

Medical Poetry and Physician-Poets: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Rafael Campo's Poems

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Received Oct.13 2025

Revised Oct.20, 2025

Accepted Jan.22, 2026

Online Apr.1, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the language of poet-physicians and shows how medicine is presented in medical poems. The aim of this paper is to examine the relation among medicine, literature, and language. The primary research questions in this paper are: What are the linguistic structures employed to present poet-physicians and their mastery of both medicine and art? And what are the ideological functions of linguistic choices in the presentation of the relationship between poet-physicians and the patient? To fulfill the aims of the study and answer the research questions, three medical poems by Raffael Campo are analyzed using Jeffries's (2010) critical stylistic tools (i.e., naming and describing, representing events/actions/states, equating and contrasting, and implying and assuming). The analysis has revealed that Campo's linguistic choices ideologically democratize the medical encounter, presenting doctor and patient as co-participants in meaning-making. The physician's voice is not authoritative but reflective; the patient's body is not an object but a storyteller. Through stylistic balance between scientific precision and poetic imagination, Campo constructs an inclusive discourse in which medicine becomes an act of compassion and art a form of healing.

Keywords: Critical Stylistics, Medical Poetry, Poet-Physicians, Ideology, and Identity.

الشعر الطبي والاطباء الشعراء: تحليل اسلوبي نقدي لقصائد رافائيل كامبو

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في لغة الاطباء الشعراء ، وتستكشف كيفية تمثيل الطب في الشعر الطبي. وتهدف الى فحص العلاقة بين الطب والادب واللغة. وتتمثل أسئلة البحث الرئيسية في : ما البنى اللغوية المستعملة في تقديم الاطباء الشعراء وابرار تمكنهم من كل من الطب والفن ؟ وما الوظائف الايديولوجية للاختيارات اللغوية في تمثيل العلاقة بين الطبيب الشاعر والمريض؟ ولتحقيق اهداف الدراسة والاجابة عن اسئلتها، تم تحليل ثلاث قصائد طبية للشاعر الطبيب رافائيل كامبو بالاعتماد على الادوات الاسلوبية النقدية التي قدمتها جيفريز (2010): وهي : التسمية والوصف، وتمثيل الاحداث والافعال والحالات، والمماثلة والمقابلة، والابحاء والاقتراض. وقد كشفت نتائج التحليل ان اختيارات كامبو اللغوية تؤدج اللقاء الطبي بطريقة ديمقراطية، إذ تقدم الطبيب والمريض بوصفهما شريكين في بناء المعنى. فجاء صوت الطبيب تأملياً لا سلطوياً، وجسد المريض لا يوصفه موضوعاً للفحص بل راوٍ للحكاية. ومن خلال توازن اسلوبي بين الدقة العلمية والخيال الشعري، يبني كامبو خطاباً شاملاً تتحول فيه الممارسة الطبية الى فعل متعاطف، ويغدو الفن شكلاً من اشكال الشفاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأسلوبية النقدية، الشعر الطبي، الأطباء الشعراء، الأيديولوجيا، الهوية

1. Introduction

The study of medical poetry is still an upsurge within the field of literature but few presented within the field of linguistics particularly in discourse. The presentation of poet-physicians and medical poetry is seen as important subject to tackle since medical poetry did not take a considerable amount of attention. One of the main aspects to study medical poetry is the effect of literature versus medicine and how it is linguistically presented. The selected poems are examined using critical stylistic tools of Jeffries (2010) (i.e., *naming and describing, representing events/actions/states, equating and contrasting, and implying and assuming*). A piece of literature about illness is not only seen as a story of painted experience but also as a record, a testimony, and wisdom behind such experience. Thus, poet-physicians can produce in their language a combination of two different ways of knowing is manifested in their writings. McLellan discusses physicians' writings and states that these works are interpretive and seen as "a unique literary activity" which is sometimes referred to as "romantic science" (McLellan, 1997, p. 564). In poetry, where linguistic choices are highly deliberate and condensed, the tools of critical Stylistic analysis presented by (Jeffries, 2010, p. 32) play a crucial role how linguistic choices (i.e., form and meaning) interact to construct the representation of health and suffering. Combining critical stylistics with medical poetry bridges the gap between linguistic analysis and literary interpretation. Thus, the intersection of discourse, critical stylistics, and medical poetry illuminate the linguistic embodiment of pain, care, and power and reveals the ethical dimensions within this genre (i.e., medical poetry) (Campo, 1996, p. 67). A number of previous studies are presented to clarify the difference between this research paper on the selected genre and previously conducted studies.

