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»The Two Coeval Come«: Emily Dickinson and ambiguity

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine some examples from Emily Dickinson's poetry with respect to the role of ambiguity. Our study includes specifically the linguistic means by which ambiguity is created, the results of pervasive ambiguity for the interpretation of texts, and the plausible purposes to which it is put.

Emily Dickinson's work is particularly worthwhile for an investigation of ambiguity from a linguistic and literary perspective because ambiguity is used as a tool by Emily Dickinson (ff: ED) frequently and variably, but at the same time in a way which seems quite principled and systematic. Our paper selects three of her poems as examples: J448, J315 and J1247.[1] While all three may serve to illustrate ambiguity in lyrical texts, it is created in very different ways – predominantly structurally in J448, predominantly via semantic mismatches in J315, and predominantly through logical contradictions in J1247. The effect of the pervasive ambiguity that is present in all three poems is also different: as we will see, it could be described as a puzzle leading up to a double answer in J448, resulting in a reversible figure, which alternately shows a duck and a rabbit, an old and a young woman, depending on which part of the picture we focus on;[2] it could be described as a case of painting by numbers in J315, where ED provides a template which we colour, using the clues the poem gives us; and it could be seen as a series of contradictory statements in J1247 – or as a game of logic in which you have three interlocked rings and your task is to get the middle one out – even if you are successful, you will be perplexed and unable to explain how this was possible.

We have selected these three poems not only because they are characteristic of ED's use of ambiguity but also because they represent three different ways in which the poetic persona[3] deals with experience: in J448 something that some-

[1] The numbers of the poems follow the edition by Johnson of 1961. In Franklin's counting of the poems, J315 appears as 477, J448 as 446, and 1247 as 1353 (cf. Franklin 1999, pp. 206, 218 f., 521).

[2] On this kind of *gestalt* ambiguity, see section 1.2 in the contribution by Bauer/Knape/Koch/Winkler in this issue.

[3] Anderson (1960) quotes from an early letter by ED to Higginson: »When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person« (p. 11).

one did is explained by the speaker to the group to which she belongs, in J315 an extraordinary but apparently not unique experience is reported to others, and in J1247 a hypothetical experience and its consequences are described. (The implicit progression is also the reason why the poems will be discussed in this order.) In each case, ED thus links the use of ambiguity to the representation of communicative situations in which someone tries to speak about something that cannot or should not[4] be defined or described easily.

The goals of our detailed discussion of the three texts include:

– a linguistic analysis of the creation of ambiguity at a local level;
– the interactive effects that the various instances of ambiguous linguistic expressions have when combined into a larger structure;
– an evaluation of the plausible possibilities for textual interpretation that are thereby created;
– a discussion of ED's probable goals.

2. The poems

In our linguistic analysis of ED's poems we rely on the following theory of grammar: The syntactic component of the grammar generates phrase structure trees, to begin with, surface structures representing the string of words that we see (Chomsky 1957). The actual input for interpretation may be a different phrase structure tree, a Logical Form, derived from the surface structure by movement and reconstruction operations (May 1985). Logical Forms are interpreted compositionally with the help of a few general principles of interpretation to yield the truth conditional meaning of the linguistic structure (Frege 1892; Montague 1970; Heim/Kratzer 1998). The principles of composition take as their input, besides the syntactic structure, the meanings of lexical items and contextually specified values for variables. Sentence level meanings so derived are conjoined in a text or discourse in order to yield a consistent set of propositions (Stalnaker 1976). Coherence between the propositions in the set is given, very generally speaking, by them referring to the same entities (individuals, events etc.) and is guided by anaphoric expressions.

A word on our use of the term ambiguity: we speak of ambiguity when a linguistic expression can have several distinct interpretations. The linguistic expression can be anything from a word to a text. In cases of a manifold, not clearly delineated range of interpretive possibilities we also speak of underspecification.

[4] Cf. the beginning of J1129: »Tell all the truth but tell it slant–«.

2.1. Distilling Amazing Sense from Ordinary Meaning (J448)

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion – so unconscious –
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –
Exterior – to Time –

2.1.1 Observations

The poem presents obvious problems for interpretation.[5] Two properties of the text in particular contribute to these difficulties. On the syntactic side, the poem is heavily fragmented.[6] There are chunks that are plausibly parenthetical (e. g. line 10 *the poet – it is he*). Sentence boundaries are unclear. The fragmentation increases towards the end: in lines 15 and 16 we merely have a sequence of NPs and PPs and no integrated clausal structure at all. The overall effect is that we have sequences of individual constituents with no fixed way in which to combine

[5] Some authors argue that J448 was written as a eulogy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Sherwood 1968, p. 209, and Schöpp 1997, p. 96), who died in 1861 – the poem was written around 1862 (Eberwein 1998, p. 285). However, there seems to be no conclusive evidence for this claim, in fact, no evidence at all besides the temporal closeness of Barrett Browning's death and the writing of the poem and ED's admiration for her. More plausible is the claim that in J448 ED took up ideas and phrases both from Emerson's essay »The Poet« and from Higginson's essays »Letter to a Young Contributor« and »My Out-door Study« (see Sherwood 1968, p. 204–213, for examples).

[6] According to Miller (1987) p. 45 f., this fragmentation is achieved through disjunction in punctuation and syntax in J448. She claims that there is an extensive use of dashes and commas in the third and fourth stanzas and the statements become juxtaposed and unconnected due to nonrecoverable deletion.

them. On the semantic side, the reference of several expressions is unclear: *this, that* in line 1, *it* in line 8 and in line 10, *the robbing* in line 14.[7]

In compositional semantics, the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meaning of its parts and by the way they are combined (the Principle of Compositionality according to Frege, as described above). This means that we ought to unwrap the meaning of each chunk and recover how these sentence chunks are to be combined. We are stuck on both sides in this poem, because unclear reference makes it hard to fix the meaning of several constituents that occur and because the combination of the chunks is underdetermined due to fragmentation. This results in multiple ambiguities, which appear to accumulate during the poem.

2.1.2 Analysis

But let us see whether a detailed linguistic analysis can help.

– the case of lines 7–10:
These lines seem to be a turning point in the poem. The preceding text is reasonably clear, but here it becomes hard to keep track of the interpretation. Directly contributing to this is *before* in line 8, which has multiple subcategorization frames; the pronoun *it* in line 8, whose reference is not immediately clear; and the cleft structure *we wonder that it was not ourselves who arrested it before…*, which asserts that ›we did not arrest it‹ and presupposes that someone ›arrested it‹, so something in the preceding text must describe an arresting event – what? In order to derive an interpretation for this part of the text, we need to make a decision on all of these points. We describe below two reasonable combinations of such decisions:

(i) (We wonder that) it was not ourselves who arrested the sense before the poet entitled us to ceaseless poverty.
This interpretation results if we take *before* to subcategorize for a CP (before [CP the poet entitled us to ceaseless poverty]). Furthermore, in order to fulfill the presupposition of the cleft structure, we take the event of distilling amazing sense to be the relevant arresting event. This fixes the reference of the pronoun *it* to the sense.

