

Understanding and Teaching Slam Poetry: An Empirical Research of University Students

Réka Sólyom, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Hungary
Andrea Pap, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

The Paris Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper focuses on the definition of slam poetry and its possible uses in the classroom. Based on two Hungarian slam poetry performances, qualitative empirical research has been conducted on Hungarian university students. During a slam poetry performance, the slammer creates a rhetorical situation, in which a new genre organises the experiences of the audience (cf. Sólyom, 2022, Sólyom & Pap, 2021). Slam poetry can, therefore, be regarded as a proactive genre (Simon, 2016, p. 96), and a hybrid medium (Mészáros, 2020, p. 77). The present study's two key questions are 1) how does slam poetry differ from canonical literary genres? And 2) how can it be employed in the classroom? The first survey was conducted in Autumn 2022, and the second in Spring 2023. The respondents of the surveys belong to two groups of students: 1) those majoring in Hungarian; 2) those with different language majors, and Hungarian as a foreign language minor. After having watched the performances, the respondents worked in small groups, and based on concise instructions, with the help of clustering techniques, they collected the most prevalent features of slam poetry concerning the questions of genre, and the possible use of slam poetry texts in the educational process. Based on the two surveys, a comparative analysis is possible: similarities and differences can be highlighted between the answers of the two groups regarding their attitudes and understanding processes towards slam poetry.

Keywords: Clustering, Genre, Slam Poetry, Survey, Tertiary Education

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

Employing a functional cognitive framework, this paper focuses on the definition of slam poetry and its possible uses in the classroom. Its aim is to answer questions about the definition, understanding and slam poetry's appearance in the classroom. Two major questions are considered, namely how slam poetry differs from canonical literary genres, and how slam poetry can be employed in the educational process. To answer these questions, this study presents the results of two surveys conducted on different groups of university students, based on brainstorming and reflecting on two slam poetry performances.

Definitions of Slam Poetry

In February 2023, readers of the Facebook Page of Slam Poetry Hungary (Slam Poetry Magyarország) witnessed an interesting experiment: ChatGPT was asked to write an article for a blog about slam poetry. It is worth examining ChatGPT's knowledge of this genre, especially regarding texts which seek to define slam poetry (data retrieved on 3rd February, 2023). ChatGPT emphasises that slam poetry "(...) is typically performed in a competition format, where poets perform their original works in front of a live audience and a panel of judges." As key elements, audience interaction and engagement are highlighted, as well as the focus on social and political issues. ChatGPT's definition is that "(...) slam poetry is a dynamic form of performance poetry that combines elements of spoken word, theatre, and audience participation."

As a genre, slam poetry has many definitions. Norbert Vass defines it as a "post-modern performance poetry" (Vass 2012: 2) and emphasises that it is a kind of "oral poetry" (Vass, 2012, p. 38), whereas Mészáros considers it to be a "hybrid medium" (Mészáros, 2020, p. 77). Simon emphasises that it is a "proactive genre" (Simon, 2016, p. 96), while Cello adds that it involves "performative co-participation" (Cello, 2022, p. 342). In short, it is a hybrid genre, which is created through language, but also builds upon the relationship between the slammer and their audience that is forged during its performance (Cello, 2022, p. 345).

It is essential to remember that the slammer and their audience take place in a classical rhetorical situation, during which a novel genre (viz. slam poetry) is being created. This genre contains many features of "classical," "canonical" genres known by the audience, which is why the process of the performance can evoke the audience's previous experiences (cf. Ayosso & Marichez, 2010, Sólyom & Pap, 2021, Sólyom, 2022).