Ibrahim and Hussein (2018) study entitled (A Critical stylistic analysis of the ideological positioning in some selected poems by John Donne) is examined. The researchers have used critical stylistic analysis for the chosen poems to uncover the ideologies of the author and how the linguistic choices serve the purpose. The selected model for the analysis is Jeffries (2010). The result of the study shows that the poet places the reader in certain positioning, i.e., obliging the reader to adopt the poets opinions.

Shati (2025) study entitled (A critical stylistic study of rhetorical devices in selected American confessional poems) is examined. The researcher investigates the use of rhetorical devices in American confessional poems. The study aims to identify types of rhetorical devices and stylistic features in the selected poems. The adopted models of analysis are Leech (1971) and Short (2007). The findings of the analysis show that rhetorical devices used in the selected poems have certain stylistic features.

Abduljabbar (2025) study entitled (Medical Poetry as a Creative Form of Therapeutics: A Study of Selected Poet-Physicians) investigates the therapeutic effect of medical poetry in comparison to medical books. The study based on literary approaches in analyzing the selected poems based on cultural critiques. Two models of therapeutics are compared and contrasted which are “biomedical” and “humanistic” models. The conclusion of the study reveals that each of the analyzed poems aims to maintain and cultivate the human and humane dimensions of their profession.

As a regard of the above mentioned research studies. The following study fills a gap in the field of discourse to focus on a new genre of poetry known as medical poetry have been studied strongly within literature, but not well recognized and analyzed within linguistics. This genre reveals significant ideological and different positioning in the representation of physician-patient relationship. Hence, the researcher follows Jeffries critical stylistics framework (2010) which is regarded as a suitable toolset to analyze hidden ideologies within the three selected poems of the well-known poet/physician of the adopted genre known as Rafael Campo.

2. Medical Poetry: Language and literature

Literature and medicine, at the first glimpse, may seem very broad disciplines, but this is not the fact since the connection between the two is much deeper than matters of subject and theme. Writers from ancient to modern times have explored illness and medicine in their poems like Jonne Donne or contemporary works like the selected poet-physician Rafael Campo (Abduljabbar, 2025, p. 28). The connection not only seems to be within literature but it goes further to language itself. Medical poetry and language seem to express the inexpressible, i.e., medical poetry puts into words the complex emotions and experiences tied to illness. Medical poetry bridges the gaps in communication and it serves as a bridge between both parties (i.e., patients and practitioners) to articulate fears, emotions, and hopes. Hence, the study of the style (particularly critical stylistics) as a manner of presentation of different expressions in writing and speaking reveals the variation in language use (Shukur & Noori, 2025, p. 1755).

3. Critical Stylistics

According to Jeffries (2010, p. 20), Critical Stylistics (henceforth CS) can be defined as “a group of textual conceptual functions that begin with Halliday’s (1985) meta-functions of language and seek to establish some level of meaning between linguistic structure and function.” Hence, Jeffries’ linguistic toolset is not completely new but is considered as a combination of selected tools adopted from (Halliday’s (1985), Fairclough (1989), Fowler (1991), and Simpson (1993)). However, CS as a toolset differs from various approaches of critical discourse analysis in that the selected tools

have specific “form and function mapping” represented by different linguistic features to show the hidden ideologies. The CS model of analysis concentrates on structural and Pragma-semantic analysis as seen in figure (1) below:

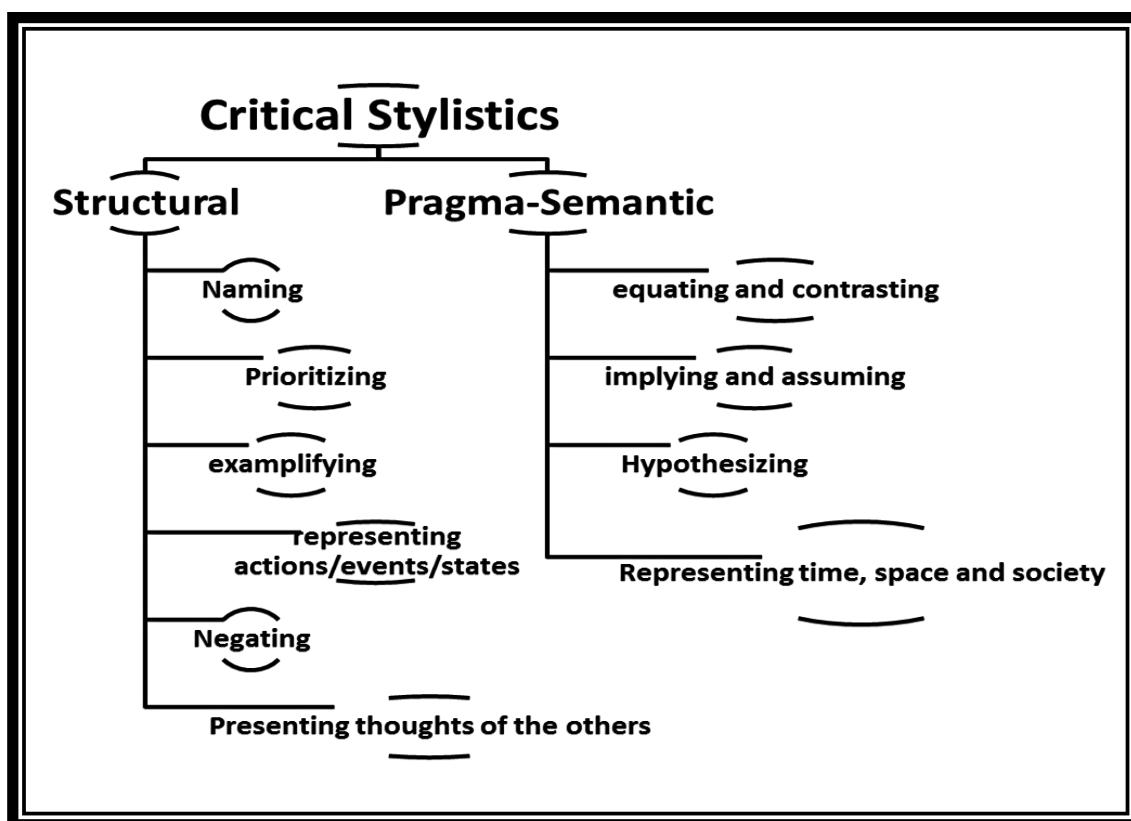


Figure 1: *Toolset of Jefferies' Model of Analysis (2010)*

3.1. Naming and Describing:

Texts identify and characterize the entities in their imagined world. This function is not only about naming things, as it also involves choosing words and phrases with different connotations. The way in which noun phrases are constructed can also be significant. Adjectives and post-modification can be used to convey evaluative or ideologically sensitive information. Nominalized verbs are another interesting feature of naming. They reify processes and remove any indication of agents or actors, making it difficult to attribute actions to specific people or groups. In summary, texts do more than just name things. They also use language to create a world that is meaningful to the reader. The choices that authors make about how to name entities can have a significant impact on the reader's understanding of the text (Jefferies, 2010, p. 35).

3.2. Representing Actions/Events/States:

The linguistic portrayal of events can substantially shape readers' perceptions. This tool of meaning is related mainly to the verbal elements of the clause “*Verbal elements of the clause and stereotypically present information on what is being done (actions), what is happening (events), or*

what simply is (states)” (Jeffries, 2010, p. 38). Hence, verbs hold the power to highlight diverse facets of an event while maintaining the core information unchanged. For instance, an event like someone conversing with their mother can be depicted using various verbs, such as (telling, talking, being close to, or gossiping). These verb choices call up distinct impressions whether the action was deliberate, a conversation, or an unintended revelation. Jeffries (2010) model of analysis depends on Halliday’s transitivity processes to explain and discuss the category of representing actions/events/states. Thus, Hallidayan transitivity processes are illustrated in table (1) below:

Table 1: Halliday’s Transitivity processes adopted by Jeffries (2010, p.41)

Process	Participant	Subcategory
Material Action Processes	Actor, Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intention • Supervention • Event
Verbalization Processes	Sayer, Verbiage Goal	
Mental Cognition Processes	Sensor Phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognition • Reaction • perception
Relational Processes	Carrier Attribute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive • Possessive • Circumstantial