It is a consequence of this analysis that the poet entitled us to ceaseless poverty, which we could presumably have prevented if we ourselves had distilled/arrested the sense. We could have arrested the sense so that the poet would not have been able to pauperize us by his arresting. Yet, the poet has and leaves (= entitles) only poverty for us. This poverty is perpetual (= ceaseless). He is rich

[7] Miller (1987) p. 76 ff. emphasizes the unusually high number of function words and especially the missing reference for the terms ›this‹, ›it‹ and ›that‹ which feed into the polysemous form of J448.

and we are poor. The verb ›entitle‹ is used ironically; the relation of »Of Pictures, the Discloser« to »The poet« is that of an apposition.

(ii) (We wonder that) it was not ourselves who arrested the sense before the poet did.
This interpretation results if we take *before* to subcategorize for a DP (before [DP the discloser of pictures]). The decisions about the presupposition antecedent and the referent of *it* are as before.

Here also the poet entitles us to ceaseless poverty, as asserted by the next sentence. But here this is not a consequence of the earlier arresting. Entitling us to poverty could have a different connection to the rest of the text.

– the case of lines 13–15:
Interpretive problems are triggered here by syntactic ambiguity and once more by unclear reference. The PP *of portion so unconscious* could be a complement of robbing, or it could belong to the preceding text and be a complement of *poverty*. Similarly, it is not clear whether *himself* is the complement of *harm*, or whether we should parse those lines with a clause boundary after *harm* and associate *himself* with the following material. The DP *the robbing* is once more a presuppositional element. It requires a context which has introduced a relevant robbing event. This is not given directly in J448. A relevant question is also how exactly to interpret *could*. Once more we sketch two possible combinations of decisions.

(i) The robbing of portion so unconscious from us by the poet could not harm us.
Let's take the PP *of portion* to be a complement of *robbing*. Let's assume that the robbing referred to is the poet's arresting sense and thereby pauperizing us. This makes the parse plausible in which *himself* is not the complement of *harm* because one is unlikely to harm oneself by robbing others.

Here, the poet is the robber. The unconscious portion is the ability to arrest amazing sense. The speaker was capable to arrest the sense. Yet, she has been unconscious of this capability. Therefore, she did not arrest. Lines 9–12 sum up the consequences of her unconsciousness. She is condemned to ceaseless poverty. Yet, his robbing does not harm her because without the robbing she would have not even been aware that she has such portion.

(ii) The robbing of portion so unconscious from the poet by us could not harm him.
We make the same decision about the PP, but let us suppose that *himself*, referring to the poet, is the complement of *harm*. This suggests that the poet is stolen from. We take the modal *could* to embed the whole structure, and we accommodate a relevant robbing event as follows: if a robbing from the poet by us were to occur, it could not harm him.

Here, the poet is the one robbed. The poet succeeded in arresting the sense while the speaker did not. The speaker by contrast is entitled to poverty. Now she can get back at him. She would like to get a part of the portion of which he is not conscious of. Her robbing will not do any harm to the poet because he is

unconscious of what he has gained. Nevertheless, his poetry is such a fortune that passes time.

2.1.3 Resulting interpretations

Let's paraphrase the resulting interpretations of the text:

Version I: The poet robs us
1. This [→ reference to a poem] was a Poet!
2. It is that [→ poetry like in the poem] which distills amazing sense from ordinary meanings and an immense attar from the familiar species that perished by the door.
3. We wonder that it was not ourselves who arrested it [→ the sense], before the poet (he is the discloser of pictures) condemns us (in contrast to himself) to ceaseless poverty.
5. The robbing [by the poet] of such an unnoticed share [from us] was not able to harm us.
6. He to him [acquired] a fortune that passes time.

Version II: We rob the poet:
1. This [→ reference to a poem] was a Poet!
2. It is that [→ poetry like in the poem] which distills amazing sense from ordinary meanings and an immense attar from the familiar species that perished by the door.
3. We wonder that it was not ourselves who arrested it [the sense], before the Discloser of Picture did.
4. The Poet (it is he who is the discloser of pictures) allocates to us (in contrast to himself) ceaseless poverty.
5. He is so unconscious of his portion that the robbing of the portion [by us] could not harm him.
6. This portion is to him a fortune that passes time.

Both interpretations are simultaneously present in J448, in the sense that the text does not allow us to unambiguously assign one interpretation – not even just one overall reasonable interpretation.[8] In version I, the act of distilling sense from ordinary words is something that is painful to the poet's readers, even though without the poet we would have been unaware of what we had before. The poet gains through his art. In version II, the poet's readers rob him, presumably when

[8] Miller (1987) p. 28 ff. states that ED uses nonrecoverable deletions in her poetry to create density and syntactic or logical ambiguity. She gives J448 as an example for this technique and provides different possibilities to resolve the nonrecoverable deletion in line 1.

they read the poetry. Being entitled to poverty may mean that we do not have to be destillers/arresters/killers.

The coexistence of two interpretations demonstrates the following:

– Both, poet and reader are getting robbed, both rob.
– The poet has a creative potential of which the reader is capable, too.
– The robbing is the fact that the poet has written the poem.
– The poet has robbed the speaker of her originality to write it first.
– The reader gets a share in his originality. While reading and interpreting his work, she applies linguistic tools (maybe unconsciously) that correspond to his tools. He does not own the poem, her role is an active one. This is where he gets robbed.
– Both do something which has to do with originality and creative potential.

Looking back, at this point, at lines 7–8, »We wonder it was not Ourselves / Arrested it«, another local ambiguity, due to ellipsis, comes in sight: the text never says whether we ›wonder that‹ or ›wonder why‹ or ›wonder if … it was not Ourselves‹. If we consider the last possibility, the tie between the seemingly opposing parties, ›Poet‹ and ›Us‹, gets even closer.

We may conjecture that ED uses ambiguity to express the complex interrelation between poet and reader. Linguistic analysis helps us to see this. ED's linguistic tools are not just used as a medium. They serve to draw our attention to the constitution of meaning in J448. By having to ›work‹ to get out some meaning, the reader gets involved in the poetical process of the poet, the gets creative, too. One poem in which this happens is, of course, J448 itself.

Summary: In this text, ED creates ambiguity at the level of Logical Form at many points throughout the poem. Her grammatical tools are ellipsis and fragmentation, used in interaction with subcategorization ambiguity, and with presupposition and anaphora resolution. The text level interpretive effect is that in the poem, there are (at least) two interpretations simultaneously present. Both interpretations (the poet robs his environment vs. the poet allows his environment to enrich itself) are coherent and sensible. We can reasonably suppose that ED intends to convey their simultaneous truth and the two-layered reciprocal relationship between author and reader in this poem. J448 itself is an instantiation of this interaction between poet and hearer, and we can take ED to be not only part of the identity of ›we‹ but also the poet. Simultaneously, J448 is an example of the ›amazing sense‹ and the verbal richness (›Fortune‹) to which it refers; ambiguity becomes a source of wealth. We might describe J488 as a brilliantly devised puzzle whose pieces form a picture when we pursue all strategies towards their combination at the same time.