There are, however, dilemmas linked to the definitions of a genre characterised by its "hybridity" (Mészáros, 2020, p. 87). From a cognitive linguistic viewpoint, the fuzziness of boundaries during categorising (cf. Langacker 1987, p. 17, Tolcsvai Nagy 2013, p. 125) the genre of slam poetry (viz. the different viewpoints in its definitions) can also be witnessed, but "(...) other phenomena can play a role in the overlaps and heterogeneity within genre categorisation (...)" (Sólyom, 2022, p. 100). We can assume that the "canonical" theory of genres, which is taught in schools, conventionalises and rigidly interprets the essentially ephemeral phenomenon of slam poetry. Consequently, its definitions are based on and related to the "canonical" genres and forms (e.g., poem, free verse, drama, etc.).

In this paper, we emphasise the importance of the dynamic and "mixed" features of slam poetry, which can be studied and characterised by language users' experiences, attitudes, and opinions about it. In other words, we seek generic definition from the bottom up rather than

the top down. To do so, two surveys of university students were conducted, and based on the data given by the respondents, language users' attitude and knowledge about slam poetry will be shown.

Main Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Informants

The two main research questions of the survey were the following: 1) how does slam poetry differ from canonical literary genres? and 2) how can it be employed in the educational process?

There were two hypotheses: firstly, we assumed that it was difficult or even impossible to introduce slam poetry into the definitions of the canonical genres. Secondly, we supposed that some differences could be observed between the two groups of respondents (university students with different majors) in terms of what conceptual schema were used to define slam poetry.

The first survey took place in Autumn 2022, and the second survey in Spring 2023. The respondents consisted of two groups of university students. In the first group (2022), there were 20 students majoring in Hungarian, all of whom attended Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, whereas in the second group (2023), which consisted of students attending Eötvös Loránd University, there were also 20 students, with different majors, and Hungarian as a foreign language minor.

Based on these two surveys, conducted in a different period with two different target groups, a comparative analysis is possible, in which similarities and differences can be highlighted between the answers of the two groups regarding their attitudes towards and understanding of slam poetry.

Methodology

During the survey, the respondents had to fulfil two types of tasks, the first of which took place before having watched two Hungarian slam poetry performances, and the second of which took place after having watched the performances. The first task was brainstorming on their own: in about ten minutes, informants were asked to write down their associations, experiences or memories about slam poetry. We told the students that they could write about anything that came to mind (e.g., about the genre, the performers or their attitude toward slam poetry).

The second task entailed group work: after having watched two slam poetry performances twice, the students had to work in small groups of three or four to prepare mind maps about slam poetry, with the help of clustering techniques. They were told that 1) they should work together; and 2) they could put anything into the mind-maps that they considered important.

Working with mind maps can be a useful tool in collecting and studying the associations of language users on a specific topic, not only in research, but also during the teaching process. The advantages of using mind maps are summarised by Óhidy as follows: "On the one hand, it helps collect the creative ideas and associations, which can be linked to the topic (...); on the other, it helps systematise knowledge through the representation of different logical relationships and connections. The graphical representation of concepts, ideas linked to the topic correspond to the arranging activity of the human brain" (Óhidy, 2005, my translation).

In tertiary education, the benefits of using mind maps are undeniable. Firstly, when used in group work, preparing mind-maps strengthens group cohesion. Secondly, it helps collect various ideas and associations, and arranges them in a functional, organic whole. Thirdly, it depicts the students' cognitive processes. Finally, it motivates students to talk about their ideas and associations fluently and effectively, so it can be good practice for students (and especially for future teachers, who took part in the two surveys).

Differences Between the Results in the Two Surveys: Brainstorming

As previously mentioned, in this task, respondents in both groups were asked to brainstorm on their own, and without watching the two slam poetry performances or talking about the genre, they had to put down their conceptual associations regarding the topic.

In this task, we asked students to freely associate their ideas about genre itself and to try to define it (if possible), and then list all the features and characteristics connected to slam poetry (e.g., contests, slammers, their personal opinions). Students who did not know anything about slam poetry were asked simply to write down: "I do not know anything about slam poetry." There were four respondents altogether, all of whom were in the second group and none of whom were majoring in Hungarian, that informed us they did not know anything about slam poetry, but they tried to get the gist of the genre from the meaning of the words in the term (e.g., by starting their ideas either from the word *slam* or *poetry*).

