetry in numerous situations which played various purposes. Sometimes, it was to give him the pre-game confidence boost ('I'm so mean I make medicine sick.'). Sometimes, it was to affect his opponents and to distract them (Sonny Liston was 'too ugly to be the world's champ.'). Sometimes, it was to express his opinions on being an African American man (and celebrity) in an era where there was a racial apartheid ('I know I got it made while the masses of black people are catchin' hell, but as long as they ain't free, I ain't free.'). Although much of what Ali was in a tongue-in-cheek manner, the power of his words was almost as destructive as his fists. The nicknames he gave his opponents (George Chuvalo: the 'Washerwoman;' Earnie Shavers: the 'Acorn;' and George Foreman: the 'Mummy') inculcated a sense of fear in his opponents even before the match had started and allowed him to gain the upper hand in numerous situations.

Confident and cocky is what Ali presented himself as with one-liners (as stated above) delivered with palatable authenticity. He time and time again boasted of his boxing abilities and gloated over his wins. His self-confidence and almost narcissistic personality as well as enraging media persona made him very well known in both the white and minority populations. He was renowned for this self-confidence which frequently extended beyond pre-match taunts to nominating the exact round in which he would win. He used poems designed to extol his talents <http://theconversation.com/what-made-muhammad-ali-the-greatest-in-the-ring-60521> and make his opponents feel unsettled. He demonstrated this linguistically in multiple ways:

Ali often voiced his faith in himself by repeating short phrases that described his boxing abilities. Phrases such as 'I am the greatest' are very easily understood and have positive sentential semantics. He uses the superlative form of good to define himself, therefore indicating there is nothing better than him, and he is superior. This is also exemplified in his well-known catchphrase 'float like a butterfly sting like a bee, his hands can't hit what his eyes can't see'. In this instance, not only does the sentence rhyme, it perfectly juxtaposes his boxing abilities with that of his opponents. He uses lexemes such as 'float' and 'sting', which again, hold positive lexical semantics, however, when describing his opponent, he uses lexemes that have

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negative lexical semantics such as 'can't'.

Over time, Ali's competitive success and his lexical choice in words with positive connotations seemed legitimate to justify his self-belief and enabled him to instil an impression that he was almost superhuman. This factor was further accepted as the public, in a turbulent social and political time were looking for a person to idolise. The self-belief and illusion of superhuman qualities were arguably instrumental in enabling Ali to win many matches (Thrilla in Manila, Rumble in the Jungle, etc).

## Expression

Muhammad Ali's hallmarked way of speaking is characterised by the distinct prosodic features of volume, tempo and stress. Muhammad Ali consistently spoke in a loud volume. This allowed him to capture the attention of his audience, additionally, he speaks at a fast tempo, further allowing the audience to keep alert to not miss anything while he speaks. Moreover, he puts stress on certain words, especially at end of rhyming words for example in this excerpt from his poem 'I am the Greatest' "Now Clay swings with a right, what a beautiful swing, And the punch raises the Bear clear of the ring. Liston is still rising, and the ref wears a frown, For he can't start counting till Sonny comes down." He increases his volume, slows his speed and pauses after saying "swing" and "ring" as well as "frown" and "down" to create emphasis on his braggadocio. Furthermore, he also uses a vocal growl to emphasize certain words. Ali also uses very extravagant paralinguistic features when speaking. They were instrumental in conveying his point as he used hand gestures to emphasise each point such as a pointed finger or an arm banging on a table in conjunction to facial expressions that showed conviction to what he is speaking about, such as direct eye-contact and raised brows. These paralinguistic features also allowed Ali to present himself as someone confident and passionate about what he is talking about.

## Knowing his audience

Muhammad Ali knew who his audience and as a result, how to make an avid following out of said people. The audience for boxing at that time was mainly people of the middle class or lower (middle-lower and lower class) status. He knew what would make these people watch the match; making outrageous claims, taunting and belittling his opponents, reciting pre-game trash-talk poems, predicting of the round his matches would end and his claim of the title of 'the Greatest' greatly fascinated and intrigued the audience. These acts employed pathos and evoked the emotions of anger or spite towards him – to prove him wrong the people would go to the matches and then after being victorious, Ali would gain supporters.

He also spoke using basic lexemes, short sentences and simple syntax so the majority of the population would be able to understand him. For example, before his famous match against George Foreman, he said "Now you see me, now you don't. George thinks he will, but I know he won't." Ali acknowledged the fact that he did not need to use complicated lexemes to convey his point to his audience of middle-class people, instead he opts to use short succinct sentences to make it very comprehensible. Another example is in his catchphrase of "float like a butterfly sting like a bee, his arms can't hit what his eyes can't see" instead of using technical boxing jargon, he uses similes to describe his boxing style so that everyone would be able to understand his boxing style. Additionally, not only does he speak in non-standard

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English so that again, everyone in the audience can understand him, he also uses it to create a connection to his audience. This allowed him to gain support as he talked in a manner and had the same idiolect as someone from the working class. He understood that formal language was not required, and it allowed him to connect with his audience in a way no other boxer/ athlete could.

## Patterns

Muhammad Ali used a very powerful tool to create an impression in the population. He used repetition, repetition is used in many marketing campaigns to keep a brand or product in front of mind. Reusing certain images, words and messages can create a sense of familiarity, making it more likely that people will remember your brand and (hopefully) like it.