2.2 He fumbles at Your Soul (J315)[9]

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on –
He stuns you by degrees –
Prepares your brittle Nature
For the Ethereal Blow
By fainter Hammers – further heard –
Then nearer – Then so slow
Your Breath has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble Cool –
Deals – One – imperial – Thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked Soul –

When Winds take Forests in the Paws –
The Universe – is still –

2.2.1 Observations

Reading the poem, one feels irritated. On the one hand, we cannot tell what it is that is described in the poem. On the other hand, it is not the case that we understand nothing. We comprehend that the poem describes a very dramatic experience, yet we cannot say who experiences it, who brings it about, and what the experience actually is. Both referents of the text – the agent ›he‹ and the experiencer ›you‹ – cannot be clearly specified, which leads to an ambiguity of reference. Also several selectional restrictions of the predicates are violated and require reinterpretation in order to make sense of unusual word combinations whose denotation is not immediately understandable. Yet, although the meaning of the text seems to be underspecified, interpretation is not arbitrary. A detailed analysis of the predicates and the lexicon used helps us constrain the range of possible experiences described in the poem and provides certain clues that enable us to limit the potential referents.

What contributes to create a balance between general and specific is the fact that we are presented with striking metaphors the vehicle (or source) of which is quite specific but the tenor (or target) remains unspecific and variable, creating ambiguity. To a certain degree, this is a common feature of metaphors (and actually a reason why we use them: to give expression to something that cannot be easily expressed). But in J315 this process becomes especially interesting, since it is a multi-layered one.

[9] The poem we worked with (and that is represented here) is from a fair copy addressed to Susan Gilbert (Sue). In a semifinal draft in packet 19 the following words were different: 5. Nature] substance, 9. time] chance, 12. scalps] peels, 13. take] hold, 14. Universe – is] Firmaments – are (ed. Johnson 1955, pp. 238–39.)

2.2.2 Analysis

The variables ›he‹ and ›you‹

The use of a pronoun (as a free variable) presupposes that the context provides an appropriate value for the variable (Heim/Kratzer 1998). This rule is violated in J315 (as it is in many other texts, often with the intention of putting the hearer in medias res). The pronouns ›he‹ and ›you‹ occur with no context to tell us which individuals are talked about. The hearer attempts to assign a referent to the variables contained in the text. For ›he‹, however, this remains impossible throughout the poem.[10] Any referent assigned to ›he‹ must be seen as a guess, yet an analysis of the predicates can constrain what is plausible (see below).

The case of ›you‹ is a little different. The poem uses a tense (simple present) which is, most likely, in this case generic. This allows an interpretation of ›you‹ according to which the pronoun does not stand for a particular individual either. Rather, it receives an interpretation which we will call generic ›you‹. Generic ›you‹ is exemplified in (1).

(1) A: (an American, interested in the troubles of her Croatian friend B): How does one obtain a greencard?
B: Well, first you have to have an immigrant visa. Then, there are two situations that allow you to apply for a greencard: …

Thus, the pronoun ›you‹ in J315 does not have to be resolved by assigning an individual referent and does not help us with identifying the type of situation described in the poem. Nonetheless, there are some constraints on generic you (see below).

Violations of the selectional restrictions of several predicates

One might expect that even if the actual referents in the narrative are not revealed, the verbs and predicates used should tell us what happens to these (deliberately obscure) individuals. However, the verbs and predicates are either overt comparisons or else expressions we can only interpret metaphorically. The following examples illustrate why reinterpretation is necessary and which effect it has.

In line 1, the verb ›fumble‹ presupposes the physical nature of its object and therefore cannot directly combine with the object ›your soul‹.

(2) [[fumble]] = [λa:a is a physical object.λb.b clumsily touches a]

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[10] The masculine role emphasises poetic ambiguity in J315 as the pronoun ›he‹ does not have an antecedent within the poem and can thus refer to different agents, e. g. death, God, a male lover, etc. Landry (1998)p. 192 f. claims that ED uses this technique in order to provoke a number of diverse interpretations and responses to J315. Cf. also Weisbuch (1975): »In this analogical collection, the master-figure is deliberately ambiguous, because his – or His – identity doesn't matter. Dickinson does not worry the cause but the experiencing of the terrible moment« (p. 98).

As hearers, we are likely to reinterpret the concrete ›fumble‹ and take ›soul‹ to have its literal meaning. We could then reinterpret as follows:

(3) [[fumble']] = [λa.λb.b affects a in a sort of roundabout way]

Thus, we resolve the local violation of a selectional restriction via a metaphorical interpretation of ›fumble‹. This implies that the first line as a whole tells us nothing specific about what happens, except that an agent ›he‹ somehow affects ›you‹.

We can reinterpret ›fumble‹ metaphorically to go with ›soul‹ – but do we therefore know what ›He fumbles at your Soul‹ means? We have a more or less clear-cut idea of what »fumbling« means. In her dictionary (Webster 1844), ED could find the following definitions:

1. To feel or grope about; to attempt awkwardly. Cudworth.
2. To grope about in perplexity; to seek awkwardly; as, to fumble for an excuse. Dryden.
3. To handle much; to play childishly; to turn over and over. (I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers. Shak.)

But what is the target/tenor of ›fumble‹, i. e. what does ›he‹ actually do, since the word is obviously used metaphorically? This is mainly a problem of the word ›soul‹.[11] If the text would read, ›He fumbles at your emotional responses‹ the whole thing would be much clearer (and much more limited). This leads us to the question whether the whole action is not applicable to a number of quite different processes and experiences. ›Soul‹ may be a metaphor for a range of things, something immaterial, such as ›seat of emotions‹, ›heart‹, or ›feelings‹, something that needs to be filled in by the reader. The adaptation therefore does not conclude the interpretation but sets off another one.

This choice of words has at least two consequences. Firstly, it creates an awareness of the interpretation process itself (see below). Secondly, it links different kinds of stunning experiences, suggesting a union between physical and spiritual, immanent and transcendent events. ›Soul‹ is determined by the contrast with ›body‹, and, as a consequence of this, by its immortality (cf. Webster, Soul: »1. The spiritual, rational and immortal substance in man«) – the body is mortal, the soul is not.

However, by treating ›soul‹ (in the complex metaphorical way just outlined) as if it was physical (combining ›fumble‹ + ›soul‹ and ›scalp‹ + ›soul‹) and by having this immortal substance undergo a painful process, scalping (line 12), that is usually lethal, a fusion or union of material and immaterial realms is suggested. This, in turn, serves to characterize and provide a context for the personal pronoun ›he‹, which thus not only appears as a blank to be filled in by different kinds of agents but also as an agent that commands all sorts of actions, physical and spiritual. In this perspective we may be justified in regarding the

[11] ED uses the words ›soul‹, ›soul's‹ and ›souls‹ 151 times altogether in 120 poems (cf. Rosenbaum 1964, p. 697 f.)

poem as a reflection on a ›divine‹ agent (or at least someone who appears ›divine‹ to the speaker).