Those who wrote comments in this task reflected on five aspects of slam poetry: 1) on the genre itself (they tried to define it according to "canonical" genres or forms like poem or free verse); 2) on the slammer or their audience (with special regard to their relationship); 3) on the performance (the circumstances and tools used during the performances); 4) on the content (prototypical topics and stylistic features were mentioned); 5) they expressed their personal attitudes towards the genre.

In this section, their comments concerning these points of view will be listed, illustrated with examples. Their replies will be listed in two groups, according to the major of the students.

As for the comments on the genre, students majoring in Hungarian wrote e.g., "it can either be a poem or a prose"; "free form"; "rhythm"; "something between a poem and rap." Students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor wrote e.g., "there are not many tropes"; "poem-like"; "free verse"; "it is a new genre." The free form of slam poetry texts was mentioned in both groups.

Concerning the comments on the slammer and/or on the audience, students majoring in Hungarian wrote e.g., "young people"; "peers," "trendy"; "feelings & thoughts"; "contests, and concrete names of slammers were mentioned. Students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor wrote e.g., "young people"; "the slammer 'gets down to business'"; and names of slammers were mentioned. Both groups mentioned that either the slammers or the audience consisted of young people, and in both groups, there were students who could mention the names of particular Hungarian slammers.

Additionally, there were comments on the performance of the slammer in both groups of respondents. Students majoring in Hungarian mentioned "improvisation," "oral performance," and the names of the Hungarian cities where slam poetry contests were held. Students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor wrote e.g., "oral performance,"

“performance with music,” “performance in front of an audience.” As we can see, the orality of slam poetry was mentioned in both groups, and while students who were not majoring in Hungarian focused on the circumstances of the performances, students with Hungarian major wrote some concrete data (e.g., names of cities).

As for the comments on the content, those majoring in Hungarian mentioned the fact that it tends to be “outspoken” [style], “frank,” “critical,” “freedom,” “current [topics].” Students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor mentioned its “creativity”, the fact that “there was a pun in the text,” along with its “freedom,” “outspoken [style],” “cursing,” and “vulgarity.” Both groups mentioned the outspoken style, but while the students majoring in Hungarian focused on more positive features of the genre (e.g., its “frankness,” “freedom,” “current”), students without a Hungarian major emphasised more negative characteristics (e.g., its “cursing,” and “vulgarity”).

In the case of opinions concerning the respondents’ personal attitude towards the genre, the most prominent difference was that in the case of students with a major in Hungarian there was only one answer that said they did not like the genre and would not like it in the future. Yet in the case of students with no Hungarian major, a dislike or lack of interest in slam poetry was expressed five times. Respondents majoring in Hungarian observed: “I do not like it, and I will not like it”; “I like it”; “once I attended to a contest”; “it will suppress the traditional genres.” Answers among students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor, e.g. “I personally do not like it, it is too ‘edgy’ for me”; “I have only seen slam poetry in American films”; “I do not know it, it must be a kind of poem”; “I do not know it, it must be some kind of poetry, but I am interested in it”; “I have not seen a performance, but I am interested in the genre”; “I have not heard about it”; “I am not interested in it” (four times); “I have not seen any performances”; “I have not heard about it, and I do not want to get to know it.”

In conclusion, there were more critical remarks concerning the content of performances among students not majoring in Hungarian. In the case of the personal attitude of this group, there were also more negative attitudes towards the genre itself (e.g., they are not interested in it).

Mind Maps: 1) Students With Hungarian Major (Figure 1, 2); 2) Students With Hungarian as a Foreign Language Minor (Figure 3, 4)

In this section, we show four of the thirteen mind maps the students produced. We chose to show these four mind maps because these proved to be the most prototypical representation in characterizing the different ways of organizing thoughts in the process understanding and interpreting the two slam poetry performances.