3.3. Equating and Contrasting:

This tool can be utilized to show that certain texts can create relationships between words and phrases that are thought of as existing outside the texts. There are variant syntactic triggers to relate equivalence and opposition within the texts (Davies, 2007, p. 62). First of all, equivalence is noticed mainly in the “parallel construction of equivalence”. In addition to the straightforward triggers, there are different ways in which “metaphor and simile” are used to indicate equivalence. Secondly, the use of oppositions is very complex. Table 2 below presents the most common oppositions seen in Davies (2007, p. 48) and (Jefries, 2007, p. 78):

Table 2: Oppositions and Syntactic Triggers.

Opposition	Syntactic Trigger
Negated Opposition	X not Y
Transitional Opposition	Turn X into Y
Comparative Opposition	More X than Y
Replacive Opposition	X instead of Y
Concessive Opposition	Despite X, Y
Explicit Opposition	X by contrast with Y
Parallelism	He Liked X, She Liked Y
Contrastive	X, but not Y

3.4. Implying and Assuming:

Implicature, belonging to pragmatics, is expected to be studied within the interpersonal meta-function, but its textual nature and the similarity between ‘assuming’ and ‘implying’ make it associated with ideational meta-function as well. Like other textual-conceptual functions, implicature shapes a worldview reflecting the producer’s (or narrator’s) opinion, making it less interpersonal than a speech act, though it can still produce one. Implicature, initially developed for interaction, is applicable to written language, allowing the use of Gricean maxims when analysing politicians’ statements that may contain excessive or insufficient information, leading to accusations of protesting too much or concealing the truth. Implicature is derived from Grice’s co-operative principle, discussed in Levinson’s book (Levinson, 1983, p. 55).

4. Methodology

In the current study qualitative and quantitative analysis of medical poetry are conducted. Critical stylistic analysis is basically qualitative. Hence, the qualitative analysis in the present study is concerned with the critical stylistic analysis of the selected poems to designate the correlation between linguistic tools and their significance (i.e., suffering, embodiment, clinical language, and power relations). Four critical stylistic tools will be applied (i.e., *Naming and Describing*, *Representing Actions/Events/States*, *Equating and Contrasting*, and *Implying and Assuming*) due to the space of time. The second method of analysis, the quantitative analysis, is primarily focusing on *frequency analysis* (using frequency of occurrence) in order to show the dominant patterns in how patients, doctors, or illness are represented. Regarding the followed unit of analysis, the current study applies Jeffries’ framework (2010), this framework shows that every toolset has specific linguistic unit. Thus, in connection to the selected toolsets, noun/noun phrase and clause are taken as the unit of analysis and taken into consideration throughout the analysis.

5. Data Selection

The data selection is based on the researcher in depth for the most well-known poet of the selected genre (i.e., medical poetry) and then the researcher looks in depth for the poems of the chosen poet-physician (i.e., Rafael Campo). These are the selected poems: “The Chart”, “What the Body Told”, and “Health”. The selection of the mentioned poems is based on the criteria that poems must reflect medical discourse (i.e., clinical settings, medical participants, and medical procedures) and poetic-linguistic focus on certain implicit or explicit medical ideologies. The researcher tries to avoid in the selection of the data the poems that have minimal medical reference and linguistic patterns are too sparse for the analysis.

6. Data Analysis

Concerning data analysis, the analysis will be divided into two main sub-sections. Firstly, the researcher presents the qualitative analysis of the selected poems. Secondly, the quantitative analysis is presented.

6.1 Qualitative Analysis

6.1.1 Naming and Describing:

In the first poem entitled “The Chart”, naming and describing are used in the following lines:

1. Says fifty-four-year-old obese Hispanic
2. With long black braids, Peruvian, who sells
3. She the Dominican with too much rouge
4. or maybe she’s the Cuban lady drunk
5. her home at last; or else the Mexican
6. it could be that Colombian drug addict

The noun phrases presented in the poem above relating the patient to his identity such as a “*Peruvian*”, “*Dominican*”, “*Cuban*”, “*The Mexican*”, and “*Columbian*”. The reading of medical chart with reference to identity, ethnicity reveals the gestures toward the racism that exists within medical field in US. The linguistic analysis of the above lines shows the dependence on the use of noun phrases and noun modification. Noun phrases and noun modification are used throughout the poem to show how the patients are represented with different descriptions of person’s identity, ethnicity, and gender. The identity of the patient has a strong impact on the way he/she is treated in the United States, specifically if one belongs to the people of color.