We might similarly analyze the combination »Ethereal Blow« in line 6, which indicates a strong effect that the agent has on the experiencer.[12] At any rate, it is not made precise what the action is going to be. In lines 9 and 10, we are informed about the experiencer's reactions, for example, »Your Brain – to bubble Cool« which expresses a period of relative calm, but we cannot say much more.

Finally, let's take a closer look at line 12 (»That scalps your naked Soul«), which contains even several semantic ›mismatches‹. Note first a combination of the physical with the spiritual similar to line 1.

(6) a. naked soul
b. [[naked]] = [λx:x has skin.x's skin is not covered]

Once more, we resolve this mismatch by taking ›naked‹ to be used metaphorically – perhaps a soul stripped of its protective layer. If we do that, we encounter a further mismatch when we combine with the verb:

(7) a. scalps your naked soul
b. [[scalp]] = [λa:a has a hair-covered skin.λb.b takes skin & hair off a]

On the one hand, the combination of ›scalp‹ and ›naked‹ seems paradoxical.[13] On the other hand, ›scalp‹ has to be reinterpreted to fit with the non-physical object. Perhaps like this:

(8) [[scalp]] = [λa.λb.b violently affects a]

Due to the metaphor plus the paradox, the resulting interpretation is once more very general.

These examples illustrate that the actions described can only be determined in an extremely general way. ED avoids using a single predicate that denotes a clearly defined property of or relation between the referents in the poem. We encounter either comparisons or predicates that cannot be directly interpreted. Consequently, we do not exactly know the type of situation described in the text.[14]

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[12] Miller (1987) p. 40 underlines ED's use of combining abstract and concrete categories to create a contrast and even to achieve a thematic paradox as in »Ethereal Blow«.

[13] Whereas in J314 the scalping clearly denotes a violent action, Juhasz (1989a) p. 63 emphasises an ambiguous use in J315. On the one hand, ›to scalp‹ implies a »murderous brutality«, but on the other hand, it also refers to the ›purification of the soul‹ in that it describes something that is reduced to its essence (see variant reading ›to peel‹).

[14] Cf., by contrast, Anderson (1960) p. 17: »To such a hellfire preacher she devoted a whole poem, some lines of which have the smell of brimstone about them still. ›He stuns you by degrees,‹ she wrote, and then working up to his climax hurls one ›Imperial‹ thunderbolt ›That scalps you naked Soul.‹ Though she nimbly eluded the lightning of these old-line Calvinists, she could give credit to the dramatic intensity of

The poem as a script

However, even though we cannot definitely say what the poem is about, it is not the case that we understand nothing at all. The analysis showed that the text relates an intense experience of person(s) B brought about by an agent A which proceeds in a particular series of steps. We are familiar with this kind of description, for example from depictions of dramatic natural events someone experiences or portrayals of religious experiences. It is, thus, possible to reconstruct a kind of general ›script‹ for the actions described in the poem.

(9) SCRIPT 315
1. x disturbs y
2. x slowly stuns y
3. cause (x permits (y calms down))
   (x prepares y for z: z a shock)
4. x deals z & z violently affects y

Thus, we do have the feeling that the poem is not about arbitrary or random actions but plausibly restricts the meaning of the experience to this kind of story, even though it is not possible to specify it any further – a general vagueness and ambiguity remain.[15] Also, the last two lines are difficult to integrate, since they do not seem to be clearly related to the rest of the action.[16]

2.2.3 Why is the poem captivating?

One effect of *not* revealing what kind of experience is described is to put the hearer in the position of imagining an experience that would be particularly dramatic to herself. A formal correlate of this is the use of generic ›you‹ instead of, e. g., ›I‹ or a proper name,[17] which invites the hearer to put herself in the position of the experiencer. One should note, however, that this use of ›you‹ seems appropriate only if the hearer could and should experience what the speaker describes.

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their faith«. Anderson is an (interesting but by no means the only) example of how ED's script may be filled.

15 Juhasz (1989a) p. 63 points out another interesting aspect of J315. By using comparative terms like ›straighten‹ and ›cool‹, ED implies the former condition of the ›breath‹ and the ›brain‹ without stating it directly.

16 It is so difficult to integrate the last two lines of the poem because they have a very different tone and the connection between them and the rest of the poem is not immediately obvious. Juhasz (1989a) p. 64 claims that the last two lines form an aphorism serving »to comment on and sum up the preceding events«. See Keller (1979) p. 169 ff. and Short (1998) p. 9 f. for more information on the use of aphorisms in ED's poetry.

17 According to Lindberg-Seydersted (1968) p. 31 ff., about 158 of ED's poems start with the pronoun ›I‹ and one fourth of all the poems has a first person singular pronoun in the first line. She concludes from a statistical count that about two fifths of ED's poems feature an explicit ›I‹.

If we compare examples 10 and 11, we see that the use of generic ›you‹ to relate an intense personal experience (such as the one in J315) only makes sense in somehow personal, ›intimate‹ conversation. The speaker in 11 wishes his friend to ›live through‹ this experience and relate to its terrors:

(10) A (the judge at a court hearing concerning possible malpractice of dentist Sabertooth): What happened when you went to Sabertooth's dental office?
B: It was terrible. First he lets you wait in the waiting room for a rather long time. Then…

(11) A (a friend of B's who, as B knows, is looking for a good dentist): How was your dental appointment at Sabertooth's?
B: It was terrible. First he lets you wait in the waiting room for a rather long time. Then, …

So, what is described in the poem is general enough to enable the reader to connect it with different kinds of experience. At the same time, it is specific enough not to be connected with just *any* kind of experience.

The reason why the poem keeps us concerned, however, is not only the balance between general and specific utterances produced by a generic ›you‹ and by means of striking metaphorical combinations. It is also because the metaphors and analogies both open up and delimit ways of realizing the script. ED thus does not specify the context that may be reconstructed but delimits the areas in which plausible contexts may be found. These are the spheres of:

(13) a. The human body and soul, what they do and is being done to them, e. g., »fumbles«, »Soul«, »Players«, »drops«, »stuns«, »your brittle Nature«, »Blow«, »heard«, »Breath«, »straighten« (you normally straighten your back), »Brain«, »deals«, »imperial«, »scalps«, »naked Soul«
b. Music, e. g., »Players«, »keys«, »full Music«, »degrees«, »Blow«, »fainter Hammers«, »heard«, »Winds«, »still«
c. Nature and meteorology, e. g., »Nature«, »Ethereal Blow«, »bubble Cool« (brooks bubble, e. g., in poem J503), »Thunderbolt«, »Winds«, »Forests«, »Universe«, »Paws« (somewhat exceptional as it refers to animal nature, contributing to the metaphorical representation of »Winds« as animals)

Much of the mysterious interest awakened by the poem derives from the fact that whatever happens to ›you‹ must be of the kind that it can be characterized by expressions taken from these three spheres, which constantly interact and intermingle. (This is also why the terrible experience in the dental office of Dr. Sabertooth is after all not really appropriate for this poem, since it is limited to the human body and has nothing to do with at least two of these areas.)