The first and the second mind maps below (Figure 1, 2) were prepared by students majoring in Hungarian, while the third and the fourth mind maps (Figure 3 and 4) were prepared by students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor. The second and third mind maps (Figure 2 and 3) primarily focus on describing the genre of slam poetry. In the first mind map (Figure 1), the two texts and slammers were the basis of describing the various aspects and characteristics, whereas in the final mind map (Figure 4), we can observe that the term slam poetry does not appear. As we can see, differences can be observed in the four prototypical mind maps, which we analyse in more detail.

Figure 1 represents the prototype of the 13 analyzed mind maps which is based on the description of the two texts and slammers. The two texts and the slammers were compared. The term 'slam' appears in the middle of the figure, and the two slammers (1. Zsófi – her first name, 2. Saiid – his stage name) are connected to it on the right and the left side (framed in black). Below each slammer, we can read the characteristics of their poetry, considering various analytical aspects: 1. Zsófi: “cynicism, sarcasm, self-presentation, self-criticism, mention of specific people, writer's vein”; 2. Saiid: “social topic, call to action, more rhythmic - rapper past, political approach, references to pop-culture.” In the middle of the mind map, linked to the term 'slam', there are comments on various aspects that characterize both performances (e.g.: “puns, change of speaking pace, enumeration, repetition, contrast, metaphor, simile, rhymes, alliteration, outspoken, no formal requirements, works only verbally”). On this mind map five citations were also written from the two texts.

