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## Interpretation: local composition and textual meaning

Literary texts, and poetry in particular, frequently offer specific challenges to interpretation which tend to be ignored by formal semantics as irrelevant to 'real' language data, and by literary criticism as irrelevant to the cultural implications of those texts. Focusing on three poems by Emily Dickinson, John Donne and William Shakespeare, we wish to show that this is to be remedied not only because a collaboration of the two fields may lead to a better understanding of texts but also for at least two further reasons: complex literary texts may widen the scope of linguistic intuition to be taken into account by semantics, and semantic criteria may place literary analysis upon a firmer basis of argumentation.

### 1 Introduction

Bridging the gap between seemingly disparate fields of knowledge has always been one of Kurt Kohn's prime objectives. In particular, one could say that he treats linguistics as an integrative rather than a (merely) specialized subject, combining as he does systematic and empirical, cognitive and textual perspectives. This is why we hope to offer a contribution that is appropriate to a *festschrift* in his honour when we present three case studies in which we combine our respective fields of expertise—literature and linguistics—to find an interpretation for a poem. We believe that the interpretation of texts is where our two fields meet naturally, and that the combination of methods and ideas from both leads to a better understanding of texts than would otherwise be possible. The results of such well-founded interpretation, in turn, benefit both fields, making accessible new ways of gathering evidence and new lines of argumentation. We hope to demonstrate this by analyses of Emily Dickinson's *You said that I 'was Great' – one Day –*, John Donne's *Batter my heart, three person'd God* and William Shakespeare's *When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes*. It goes without saying that we do not attempt a comprehensive interpretation of these complex poems, nor do we refer, for present purposes, to all the critical readings to which we are, knowingly or unknowingly, indebted.

### 2 Case studies

We chose the texts that we did because they invite interpretation. That is, they are neither perfectly ordinary, completely transparent bits of discourse, nor are they totally incomprehensible. They are hard to understand, hence a detailed analysis makes sense.

## 2.1 Emily Dickinson

You said that I 'was Great' – one Day –  
Then 'Great' it be – if that please Thee –  
Or Small – or any size at all –  
Nay – I'm the size suit Thee –  
Tall – like the Stag – would that?  
Or lower – like the Wren –  
Or other heights of Other Ones  
I've seen?  
Tell which – it's dull to guess –  
And I must be Rhinoceros  
Or Mouse –  
At once – for Thee –  
So say – if Queen it be –  
Or Page – please Thee –  
I'm that – or nought –  
Or other thing – if other thing there be –  
With just this Stipulus –  
I suit Thee –

(Dickinson c1863/1975, no. 738)

The first interpretive problem that a reader encounters here is that the poem seems to start, so to speak, in the middle of things. We have not yet encountered either speaker or listener, but the first line presupposes an earlier conversation between the two in which H (the hearer in our text) tells S (the speaker in our text) that she is great. Since this utterance by H seems to be the topic of the poem, we are inclined to assume that the conversation must in fact have taken place – we accommodate (to use the proper semantic term; Lewis 1979; Kadmon 2001) the missing information.

Accommodate: There is an earlier situation *e* in which H talks to S.

Assertion: H says in *e* that S is great.

The poem is a reflection on H's utterance "you are great". In order to gain an idea of what the author's purpose might have been, let's consider the specifics of what is said by S about this "you are great".

The first stanza is concerned with physical sizes that would, or would not, be "great". Here, we note that the interpretation of an English adjective in the unmarked (so-called Positive; Stechow 1984) form depends on context. This becomes obvious when we consider the following example:

(about a four year old:)

Pascal is tall. → 1.20m would suffice

(about an adult basketball player:)

Pascal is tall. → certainly over 2m

Precisely this property of the interpretation of *great* is used by S: there is no fixed or independently given size standard in our example. S uses this fact to state that whatever H wants to consider *great* will be fine with S – will in fact be the relevant size

standard. The first stanza conveys that H gets to set the standard, and thereby decide on the properties that apply to S.

Another aspect of the meaning of the adjective *great* in particular is that it can be concerned not only with size, but also with rank, power etc. That is, the scale on which individuals are ordered when contemplating their 'greatness' can be physical size, but also all kinds of other criteria. In fact, it is quite surprising that S seems to take H's statement literally, i.e. refer to size at all. Even though Dickinson's dictionary told her that "Large in bulk or dimensions" was the first meaning of "GREAT, a. [L. *crassus*]" (Webster 1828), this is not what H can mean if he is paying S a compliment. *Great* in this sense may refer e.g. to "a great house; a great farm"; Webster's second meaning of *great*, "Being of extended length or breadth," is exemplified by "a great distance; a great lake". None of these meanings are applicable to persons. S teases H, however, by contrasting "great" with "Small—or any size at all" and therefore assuming that H actually did refer to her physical size.<sup>1</sup> S assumes two possible ways of H's doing so, which are explained in the next two stanzas: "great" as an expression of size may refer either to the scale of length or to the scale of bigness. It is, according to Webster, "a term of comparison," a fact S comically stresses by comparing herself to a stag or a wren, a rhinoceros or a mouse. The comical inappropriateness of being called "great" (in the sense of "big" or "tall") is thrown into relief if we make a further assumption about the context and identify S with Emily Dickinson, who in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson famously described herself as "small, like the Wren" (Sewall 1974: 556), a phrase actually used by S in the second stanza ("Tall—like the Stag—would that? / Or lower—like the wren—").

Exactly because S points up the inappropriate use of *great*, however, we can see the way in which she regards it as appropriate. The very fact that the meaning of *great* is relative with respect to size standard gives S the opportunity to stress that she wants to be "relative" to H. S does not want to be "great" in any fixed sense but wants to be whatever H says she is.