In the poem “Health”, naming and describing is used in the following lines:

7. Obesity writ large no more, Alzheimer’s
8. forgotten, we could live carefree again.
9. We’d chant the painted shaman’s sweaty oaths,
10. We’d kiss the awful relics of the saints,
11. We’d sip the bitter tea from twisted roots,
12. We’d understand the moonlight’s whispering.

The linguistic analysis of the above lines depends mainly on nouns and noun phrases. The writer critiques a western biomedical model and reimagines health as “wholeness”.

In the poem entitled “what the body told”, naming and describing is used in the following lines:

13. I’d look inside another person’s mouth,
14. And see the desolation of the world.
15. I’d see his genitals and think of sin.

16. I look inside their other-person's mouths,

17. And see the wet interior souls.

The extract “another person’s mouth” expresses the reality of the physicians’ world, treating and providing comfort to different patients regularly lead to the knowledge that transforms body into a thing with the potential to harm or contain “the desolation of the world”. The body is treated as something to fear to revere. Hence, the above lines show medical phrases, such as (genitals, tongue) contrast with poetic language such as (the desolation of the world). This type of naming shows how medicine reduces the body while the poem restores its emotional voice.

6.1.2. Representing Actions/Events/States

This section presents a detailed analysis of the transitivity processes used in the selected poems as shown in table (3) below. Concerning transitivity processes as they are presented previously in (table 1).

Table 3: The Transitivity Processes of the Poems “The Chart”, “What the Body Told”, and “Health”

Poem	Process Type	Extract
The Chart	Material Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peruvian, who <i>sells</i> tamales at the farmers’ market • The Mexican who <i>hoards</i> the littered papers she <i>collects</i> • Lace handkerchief <i>balled up</i> in her plump hand
	Verbal Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Says</i> fifty-four-year-old obese Hispanic female • <i>Tells</i> me I’m too thin • It’s the one who never <i>says</i> exactly where she’s from
	Mental Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I <i>wonder</i> if they <i>mean</i> the one with long black braids • but who <i>reminds</i> me of my grandmother • who I’ve <i>seen</i> half-asleep • some doctor, nose in her chart, <i>overlooked</i>
	Relational Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Or maybe she’s the Cuban lady drunk on grief • Whose Spanish, even when she’s high, <i>is</i> perfect
What the Body Told	Material Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • my parents <i>held</i> me in their arms • they <i>care</i>, and <i>stare</i>, they <i>note</i>, they <i>make</i> their pilgrimage • they <i>cry</i> • I <i>look</i> inside their other-person’s mouth • And <i>see</i> the wet interior souls • I’ve <i>studied</i> medicine until I cried • They <i>nod</i>, they <i>make</i> their pilgrimage
	Verbal Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What the body <i>told</i> • Because my body <i>speaks</i> the stranger’s language •
	Mental Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have <i>disappointed</i> them; they <i>care</i> •
	Relational Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s warm and red in there
Health	Mental Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I <i>realized</i> we <i>need</i> a health pandemic • We’d <i>listen</i> to our grandmother’s advice

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We'd <i>understand</i> the moonlight's whispering
	Material Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We could <i>chant</i> the painted Shaman's sweaty oaths • We'd <i>kiss</i> the awful relics of the saints • We'd <i>sip</i> the bitter tea from twisted roots

The transitivity processes that are apparent in the selected poems are mainly *mental, relational, material, and verbal processes*. Within the analysis of the poem entitled “the chart”, the material process is seen in table (3) defines the stereotyped identity that is connected with the description of people belonging to certain race, as in “Peruvian, who *sells* tamales at the farmers’ market”. Here, the verb “sells” is used to describe the financial belongingness to certain class in American society. Whereas the mental process is used throughout the poem to show how the chart of the patient is categorized according to their race and identity. Regarding relational and verbal processes tries to expose dehumanization in the medical discourse as in “or maybe she’s the Cuban lady drunk on grief”.