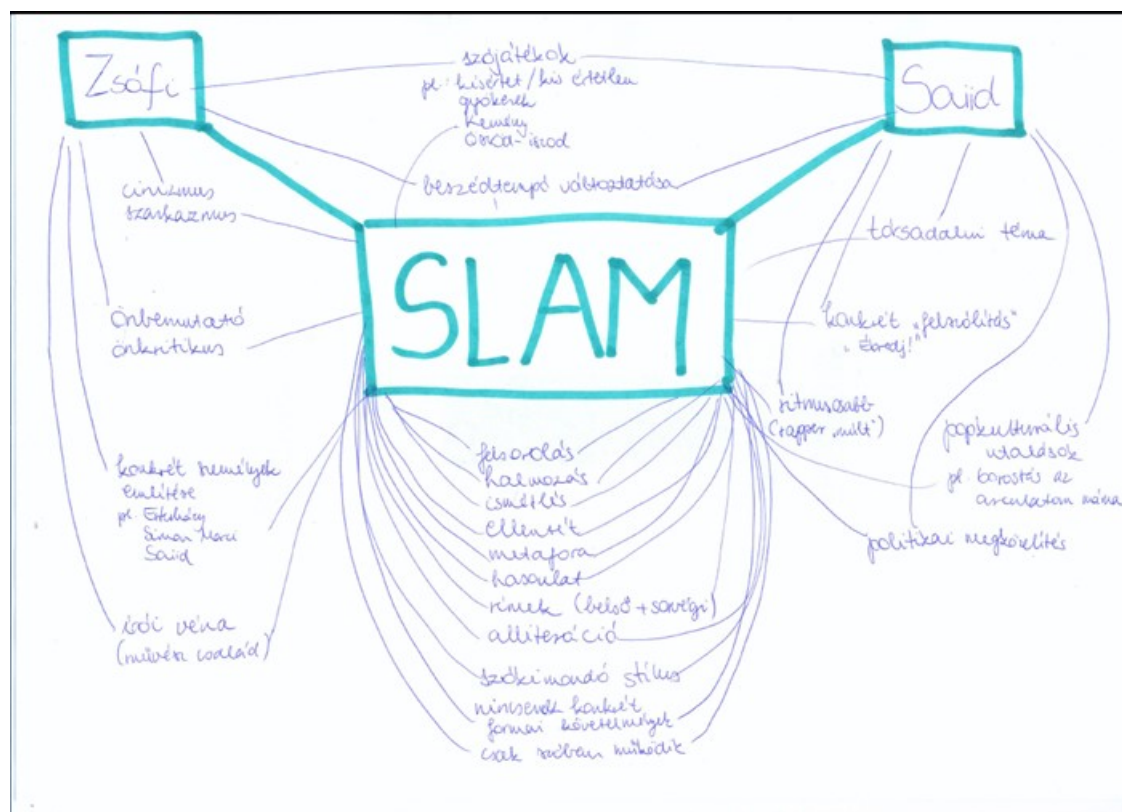


Figure 1: Mind map of students majoring in Hungarian.

In the case of the second mind map, which was also prepared by students majoring in Hungarian (Figure 2), a different method was employed to interpret slam poetry, namely it was made based only on the generic description of the genre. The term slam is located at the centre of the mind map, and the three genres (lyric, epic, drama) are named in connection to it, as well as the comments referring to slam poetry (framed in red), without emphasizing each analytical aspect or category: “pun, emphasis, condensed plot, dialogue-like, references, intertext, politics, emotions, rhyme, refrain, *figura etymologica*, enumeration, characters, linear.” On this mind map six citations were also written.



Figure 2: Mind map of students majoring in Hungarian.

The central aspect of the third mind map, which was prepared by students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor, is the term ‘slam poetry.’ Below this, characteristics related to the genre, topic and style are highlighted: “poem, rap (stand-up comedy); social criticism, modern, vulgar, outspoken, puns, rhymes.” On this mind map five citations were also written (e.g.: “I’m only bothered by the heart rate.”).

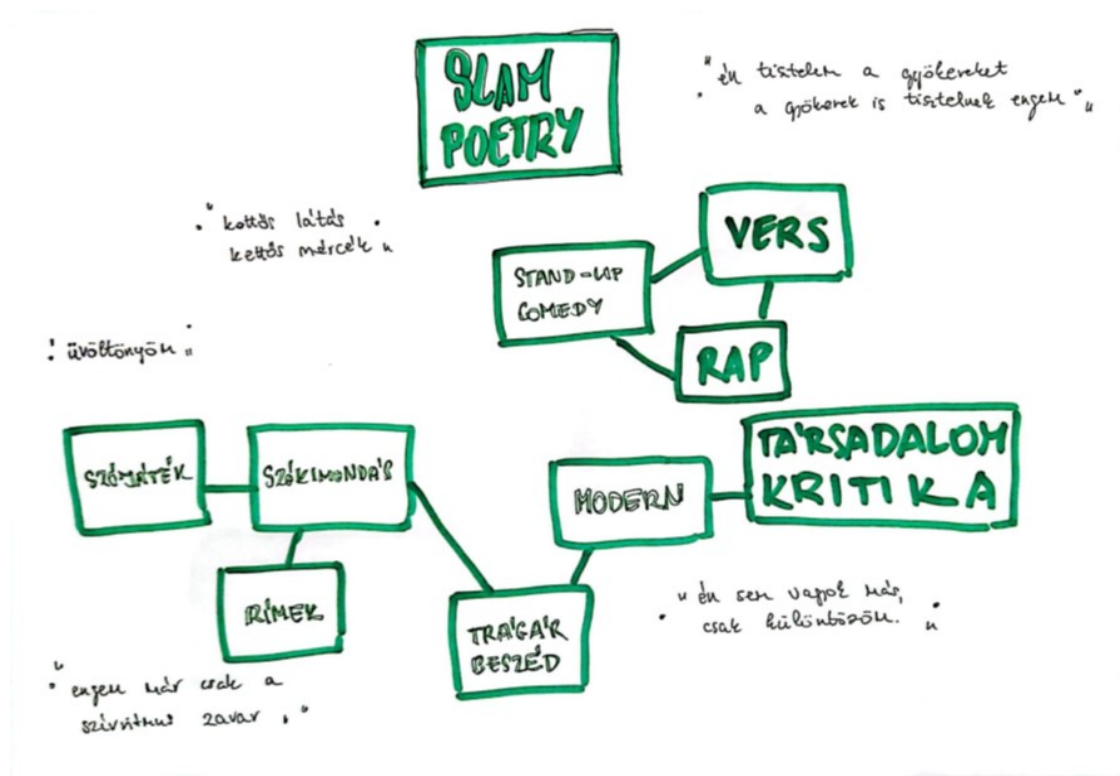


Figure 3: Mind map of students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor.