An example is »Blow«, which refers to the human action of the unknown ›he‹ hitting ›you‹ – the verb ›deals‹, which ordinarily belongs to this action, only appears five lines later and is linked to the »Thunderbolt« which we would not expect to be dealt but (assuming the god Zeus to be the acting person) to be thrown or hurled. Just like the thunderbolt, »Blow« could also mean a meteorological

or atmospheric phenomenon, an »ethereal Blow« both leading up to and being quite different from the ›Thunderbolt‹: Last but not least, »Blow« fits in with the musical imagery of the poem, especially if we take into account that there is one musical instrument which combines both »Keys« (a keyboard) and »Winds«, i. e. the organ (having a name curiously linking it with the human body).

Speaker-specific usage of words

Reconstructing contexts in everyday utterances includes knowledge about the way your interlocutor usually puts things. Poetry is quite helpful in this respect, too, for it tells us something about the ways in which such a speaker-specific usage may help us understand the meaning of an utterance. And usually we do have other poems by the same author, which makes this task easier. If we look at ED's speaker-specific usage of words, we can find several interesting similar uses.

The most obvious parallel to ED's use of ›scalp‹, for example, can be found in the poem that immediately precedes it in Johnson's edition, J314, since it shows that to ED the process of scalping is not confined to the human head (it is the only other instance in which she uses that word), beginning with »Nature – sometimes sears a Sapling / Sometimes – scalps a Tree –«. This provides an external link between the thunderbolt »That scalps you naked Soul« and the winds in the next line that »take Forests in the Paws«, a connection which might otherwise be inexplicable. Furthermore, this poem contrasts *people*, having souls, with *trees*, not having souls.

Also interesting is the word ›paws‹. Considered musically, the poem invites us to listen to it at least as much as to read it. In that case, »Paws«, when heard, is not to be distinguished from ›pause‹ in the sense of rest, the two are homophonous and, when heard, ambiguous. ›Pause‹ in the sense of ›rest‹ is among other things a musical term implying silence. »When winds take Forests in their Paws« thus evokes rests taken by winds during a pause – and of course, when they do so, when winds stop shaking trees, everything (the Universe) is still! A similar link between a pause full of suspense and *paws*, meaning ›animal feet‹, is to be found in poem J414, »›Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch«, which is similar to J315 in its script-like character and treats, among other things, the notion of time, especially lines 11–12: »Until you felt your Second / Weigh, helpless, in his Paws –«. Here, too, the being held in Paws by an unknown ›he‹ is linked to a moment of suspense.

Model instances of form and content

Finally, the poem reflects on the problem of interpretation itself by providing paradigmatic or model contexts which the reader has to fill appropriately. Thus ED alludes to the formal structure, the ›essence‹ of a sonnet:

(18) Shakespearean sonnet:
- 14 lines
- mostly iambic pentameter
- 3 quartets + couplet with summary or turn
- rhyme scheme: abab–cdcd–efef––gg

(19) ED J315:
- 14 lines
- mostly iambic
- 3 ›quartets‹ + couplet with summary or turn
- rhyme scheme: xaxa–xbxb–xcxc'––xx (cc': ›cool'-›soul‹ are not the same but sufficiently similar to evoke this rhyme scheme)

Structural similarities are sufficiently clear to be perceived by the reader, but not prominent enough to dictate any definite form to the poem, or, for that matter, a definite interpretation to the reader.

The same (or at least something very similar) happens on the semantic level: ED distills the essence of the narrative of a dramatic experience from particular instances (she could not have written this without any real experiences in mind). She then produces an ›instance‹ that upon closer examination turns out not to be a particular instance at all, but a paradigmatic mold, a form or idea, in Plato's sense, that needs to be filled appropriately. One can see the poem as an intuitive analysis of this kind of narrative, presented in the form of the narrative itself – showing us what is essential to such an experience, what needs to be said, and what would narrow the range of possible interpretations too much and needs to be left out.

Thus, on several levels, the poem makes us aware of the process of assigning meaning and invites us to do so directed by the clues the poem gives to the reader; this would not be possible without maintaining ambiguity.

Summary: ED makes use of ambiguity of reference in J315 and of reinterpretation, which leads to underspecification of the resulting meaning. Here, too, these particular mechanisms are used systematically throughout the text. For the interpretation of the poem as a whole, the effect is that it is never resolved what exactly the event is that is described. We are left with a rather general notion of a dramatic experience instead of any specific instance of it. Although ED reveals through her choice of words and concepts what might lead to such an experience for her, the hearer is not tied to the same situations. J315 distills what makes up a thrilling description of an intense experience while avoiding to limit us to just one particular such experience.

2.3 This Would Be Poetry (J1247)

To pile like Thunder to its close
Then crumble grand away
While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry –

Or Love – the two coeval come –
We both and neither prove –
Experience either and consume –
For None see God and live –

2.3.1 Observations

In this poem, ED is ambiguous in two ways. Firstly, through various kinds of underspecification. The possible referents for some phrases remain unclear, thus obscuring what exactly is compared to what in the first three lines. Especially important in this poem are the multiple possible meanings of central verbs, where different interpretations lead to different agents. The syntax contributes to leave the reader confused, either because ED leaves out punctuation marks which could help in fixing on one interpretation, or because logical boundaries do not coincide with the arrangements ED makes. Secondly, through the use of mutually exclusive connectors and operators, ED creates contradictory relationships between the subjects the poem is about (love, poetry, God, ›we‹), leaving the reader with a paradox that cannot be solved, analogous to the sublimity of experiencing love, poetry and God.

2.3.2 Analysis

Undetermined/underspecified Reference: »like Thunder«; »grand«, »this« and »we«

The first is the undetermined or underspecified reference of certain words. For example, it is not made clear what exactly is meant to be »like Thunder«. Is it only the action of piling? Both piling and crumbling? Does »Everything created« hide *because* piling and/or crumbling is »like Thunder«, or is there no connection? What is »Everything created«? For example, it could be the poet's creation, i. e., poetry or a poem; it could be God's creation, or something else.

And who or what is »grand«? Is »grand« an adjective, referring to a person or thing that is grand while crumbling? Or is »grand« an adverb, as in ›to crumble grandly‹? ED often uses adjectives as adverbs, so such an interpretation would be quite possible. Actually, ›grand‹ can mean quite a number of things:

a) Great; but mostly in a figurative sense; illustrious; high in power or dignity; as a grand lord. (Webster Grand 1)
b) Great; splendid; magnificent; as a grand design. (Webster Grand 2)
c) Noble; sublime; lofty; conceived or expressed with great dignity; as a grand conception. (Webster Grand 4)
d) Old; more advanced; as in grandfather, grandmother, that is, old-father. (Webster Grand 5)[18]

Who is meant by »We«? Is this everybody (including speaker and hearer)? Is it just the speaker, that is, a single speaker using the plural, maybe in the function of a pluralis *maiestatis* (this would go along with ED's persona as ›queen‹[19])? Is

[18] These definitions are taken from Noah Webster's 1844 *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Since this is the dictionary ED owned and frequently used, it shows us which meanings of a word were available to her.

[19] For a discussion of ED's different personae, see Todd (1973) p. 31–52.

it a group of speakers (e. g., ›we the poets‹)? It would even be possible to see God as the speaker, who describes what only God can do without dying, what would destroy any human being.