<https://www.salmat.com.au/blog> This same concept can be applied to Ali's speech patterns which include repeating the same phrases over and over again (e.g. I am the Greatest), by reiterating the same message it allows him to solidify his image of being The Greatest in the audience's mind. However, he was aware of not overusing this phrase to not cause a phenomenon called 'customer fatigue' where people actively tune out or ignore a certain object or thing because of constant repetition. He also uses the rhetorical device of anadiplosis to emphasise his points. It allows him to creatively convey his point to the public in an almost lyrical or rhythmic way. "Don't count the days, make the days count." In this quote, anadiplosis is used to create stress on the word 'days' as well as 'count' to bring particular attention to these two words. He also frequently uses rhyme in his poems to 'give pleasure and aid memory in recitation' <https://education.seattlepi.com/rhythm-rhyme-important-poems-6546.html>, therefore, by using rhyme he is not only able to communicate his point to the audience he is also able to make a lasting impression to the audience.

All of the above linguistic features can be seen in this below example:

Mr Cassius Marcellus Clay.

I AM THE GREATEST!

This is the legend of Cassius Clay,

The most beautiful fighter in the world today.

He talks a great deal, and brags indeed-y,

of a muscular punch that's incredibly speed-y.

The fistic world was dull and weary,

But with a champ like Liston, things had to be dreary.

Then someone with color and someone with dash,

Brought fight fans are runnin' with Cash.

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This brash young boxer is something to see  
And the heavyweight championship is his des-tin-y.  
This kid fights great; he's got speed and endurance,  
But if you sign to fight him, increase your insurance.  
This kid's got a left; this kid's got a right,  
If he hit you once, you're asleep for the night.  
And as you lie on the floor while the ref counts ten,  
You'll pray that you won't have to fight me again.  
For I am the man this poem's about,  
The next champ of the world, there isn't a doubt.  
This I predict and I know the score,  
I'll be champ of the world in '64.  
When I say three, they'll go in the third,  
So don't bet against me, I'm a man of my word.  
He is the greatest! Yes!  
I am the man this poem's about,  
I'll be champ of the world, there isn't a doubt.  
Here I predict Mr. Liston's dismemberment,  
I'll hit him so hard; he'll wonder where October and November went.  
When I say two, there's never a third,  
Standin against me is completely absurd.  
When Cassius says a mouse can outrun a horse,  
Don't ask how; put your money where your mouse is!  
**I AM THE GREATEST!**

This poem was recited before the boxing match between Muhammad Ali against the long-

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reigning heavy-weight champion, Sonny Liston. In response to this match, it was often commented that Ali was the underdog, the odds were not in Ali's favour and his chance of winning against his opponent was very slim. As a response, Ali needed as much support and publicity he could get to try and intimidate and to gain dominance over his opponent. This was clearly successful as the poem 'The Greatest' allowed him to be known in the boxing world as the cocky, almost narcissistic, Cassius Clay and some even speculate, to win the match.

When reciting this poem, phonologically, he speaks in an extremely loud voice, this allows him to appear very confident. In this scenario, him being confident also allows the crowd to see that he is confident in his abilities in boxing and his ability to win the match, this attitude can also translate to the crowd, making them also start to recognise and support Ali before his match. It can also intimidate and affect his opponent, Liston and therefore, give himself leverage even before the match. Ali also increases in volume when describing himself. This grasps the audience's attention and it makes it seem like when he raises his volume, the subject (in this case, himself) is more important or superior to the other parts of the sentence where he speaks in a lower volume. With only his phonology he can make the crowd subconsciously support him.

Humour is also a critical component in Ali's poem, this tool is particularly powerful as this allows Ali to have his poem resonate with and communicate his contention (in this situation, it is that he is better than sonny Liston, and will win the match) to the public very effectively. This is because humour allows for confronting or threatening topics to be discussed in a non-confrontational way, allowing for the majority of people to agree with him and his perspective on different subjects. Rhyme is also a powerful tool to make things 'stick' with people. Therefore, by using rhyme, it allows for his poem to further resonate and 'stick' with the audience. With the poem being remembered by the audience it also makes them remember that Ali is the greatest and the best.

In conjunction to using lexemes that are plain (easily understood) and sentences that are short and direct, it also allows for most people to understand which was critical for Ali. When he mocks and ridicules Liston, it not only puts him into a position of power, where it allows him to be more dominant over Liston, it also makes the audience believe the image of Liston that he is portraying. Thus, allowing him to seem superior and gain more support. The lexemes he uses to describe Liston also all have negative connotations, for example: 'dreary' and 'weary', juxtaposed to the adjectives he describes himself, which all have positive connotations such as: 'speedy' and 'greatest'. This also allows Ali to intimidate and have more power against Liston. He also repeats the phrase 'The Greatest' a term he refers to himself as. Repetition "encourages the acceptance of an idea. When you repeat and emphasise one idea, competing ideas are subordinated and sometimes are driven completely out of the audience's mind." <http://www.cfug-md.org/speakertips/782.html> Consequently, this makes all previous opinions people had towards/about him to be replaced with him being 'The Greatest'.

Through and after his career, Muhammad Ali gained millions of supporters and fans. His memorable 'poems' and personality as well as his dedication to various causes, allowed him to rise in fame and portray himself as 'superman'. He acted as if he was better and talked with his unique flair.

"When I'm gone, boxing will be nothing again. The fans with the cigars and the hats turned down'll be there, but no more housewives and little men in the street and foreign presidents. It's goin' to be back to the fighter who comes to town, smells a flower, visits a hospital, blows a

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horn and says he's in shape. Old hat. I was the onliest boxer in history people asked questions like a senator."

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