The fourth mind map, which was also prepared by students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor, Figure 4, could be considered the most significant one in that the term ‘slam poetry’ does not appear at all. The central, starting idea can be read at the top of the mind map (framed in green): criticism. In connection with this, four other important aspects are highlighted (in relation to slam texts), to which additional characteristics are connected: 1. “world, society, politics”; 2. “feelings” (e.g.: “temper, anger, cynicism, irony, disillusionment, alienation”); 3. “literary devices” (e.g.: “simile, alliteration, rhymes, frame structure”); 4. presentation style (e.g.: pause, volume, emphasis, mime).”

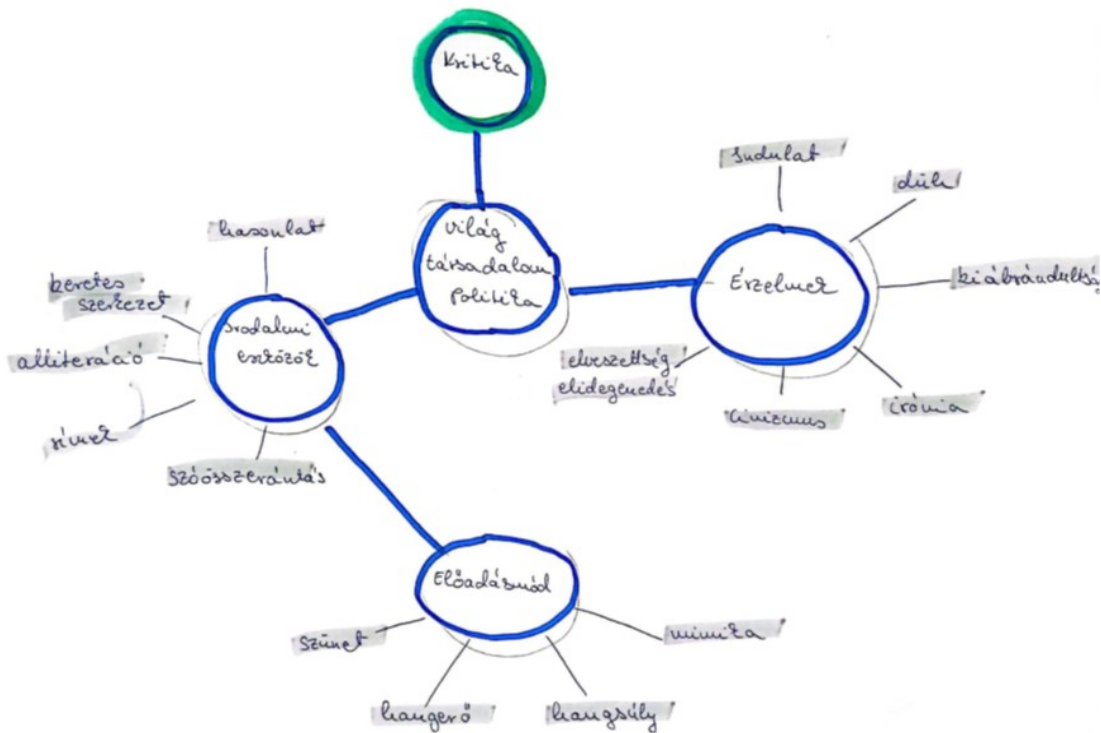


Figure 4: Mind map of students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor.