It is unclear what »this« refers to (piling? piling and crumbling? piling, crumbling and hiding?), and as »This« also determines poetry and/or love, their nature remains vague. All these things are left open, and while an interpretation is still possible without knowing about them exactly, they do create an indecisive and vague impression.

Indeterminacy/Underspecification of verbs: »to pile«, »crumble«, »created« and »would«

Let's look in a bit more detail at the underspecification of verbs.[20] Since the first verb »to pile« is only given as infinitive, it could mean ›we/you pile like Thunder‹ or ›the piling of something‹ (without our intervention, just as thunder comes into being without us doing anything). Consequently, »to pile« could be transitive (compare »his wife quietly piled things on the kitchen counter«, OED *v.*[2] 2.a) or intransitive (»The work is just piling up«, OED *v.*[2] 3.a). Even though the intransitive reading seems more obvious at first glance, it does seem to make sense to take the transitive reading into account, the piling up *by* someone *of* something – considering that piling is also linked to poetry, which we could consider as the creation of something by someone.

The same problem occurs with »crumble«. Firstly, the infinitive leaves it open who or what crumbles. Secondly, »crumble«, too, could be transitive (G. Herbert, »The Church-Porch,« l.70: »O crumble not away thy soul's fair heap«) or intransitive (»The earth crumbled under our horses' feet«, OED *v.* 2). Our reading of »crumble« is likely to depend on that of »pile«, and, again, looked at in the context of consciously creating a work of art, it does also make sense to keep a transitive reading in mind.

Ambiguity: »prove« and »consume«

Let us consider the ambiguity of two central words: »prove« and »consume«.[21] For both verbs, there are several meanings (some of which are polysemous), and the choices we make will lead to different readings of lines 6–7.

To prove

a) To try; to ascertain some unknown quality or truth by an experiment, or by a test or standard. (Webster Prove v.t.1); To evince truth by argument, induction

[20] Lindberg-Seydersted (1968) p. 243–252 argues that the frequent use of verbs in their infinitival form by ED indicates a subjunctive form and claims that the verbs are imprecise and obscure. Miller (1987), however, advances the view that the infinitival form is used to imply a »timeless, nonreferential space around the action« (p. 69).

[21] Both verbs are ambiguous in that they can be used transitively or intransitively. According to Miller (1999) p. 246 f., this undefined usage of the verbs feeds into the ambiguity and tension in meaning which is quite characteristic of ED.

or reasoning; to deduce certain conclusions from propositions that are true or admitted. (Webster Prove v.t.3). Possible reading: ›We show that both Poetry and Love are true/exist and we don't show that Poetry and Love are true/exist‹

b) To be found or to have its qualities ascertained by experience or trial; as, a plant or medicine proves salutary. (Webster Prove v.i.2); To be ascertained by the event or something subsequent; as, the report proves to be true, or proves to be false. (Webster Prove v.i.3); cf. »We […] prove / Mysterious by this love« (Donne, »The Canonization«). Possible reading: ›We are both Poetry and Love and neither Poetry and Love‹ *or* ›We are evidence of Poetry and Love and we aren't evidence of Poetry and Love‹

c) To experience; to try by suffering or encountering; to gain certain knowledge by the operation of something on ourselves, or by some act of our own. (Webster Prove v.t.5); cf. »Come live with me, and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove« (C. Marlowe, »The Passionate Shepherd to his Love«). Possible reading: ›We experience Poetry and Love, and we don't experience Poetry and Love‹

To Consume

a) To destroy; to bring to utter ruin; to exterminate. »Let me alone – that I may consume them«, Exo 32). (Webster Consume v.t.5). Possible reading: ›If we/you experience either, we/you will destroy either‹

b) To destroy, by separating the parts of a thing, by decomposition, as by fire, or by eating, devouring; and annihilating the form of a substance. Fire consumes wood, coal, stubble; animals consume flesh and vegetables – as in consumerism – (Webster Consume, v.t.1). Possible reading: ›If we/you experience either, we/you will taste it or take it in (completely)‹

c) To waste away slowly; to be exhausted. (Webster Consume, v.i.). Possible reading: ›If we/you experience either, we/you will pine (for it) and waste away‹

If we observe the last line's biblical background,[22] another reading, which is not given in Webster, becomes prominent: the passive ›to be consumed‹, i. e., a reading that combines ›dying‹ (meaning *c*) with the biblical connotation of perishing at the hand of God (meaning *a*). This gives the interpretation ›If we/you make either (of these overwhelming experiences), we/you will be killed, because we/you cannot bear it‹. In this context it is worthwhile to consider the impossibility in the Old Testament of seeing God directly: »Thou canst not see my face: for there

[22] ED's knowledge of the Bible can frequently be observed in her poems. She became familiar with the Bible during her education at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke (cf. Miller 1987, p. 132). Miller also claims that »the extreme compression of Dickinson's poems and that of biblical text are strikingly similar. In both cases the compression stems from frequent use of ellipsis, parallel and short syntactic structures linked paratactically or by simple conjunction, and apposition« (Miller 1987, p. 134). For ED's use of the Bible see also Bauer (2006) pp. 374, 377, 386, 388 n. 48.

shall no man see me, and live« (Exo 33:20), with Moses as the only exception, and ED's poem J1733 »No man saw awe«, which uses ›consume‹ in exactly this sense: »›Am not consumed,‹ old Moses wrote, / ›Yet saw him face to face‹ –«.

The relationship between »Poetry« and »Love«

Another problem we find are the contradictions in the relationship between »Poetry« and »Love« described in lines 5–7.[23] The ›or‹ in ›This – would be Poetry – / Or Love« provides us with two possibilities. It could be *exclusive*, as in, »You can sleep on the couch, *or* you can go to a hotel, *or* you can go back to London tonight« (Quirk/Greenbaum 1973, p. 258). But it could also be *inclusive*, as in, »You can *either* boil an egg, *or* you can make some cheese sandwiches, *or* you can do both« (Quirk/ Greenbaum 1973, p. 258). We have alternatives, which can or cannot exist at the same time; the poem leaves it open how exactly love and poetry are correlated.

This ambiguous relationship continues in the next line with »coeval«. If love and poetry are »coeval«, we expect ›or‹ to be inclusive, since both come at the same time. However, if they are coeval, »This« would always be Poetry and Love *at the same time*, so why use ›or‹ at all?

In »we both and neither prove« we are confronted with the problem that »both« and »neither« are mutually exclusive. Strictly speaking, if we prove both, it doesn't make sense to say we prove neither; if we prove neither, it doesn't make sense to say we prove both. Now, we could imagine that we cannot prove one without simultaneously proving the other, thus reinterpreting »and« to ›or‹. We might also argue that we prove both, but don't prove any of them completely, so that we have not really proven them. A similar use would be that found in Wordsworth's *Prelude*:

Upon a Dromedary, Lance in rest,
He rode, I keeping pace with him, and now
I fancied that he was the very Knight
Whose Tale Cervantes tells, yet not the Knight,
But was an Arab of the Desart too;
Of these was **neither**, and was **both** at once. (W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 5.121–125)

Finally, »Experience either« gives us two possibilities, parallel to the case of ›or‹ already discussed. Either could be *exclusive* (›You must choose either the couch or the hotel, but not both of them‹), or it could be *inclusive* (›You can have either a boiled egg or a cheese sandwich, or both of them‹).