The analysis of the transitivity processes in the poem entitled “What the Body Told” reveals that the poet/physician uses verbal process to express patient body’s emotions as in “ Because my body *speaks* the stranger’s language”. Whereas material processes are used to reveal the material acts of doctors in examining patients as in the example “I *look* inside their other-person’s mouth”. The poet depends on mental processes to express the moral and emotional cost of medical training. The analysis of the poem entitled “Health” utilizes mental and material processes. The poet uses material processes to describe physical activity and mental processes to listen to the language of the body. As in “I *realized* we need a health pandemic”, the poet/physician relates the body as site of societal healing. Ideologically reframes “health” as communal, spiritual, and natural opposing mechanized modern medicine.

6.1.3. Equating and Contrasting

The analysis of the poem “What the body told” reveals the use of “parallel equivalence” in the following lines:

18. I'd look inside another person's mouth,

And see the desolation of the world.

19. I look inside their other person's mouths

And see the wet interior of souls.

“Desolation of the world” is seen in the mouth equating bodily interiors with emotional /spiritual realities. Whereas the “wet interior souls” is a phrase used to indicate anatomical metaphor of vulnerability.

The analysis of the poem “the chart” shows the use of appositions (e.g., “is”, “she’s”, “as if”, “means”) whose function is equating the patient’s identity with the descriptions written in the medical chart.

20. “Fifty-four-year-old obese Hispanic female

She’s the Cuban lady drunk on grief.”

“Could be Peruvian, Dominican, Mexican, Colombian.”

Campo exposes the ideological violence of bureaucratic medical discourse where “be” is to “fit” a description. Equating acts here shows the patient-doctor relationship in bureaucratic societies where the treatment of people sometimes is linked to the race and the background stereotyped identity to strip individually and naturalize bias, making dehumanization appear routine and objective.

The analysis of the poem entitled “Health” shows the use of contrast. The poet uses “negated oppositions” as in the following lines:

21. To praise the memory of long-lost need,

Or not to live forever in the world

Made painless by our incurable joy

Here, the analysis shows how Campo tries to expose the contrast of clinical interventions with cultural, emotional rituals. Health is equated to love and joy, not disease avoidance.

6.1.4 . Assuming and implying

The analysis of the poem “The Chart” in terms of assuming and implying shows that the patient is reduced to “fifty-four-year-old obese Hispanic female.” The medical record assumes that these categories are sufficient to define the patient. All the ethnic markers mentioned in the poem, such as (Peruvian, Dominican, Cuban, Mexican, and Colombian) are assumed to be interchangeable identities under the same “Hispanic” umbrella. Whereas the implication shows a stereotyping is accompanied by a description of different reductive cultural identities, and the overlooked medical condition at the end implies medical neglect.

Analysis of the “Health” shows that it challenges the assumptions that health is about (weight, longevity, gym routines). As in the line “exercise in getting nowhere fast” but the true health might lie in the rituals, pleasure, memory, and connection. This implies that Western medical culture has lost touch with human connection, ritual, and joy.

Analysis of “What the body told” reveals that medicine is assumed as a rational tool, but in this poem it brings emotional trauma and cultural disconnection: “*because my body speaks the stranger’s language*”. Also, there is the assumption that the body “tells” truths that the self cannot hide “*I’d look inside another person’s mouth/And see the desolation of the world.*” The implication

of the poem lies in the idea that the narrator's struggle is not just scientific but deeply cultural and personal, shaped by identity and family expectations.

6.2. The Quantitative analysis

The presentation of the frequency of occurrence of the selected toolsets demonstrates that Campo's representation of the relationship between the doctor and the patient and how it is linguistically presented. The frequency of occurrence seen in (Figure 2) below shows that the tools of *naming and describing* and *assuming and implying* are highly used in Campo's poems to demonstrate that Campo's poetry is introspective and definitional rather than descriptive. These tools redefine the experience rather than narrating it only. Whereas both of (equating and contrasting and presenting events/actions/states) are less used in Campo's poems to reinforce humanist stance, implying that healing cannot be apart from empathy.