Mind Maps: A General Overview

This subsection provides a general overview of the mind maps, and the significant findings of this part of the research will be presented. In the analyses, we have worked with a total of thirteen mind maps (7 mind maps prepared by students majoring in Hungarian, and 6 prepared by students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor).

In the case of (1) students majoring in Hungarian, the performances were analysed in two ways (on the mind maps): 1) The two texts and slammers were the basis for organizing thoughts, ideas, and formal aspects of the poetry. Students compared the two texts and described similarities and differences like comments on the genre; on the content/topic; on the stylistic features/language, or on the performance. 2) In the other case, the mind maps were made based on the genre description: like general information, comments on the genre, the content/topic, the stylistic features, and on the relationship between the slammer and the audience.

In the case of (2) students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor, different ways of analyses are identifiable. Differences can be observed in the association process: the mind maps were made based only on the genre description, and the two slam poetry performances and slammers were not characterized separately. In one mind map, the term slam poetry does not appear.

In a part of the mind maps, there are also some quotes cited from the texts (in the case of group 1: in 5 maps; in group 2: in 3 maps); and in some mind maps, the students' analysis was more prominent (in the group 1: in 2 maps; in the group 2: in 4 maps). In conclusion, there are certain differences between the association processes of the two groups. Another

relevant observation was that the students majoring in Hungarian cited the poems a good deal more.

Analysis of Mind Maps: Differences

While analysing the mind maps, particular attention was paid to what the students were studying. The main difference that can be seen between the mind maps is that some groups of students majoring in Hungarian divided the mind maps into two groups, based on the performer's (slammer's) name. In the case of students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor, their mind maps are not divided into two parts based on the performers' names. They focused either on the content or the audience.

Another difference is that the mind maps of students majoring in Hungarian contain more precise descriptions and terms, which usually refer to the genre. We can suppose that this characterisation is based on the former and present studies of the students, and the terms they use can be found in literary terms, e.g., "alliteration," "free verse," "intertext," "metaphor," "pun," "rhythm," and "simile."

As previously mentioned, the mind maps of students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor do not focus on the two slammers, but they collect features of the performance instead. Although some concrete terms (e.g., "poem," "rhymes," "pun") occur in their mind maps, there are not as many stylistic terms among them as in the mind maps of students majoring in Hungarian. This group focused on the content and the audience of the performances instead; they highlighted the most prevalent, but everyday features of the two performances. Words that characterise the topic of the performances are e.g., "depression," "disillusion," "taboo dissolution," and "historical," while words that refer either to the slammer or the audience include "millennials," "self-criticism," "stand-up comedy," and "young people." As we can see, the most important difference between the mind maps of the two groups is their focus, which is used during the description of the genre, and the details, which characterise the descriptions. The mind maps of the group majoring in Hungarian contained more precise, academic terms than the mind maps of the group with no Hungarian major. This might be due to their studies in tertiary education, both in linguistic and literary fields.

Analysis of Mind Maps: Similarities

Besides the differences, some similarities are apparent. These similarities can be divided into four fields, based on the topics to which they refer. The first group contains comments on the literary forms in the case of both groups, e.g. "drama," and "lyric." The second group focuses on the genre, e.g., "rap," and "verse." The third type of comments refers to the content, e.g., "politics," and "society criticism." And there are comments also on the form of the texts, e.g., "alliteration," "curses," "outspoken," "rhymes," "simile," and "slang." Ultimately, both groups of students recorded some general comments on their mind maps, but these features characterise the genre of slam poetry in general, and they mostly contain elements, which are taught during primary and secondary school years.

Proving the Hypotheses

In Hypothesis 1, we assumed that it was difficult or even impossible to introduce slam poetry into canonical definitions, and based on this we assumed that the comments would show the students' previous "school" experiences, based on previously acquired knowledge and

expectations. The analysis showed that prior knowledge has an impact on the interpretation of slam poetry, but such a form is difficult to define according to canonical genres. Based on these results, we can conclude that slam poetry is a “non-canonical” genre.