It is conspicuous that the use of ›both‹, ›neither‹, and ›either‹ creates the impression of clarity and clearly defined distinctions (a kind of mock logic), but if we look closer, we see that the contrary is the case. Thus the relationship

[23] According to McIntosh's interpretation, »in ›To pile like Thunder‹ Dickinson also zestfully eliminates the boundaries between poetry and love and then between them and ›seeing God‹. […] She prefers not to fixate her beliefs and experiences but […] to illustrate their fluidity« (McIntosh 2000, p. 109).

between poetry and love, and the relation between poetry, love and ›us‹, is simultaneously restricted and left open by ED's choice of words.

Lines 4–6 of the poem show an increasingly complex relation between love and poetry. In line 6 at the latest it becomes impossible to logically unite the contradictions created by the combined use of words like ›both, neither, either, and, or‹ – we are confronted with a paradox that we are unable to solve.[24] Considering that the poem is about a number of sublime experiences – the experience of love, poetry, God – the poem's language reflects the impossibility of grasping sublime moments.[25]

Underspecified syntax

Poem J1247 also becomes ambiguous through its lack of punctuation, typical for ED. She obscures structural divisions and sentence boundaries by habitually using dashes instead of punctuation marks – dashes can have all kinds of functions (full stop, comma, semicolon, colon, pause, dash).[26]

In addition, in this poem there is often no clear division where we would expect one. For example, we might expect a full stop or semicolon after »Or Love –« as well as after line 5, 6, 7 or 8, and we might also expect a colon after line 3. Possible places for conjunctions would be line 5, ›(because/although) the two coeval come‹ and line 6, ›(and/but) we both and neither prove‹ – conjunctions in lines 5 and 6 would also greatly help with disambiguating the meaning of the poem. On the other hand, there are divisions where we would *not* expect them. There is a stanza break after line 4, while the sentence clearly goes on; »This – would be Poetry« is separated by a dash though it apparently belongs together; and there is no punctuation mark after line 3, in spite of the fact that there definitely begins a new clause in line 4.

For example, imagining line 7 as a continuation of line 6, we could read it as ›we/you experience either‹ or ›we/you can only hypothetically experience either‹. However, we could also imagine a full stop after line 6, so that line 7 would be meant as a challenge or warning: ›dare to experience either (and you will die)‹.

This means that the reader often has to decide how to group phrases together, which in turn influences interpretation. A corollary of ED's peculiar use of syntax in this poem is the reader's impression not of a written statement, but rather of spoken thought, where motivations and justifications are clear for the speaker and therefore not put into words, or punctuation marks, respectively.

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[24] Miller (1987) p. 98 ff. points out that ED uses contrast both in a definitional and in a dramatic way in J1247, which gives the reader the impression that the speaker works out things while writing and that he can experience this impulsiveness directly.

[25] Cf. also the description of God, who is unfathomable, in contradictory terms, e. g., in Nicholas of Cusa's statement »that God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere« (Hopkins 1978, p. 13).

[26] Miller (1987) claims that the dash can also be used to foreground a parallel between two entities, for example ›love‹ and ›poetry‹ in lines 4 and 5 of J1247, and cause a moment of surprise for the speaker (p. 52 f.).

2.3.3 Resulting interpretations

If we have a look at the poem as a whole we can see that, as in J448, different local interpretations result in different global interpretations. Thus we get (at least) four possible readings:

a) If we could do/experience »This«, it would be Poetry/Love, and it would be equal to seeing God. Both things would kill us. »This« could be the experience of writing or reading poetry or loving truly. Since »This«»surpasses human imagination, it is impossible to fully grasp or understand it, therefore we can only describe it imperfectly (with imprecision and contradictions, and comparing it to other things, like thunder).
b) In writing poetry (which is like piling thunder), or in experiencing love (which is like piling thunder), we would be proof of Poetry/Love. If anyone (you or we) would experience this, it would destroy them, in the same way that seeing God would destroy them.
c) The moment of doing/experiencing »This« (i. e., the moment of doing/experiencing Poetry/Love) is a moment of cognition (similar to that of Adam and Eve), which will change or even end our lives as we knew them.
d) We simply consume Poetry and Love, but not in such a way that we ›see God‹. We don't truly experience Poetry/Love/God (no-one can do this), but in spite of this we nevertheless live – this would be something of an ironic twist on the Creation story?

Summary: Ambiguity comes in indirectly (with the help of underspecified verbs and underspecified syntax). It is the result of the speaker's equating one thing with another in a (hypothetical) process of establishing identity or metaphor (›A would be B‹). Equations/Identifications are both maintained and questioned (e. g. by means of ›or‹ and ›either‹ which can be used in an inclusive and an exclusive sense).

The second part of the poem consists of what we might call a series of dual oppositions: and, or, both, neither, either, coeval. Some of them result in contradictions (most obviously both and neither). Since we are unable to add contradictory statements to a common ground, reinterpretation has to occur at the highest level. The poem is ambiguous or underdetermined because it consists of a sequence of statements that cannot simultaneously be true literally. The reader must speculate what is really intended.

3. Discussion

Our discussion of the three poems has made it clear that ED's creative use of language involves in particular the interpretive side of grammar. That is, she plays with those components of the grammar that are involved in deriving the meaning of complex linguistic structures: the Logical Form of a surface string;

composition of two meanings at a local level; and context dependent contributors to complex meaning. Ambiguity is a very substantive part of what she does. We have shown that there are systematic aspects to how she creates it, as well as specific effects and probable purposes in each text. Let us now try to draw more general conclusions beyond interpreting the individual poems.

3.1. ED's work as identifying and pushing the boundaries of grammar

Let us make an inventory of the most important linguistic tools used in the three poems we analysed.

J448 works with ellipsis, parenthesis, apposition, fragments as challenges for compositional semantics. These are challenges at the syntax/semantics-interface, in that it is not obvious what the Logical Form is that is the input to interpretation. Fragments, furthermore, are not definitively integrated at all and leave some leeway in how they are to be semantically connected to other expressions. J448 pushes these interpretive challenges to their limits (making it hard to identify any interpretation to be assigned to the linguistic structures, and leaving room for several).

J315 uses subcategorization violations, creating local uninterpretability. As the hearer seeks to circumvent the mismatch by reinterpretation, compositional meaning stops being determined by the linguistic ingredients, resulting in underspecified meaning. Here, too, the process of interpretation is opened up.

Contradictions as in J1247 have a similar effect, at the semantics/pragmatics interface, since the hearer wishes to avoid an inconsistent set of propositions as the meaning of a text.

The semantics/pragmatics interface moreover enters the picture in all three poems in the shape of the meaning of context dependent expressions (pronouns, definites and the like). Those are critical points for bringing in context information. Therefore, on the one hand, missing context information creates more challenges for interpretation in our poems, and, on the other, existing context information guides textual coherence.