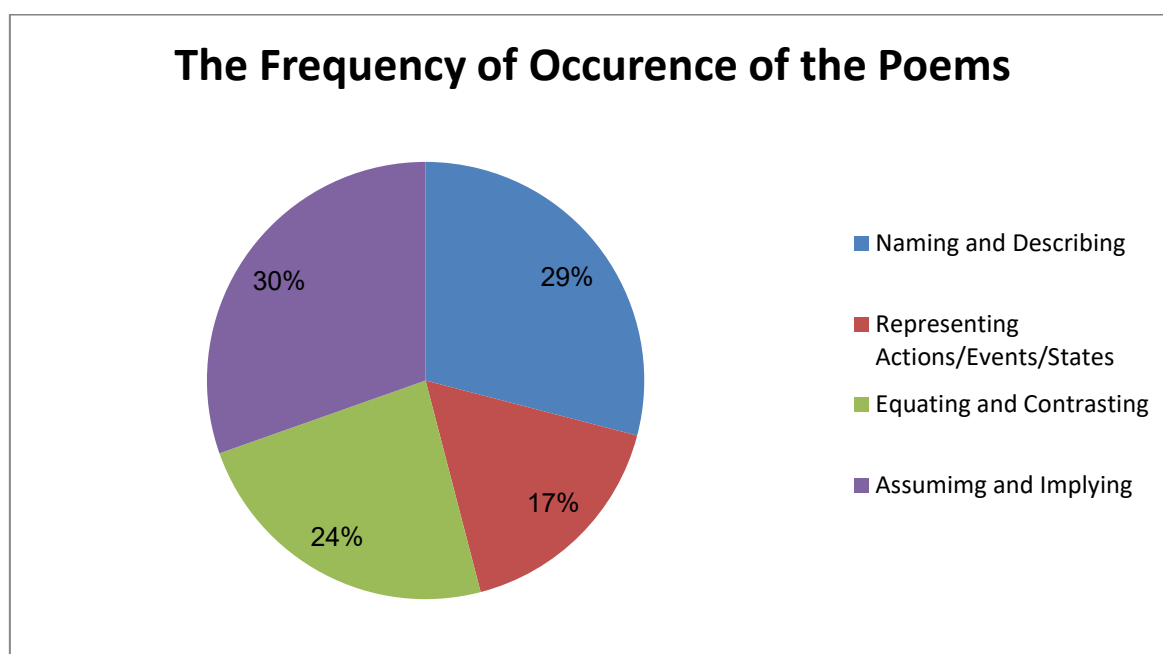


Figure 2: The Frequency of Occurrence of Critical Stylistic Toolsets in the Selected Poems

7. Conclusions

Having analyzed three poems of medical poetry by Raffael Campo in terms of Jeffries (2010) critical stylistic tools, the researcher has come up with two conclusions that answer the research questions of the current study. With respect to the first research question which reads as follows "what are the Linguistic Structures presenting the Poet-Physician and his mastery of medicine and art?", analysis shows that campo employs a rich combination of transitivity patterns, relational structures, and acts of equating and implying to reveal his dual identity as both physician and artist. The frequent use of mental and relational processes ("knew," "felt," "was," "became") indicates a consciousness engaged not only in clinical observation but also in emotional reflection. Campo portrays the physician as *thinking, feeling subject* rather than a detached scientist. In "*The*

Chart,” the predominance of material and relational processes connects medical documentation (“recorded,” “examined”) with emotional resonance, showing how language can bridge technical accuracy and poetic empathy. In “*What the Body Told*,” repeated relational clauses (“The body told me...”) equate the body with wisdom, linguistically reversing the conventional hierarchy of doctor over patient. In “*Health*,” the use of equating structures (“Health is forgiving ourselves,” “Health is love”) demonstrates Campo’s ability to *redefine medical terminology poetically*, mastering both scientific and literary discourses. The poet-physician becomes a mediator between body and language, using stylistic creativity to heal through words as much as through clinical practice.

With respect to the first research question which reads as follows “what are the ideological functions of linguistic choices in representing the poet-physician–patient relationship?” Campo’s linguistic strategies also carry powerful ideological functions that challenge the traditional hierarchy between the physician and the patient.

Transitivity choices redistribute agency: the *body* often acts as the grammatical subject, while the *doctor* becomes the listener or recipient of meaning. This shift embodies an ideology of shared humanity and mutual vulnerability, replacing dominance with empathy. Equating and contrasting structures articulate a moral opposition of science versus compassion, detachment versus intimacy, treatment versus healing exposing the limitations of purely biomedical perspectives.

Assuming and implying further strengthen this ideology by presupposing that suffering, empathy, and love are universal human experiences, not medical conditions to be cured but realities to be understood.

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