In Hypothesis 2, we assumed that the two groups of university students use different categorization schema to define slam poetry. In the case of students majoring in Hungarian, two principles of categorization were used: 1) one principle focused on the two slammers; 2) the other principle was based on the general description of the genre. Students with Hungarian as a foreign language minor did not focus on the two slammers, but only on generic description.

Conclusions

This paper has been focused on the understanding and teaching processes of a “non-canonical” genre, namely slam poetry. Based on two recent surveys (conducted in Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023), the differences, and the similarities in the answers of the two groups of university students have been compared.

It has been revealed that students majoring in Hungarian (who are future teachers of Hungarian) focused more on the description of the genre as a part of literary knowledge, adding more precise features to their descriptions of the genre in general, along with reflections on the content and the form of the slam poetry performances. However, students with no Hungarian major focused only on the content and the style of the performances, and they did not add as many precise, technical elements to their mind maps.

The results of this survey can be used in other fields. Firstly, they can be incorporated into planning the teaching process of present-day literary genres at different levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). Secondly, with the help of data gained during empirical research, more emphasis can be put on the former knowledge of students, which might be useful in avoiding repetitions of former knowledge during the description of the genre, and in teaching new aspects of slam poetry.

Acknowledgements

Work on this paper was supported by the research grant K-137659 “Corpus-based cognitive poetic research on person marking constructions” and by Eötvös Loránd University.

References

- Ayosso, J., & Marichez, H. (2010). Écrire, déclamer, inventer : l'expérience d'un groupe Thérapeutique de slam pour adolescents. *Enfances & Psy*, 48, 85–94.
- Cello, S. (2022). Slammeurs et public : une coparticipation performative. *Altre Modernità: Rivista di studi letterari e culturali*, 28, 342–350.
- Langacker, R. (1987). *Foundations of cognitive grammar. Vol. I. Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Mészáros, M. (2020). A slam poetry mint műfaj és/vagy medium. [Slam poetry as a genre and/or a medium.] *Partitúra*, 2, 77–88.
- Óhidy, A. (2005). Az eredményes tanítási óra jellemzői. Kooperatív tanulási formák a gyakorlatban. [Features of the effective lesson. Cooperative learning forms in practice.] *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*, 12, digital publishing, <https://folyoiratok.oh.gov.hu/uj-pedagogiai-szemle/az-eredmenyes-tanitasi-ora-jellemzoi> (retrieved: 2023.04.10.).
- Simon, G. (2016). On Patterns of Intersubjective Cognition in Didactic Poetry. *Logos & Littera: Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text*, 2, 90–112.
- Sólyom, R. (2022). A slammer bölcsészszemmel: kérdőíves felmérés egyetemisták körében két slam poetry szövegről. [The slammer through the eye of an arts student: a questionnaire among university students about two slam poetry texts.] *Tempevölgy: kultúra, művészet, tudomány*, 3, 92–104.
- Sólyom R., & Pap A. (2021). Magyar költők megidézése. Két slam poetry szöveg empirikus vizsgálatának tanulságai. [Evoking Hungarian poets. Lessons from the analysis of two slam poetry texts.] In K. Laczkó, & Sz. Tátrai (Eds.), *Líra, poétika, diskurzus* (pp. 273–292). Budapest: ELTE Eötvös József Collegium.
- Tolcsvai Nagy, G. (2013). *Bevezetés a kognitív nyelvészetbe*. [An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics.] Budapest: Osiris Kiadó.
- Vass, N. (2012). Kis hazai slamtörténet, avagy a text-tusák kontextusa. [Short history of domestic slam, or the context of the battles of texts.] *Szépirodalmi Figyelő*, 6, 36–51.

Contact emails: solyom.reka@kre.hu
pap.andrea@btk.elte.hu