Given our theory of the interpretive side of grammar sketched at the beginning of section 2, we observe that ED identifies several points at which compositional interpretation is sensitive: the syntax/semantics interface, local combinability, and the semantics/pragmatics interface. She stretches the limits of what grammar makes possible in each of these areas. Grammar is adaptive, in that we can reconstruct, add and even invent interpretive ingredients. ED tests the boundaries of adaptivity by giving us borderline cases of interpretability.

3.2 ED as a native speaker and intuitive linguist

ED's poetry reveals a very high level of awareness of the mechanisms of grammar. The linguistic phenomena that she works with are known to be fairly complex – for example presupposition resolution (Kamp/Rossdeutscher 1994).[27] So at an intuitive level and in the shape of a poem, we see here an analysis of the process of presupposition resolution at the semantics/pragmatics interface. Bauer/Beck (2009) describe a similar analysis of gradable adjectives in the unmarked, positive form in ED's poem »You said that I ›was great‹ …«.

It is interesting that a native speaker can have this level of awareness of linguistic rules. Even if we keep in mind that language and grammar played a major role in ED's education at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke,[28] this is by no means a matter of course. It takes years of training for the average student of linguistics to reach a similar level. As linguists who want to model native speakers' competence, we may wonder whether we do not have a particularly worthwhile speaker to investigate in ED, for the following reason:

The main difficulty in modelling linguistic competence is the fact that the ability is very largely subconscious. A higher level of awareness of it may well be helpful. Linguists involved in fieldwork know, for example, that there are good informants and bad informants. The good informants are the ones that have clear intuitions and the ability to talk about them – i. e. to raise to a conscious level what they normally do intuitively, automatically, subconsciously, and to describe it. Linguists (when they are naive as to the goals of the investigation) tend to be

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[27] For presupposition antecedent and presupposition accommodation (ED frequently plays with the latter as is the case, for example, in J448 line 14 »The Robbing«) see von Fintel (2000) and Beck (1997).

[28] See Sewall (1974), p. 349 for a listing of the various subjects offered at Amherst Academy, and although it is not known exactly which classes ED took, we do know that exercices in composisiton and declamation were compulsory and that she studied Latin for several years (Sewall p. 348–349). Thus, albeit not a professional linguist, ED seems to have been well conscious of the ways in which language works. L. A. Cuddy (1978) even argues that ED's poetic and syntactic style is directly based on Latin (or rather, on the Latin style presented in her textbook). However, the stylistic devices he cites (hyperbaton, ellipsis and enallage/antimeria) were used by most English poets to varying degrees, so that it is not apparent why ED's writing should be modelled on this Latin model rather than being due to her general rhetorical training (through Latin, but also through English classes, and general reading of English poetry). It is also worth noticing that, in New England and particularly in Amherst, ED lived in a cultural environment which encouraged the close investigation of language. Her grandfather was well acquainted with Noah Webster, ED was a friend of Webster's granddaughter and she observed the major poetological discussions of her time (Schöpp 1997, p. 90–92). ED's consciousness of language also becomes manifest in her heavy use of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*.

exceptionally good informants, no doubt because their training made them conscious of a lot of the processes behind giving an intuitive judgement.

This means that instead of looking down on poetic texts as a dubious source of evidence for linguistics, we should regard them as particularly valuable, given that they are results of language production by language specialists – intuitive linguists – an intuitive semanticist in ED's case.

There is behind this also a question of between-speaker variation with regard to linguistic competence. Linguistic theory has it that practically all human beings are equally competent (Chomsky). In general terms, this is surely true; but at a more fine-grained level, there are differences to be observed (e. g. also in Second language acquisition, bilingualism) which perhaps we ought to investigate more closely.

3.3 ED as a poet reflecting on language

Instead of publishing dry, dusty articles about them in *Linguistics and Philosophy*, ED uses her linguistic insights to tell us about experiences. Thus the language she employs, despite its difficulty, is a language serving ordinary purposes of communication. (This is confirmed by the fact that ED's poems and letters are not to be strictly separated.)

Nevertheless, ambiguity in ED is not so much a question as to *which* meanings are conveyed but rather *how* meaning is to be produced linguistically: the very process of producing meaning becomes the subject of her poems, which are frequently concerned with ›poets‹ and what they do. This should not be confused with self-referentiality; the poets and their activity are by no means simply to be equated with ED herself. Reference is not irrelevant, for ED seems to be constantly concerned with events that are meaningful to her poetic persona. One of their common denominators is the notion felt by the speaker that life (or, as J1247 has it, »Love«) is ›coeval‹ with poetry, even though both may be far out of reach for her. The ambiguity of the speaker's utterances seems to be the result of that experience.

The poet as the origin of ED's lyrical utterances is situated, as it were, in an intermediate position between the skilled native speaker creating utterances to communicate about something, and the linguist creating utterances to exemplify her intuitions and insights about a language. ED thus sketches out a role for poetry and its readers: it is to make sure of the full potential of language as the most important instrument of human communication by both exemplifying its communicative power and reflecting on its underlying rules. No other form of utterance seems to be able to do both at once to the same degree of urgency and perfection.

A final question: Why do we get a sense of increasing ambiguity in all three poems we analyzed (and a lot more besides)?[29] Frequently, the first stanza, sen-

[29] Cf. Juhasz (1989b) on reading ED's poems: »And those poems are not self-evident. The minute one begins to read them carefully, they open up, flower, expand; so that

tence or sense unit seems to be perfectly unambiguous and comprehensible. But then the structures of grammar seem to be broken up more and more. We suggest that this is part of ED presenting her poems as documents of an experience that is marked by an increasing insight into the difficulty of her venture into life and language. It is a road we are asked to follow.

Summary

»The Two Coeval Come«: Emily Dickinson and ambiguity

By focussing on three poems by Emily Dickinson, this paper shows that linguistic analysis based on the compositional interpretation at the level of Logical Form helps us establish a clearer picture of notoriously difficult poetic texts. At the same time, poems which provide us with borderline cases of interpretability help us see clearer the limits of adaptability within the grammatical system. Ambiguity is the field in which both sides meet, as it is used by Dickinson quite systematically in order to present different aspects of the way in which language relates to experience. In »This was a Poet« (J448), for example, two coherent readings created by ambiguity at the level of Logical Form emerge as the result of simultaneously pursuing all strategies of presupposition and anaphora resolution and as the quintessence of the poet-reader relationship described. In »He fumbles at your Soul« (J315), ambiguity of reference and of reinterpretation lead to underspecification of the resulting meaning, which appropriately serves to convey the idea of a speaker narrating an experience that is both general and specific. In »This would be Poetry« (J1247), reinterpretation must occur at the highest level because the poem consists of a sequence of statements that cannot simultaneously be true literally. Each poem is marked by a high degree of linguistic self-awareness and may be regarded as a test case, stretching the limits of what grammar makes possible.

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suddenly all that may have seemed clear (oh, I know what this poem is about), becomes complicated, suggestive, dense, even downright contradictory« (p. 217).

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