

# the heart of a haiku

a space for a little poem  
to weave its magic!

## part 8 syllables

A quick recap and then on to infamous syllables that plague haiku:

Haiku are mostly unrhymed poem that rely heavily on images. Most often you can draw them on paper, but there are many that cannot be drawn, because the image is mysterious! When the images are clear, the poet has clearly used *concrete words*, as opposed to abstract words. Some examples of this: *tears* (not sadness), *laughter* (not joy), *chocolate (melting) in my mouth*, *rustling leaves*, *rushing waves*, *sound of the temple bell* and so forth. We relate to life through our five senses, which are sound (ears), touch (skin), sight (eyes), flavour (tongue) and smell (nose). But, hold your horses ... although haiku is about the seasons of nature and your lived-in environments, direct experience and direct observation ... don't leave out your imagination. Notice, in the examples I've given the last few weeks, how well poets have woven their imagination into their poems to maintain that warp and weft of weaving just as it's done in our beautiful khadi.

One of the things that makes haiku work is the rhythm of strong beats or stresses. This is highly variable and there is no formula and no rule. The traditional 17-sound structure in Japanese doesn't translate into 17 syllables in English. Let's take a look:

*Akai* in Japanese means red  
But how is it pronounced in Japan?  
a/ ka/ i — 3 sound-units.  
... while the English word— red — is just 1 syllable.

Please note: The English word *red* actually does have three distinct *sounds* or *phonemes*: /r/ /e/ and /d/. But they form a single *unit*, called a 'syllable' in English. To make things clearer, we'll say "sound-units" — called—"on" in Japanese and "syllables" in English — but these are different linguistic entities from each other. Also, Japanese "on" or sounds are "timed" sounds. We do not have this in English at all.

Take Tamizh:  
Red / *akai* in Tamizh is *shivapu* — shi/va/pu — 3 sound-units.  
In Hindi — it is *laal* — laa/l — 2 sound-units.

Let's take a Sanskrit word like: *Githanjali* — a person who is unfamiliar with this name will treat it as a four-syllable word, but in India, not just in Sanskrit, but in most regional languages, we would read it as: gi /tha /an / ja/ li | (as 5 'timed' sounds or sound-units.) Indians would just intuitively know how long to stretch the *thaa*. Is there some relation between the 'mora' or the 'timed' sounds found in the Japanese language and the *maatras* that Indian languages use? It

needs more research. But what I'm trying to say here is that Indians can easily and clearly understand the 'timed' sounds used in the Japanese language.

The simple conclusion is that the particular language used dictates the number of sounds, and so one cannot make a general 'rule' and say that, just because the Japanese write haiku in 5/7/5 (17 sound-units), we should follow suit in English too!

Outside Japan, haiku is generally written in fewer than 17 sound-units. One widely-used structure is:

short  
l o n g  
short

We abbreviate this structure as s/l/s, and the whole poem adds up to anywhere between 9 and 15 sound-units in total. One cannot generalise, because many poets do not follow this pattern. But to make things easier let us continue with s/l/s here.

Note how these two haiku so effortlessly take the form to a different level all together:

jamun tree  
the stain of summer  
on my lips

— Shloka Shankar

opening the window  
to a moth and what's left  
of the moon

— Sanjukta Asopa

How to count the syllables:

Even though I have clearly mentioned that *syllables* are not used in Japanese haiku, one needs to know how to count syllables in English-language haiku ('ELH').

autumn dusk . . .           -3 syllables  
without any fuss the end -7 syllables  
of a yellow leaf           -5 syllables

Notice that when the same haiku is translated into my mother tongue, Tamizh, it has many more syllable counts or rather, it takes the shape and sound of the Japanese 'timed' sounds.

paraparpedhumillaamal       -9 sound-units  
oru pazhutha ilaiyin mudivu -11 sound-units  
ilaiyudhir andhi           -6 sound-units

Haiku: Kala Ramesh  
Tr: Shrikaanth Krishnamurthy

The same haiku in Hindi:

patjhad ki saanjh . . . -5 sound-units

bina kisi kolahal ke -8 sound-units

ek peele patte ka anth -7 sound-units

Tr: Paresh Tiwari

There are many poets who write in 5/7/5 syllable counts in English, but it's slightly tricky, for it should not look contrived or padded just to get the syllable count right.

Just an example:

the quickening beat  
of raindrops on fallen leaves  
I begin to hum

— Kala Ramesh

I hope this Monday column has convinced you that it is not the syllables that make or break a haiku. It's the *spirit of haiku* which defines your ku!

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*Passionate about taking haiku to everyday spaces, Kala Ramesh initiated the 'HaikuWALL India' project, which encourages graffiti artists to paint haiku on city walls. Kala conducted a taster's session in haiku and haibun at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) on 10<sup>th</sup> September; which left our future filmmakers, directors, scriptwriters and dreamers clamouring for more! As part of the TRIVENI: World Haiku Utsav 2016, Kala will be holding a full-day haiku & haibun workshop on 22<sup>nd</sup> September at the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Viman Nagar.*