The last stanza includes a shift with respect to the scale that "great" refers to. By no longer relating the meaning of "great" to size but to rank ("Queen" or "Page") S casts H in a similar aristocratic role (a knight, perhaps). It now becomes obvious that the (mis)interpretation of "you are great" as a reference to S's size was a deliberate reduction or shift of context. Now S shows that she has of course understood very well that *great* could mean, for example, "supreme, illustrious" (Webster 1828, def. no. 08), "wonderful; admirable" (no. 09) or "Dignified in aspect, mien or manner" (no. 13, quoting Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* I.507, "Amidst the crowd she walks serenely great").

Despite the fun poked by S at H in the first three stanzas, S proves to be quite polite, as she does not respond to H's approving utterance by talking about her qualities but about size. Moreover, S does not simply reject or acknowledge the compliment but plays with the notion of greatness and wishes to be what suits H. This is a very serious compliment S pays H, and we are beginning to realize that we are reading a

<sup>1</sup> In order to distinguish more easily between the persons involved, we assume S to be female and H to be male. Apart from the fact that the poem was written by a woman, which may lead to the assumption that S is female, there is no evidence as to the sex of either S or H.

love poem. By this strategy, however, S proves to be much "greater" than H in this exchange, as she takes up his rather unoriginal statement and transforms it into a complex expression of her wish to be determined by H. We see that S lovingly (and mockingly) deals with H's verbal helplessness by treating it as an expression of genuine admiration. The poem is thus revealed as an elaborate game that is being played with the apparently banal compliment that H pays S, in which the author uses the contextual underdeterminacy of language in order to fill what has been said with a wealth of meaning.

The example shows that a reading of the poem that is informed by semantic criteria may be more plausible than previous explanations. To Hagenbüchle (1988), for example, the poem shows that the wish to acquire an identity appropriate to the "thou" cannot be realized; he sees this futility in S's agonizing quizzing game, vacillating between extremes (240). Recognition of S's playful analysis of her interlocutor's compliment, however, shows that S is not agonized at all but quite in control of the situation. S finds it "dull to guess" what she is to H not because it is impossible to fix the standard or scale but because guessing becomes superfluous when S is what H desires her/him to be.

The poem brings to our attention several facts that are interesting for linguistic theory. To begin with, what is accommodated here is not one of our run of the mill examples involving a factive verb or a definite description.

I forgot that I have a dentist's appointment this afternoon.

→ possible acc.: I have a dentist's appointment this afternoon.

I bought a present for my niece's birthday.

→ possible acc.: I have a niece.

Accommodation can be understood as making an assumption about the background of the conversation that had not been made explicit, but is needed to comprehend an utterance. Putting it differently, it can be seen as a process of reconstructing what the context is like in which the conversation takes place. In order to understand the first line of the poem, one accommodates – due to the quotation – that an earlier conversation has taken place. Accommodation in the sense of context reconstruction thus has more applications than is usually assumed in semantics.

Secondly, the poem seems to be a conscious reflection on a way of interpreting context dependent linguistic expressions which Barker (2002) calls a "sharpening use". On this use, a context dependent utterance like 'Chris is great' informs us what the context is like that we are in, i.e. what counts as 'great' in the situation in which the sentence is uttered. Barker contrasts this with a normal, 'descriptive use', which takes the context for granted and informs a hearer about the facts – in the example, that Chris fulfills the criterion for greatness. It is interesting that speakers (here: Emily Dickinson) may be aware of the fact that sharpening is a use that language can be put to.

From a literary perspective, the linguistic criteria are helpful in order to make us aware of the process of accommodation that is both required by the reader and reflected upon by Dickinson. The interpretation of utterances thus becomes visible as a thematic focus of the poem and not just as an activity we always more or less con-

sciously engage in. The very absence of a specific, identifiable context furthermore suggests the need for a personal interpretation; i.e. for the evocation of a context most immediately relevant to the individual participants in the act of communication.

Connecting local composition with textual meaning, which we have done here for particular aspects (accommodation) of a specific example (the beginning of the Dickinson poem), is of course the goal of general theories of communication like Sperber / Wilson's (1986/1995), in which such an enterprise should be embedded.

## 2.2 John Donne

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet, but knock, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend,  
That I may rise and stand, orethrowe mee, and bend  
Your force to break, blowe, burne, and make mee newe. 04  
I, like an vsurp'd towne, to another due,  
Labour to'admitt you; but oh to noe end,  
Reason, your Vice-roye in mee, mee should defend,  
But is captiu'd, and proues weake or vntrue, 08  
Yet dearly I loue you, and would bee loued faine  
But am betroath'd vnto your enemye.  
Divorce mee, 'untye, or breake that knott againe;  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I, 12  
Except you inthrall mee, neuer shalbee free  
Nor euer chast except you ravish mee.

(Donne 1633/2005: 25)

Here, as well, interpretive problems arise in the very beginning. The verb *batter* combines with an object argument that needs to refer to a solid object in order to be 'batterable'. It is combined with "my heart". Now whether this refers to a solid object depends on the reading that we give to this expression: "my heart" might refer to the physical heart of S (the speaker). In this case, it is a solid object, and battering it would result in a situation that we will call the horror movie scenario here. The continuation, however, makes a second possible interpretation of "my heart" more plausible. On this (metaphorical) reading, "my heart" refers to the emotional center of S. This is not a solid object. In order to effect a combination with the verb *batter*, the verb will have to be reinterpreted as something like *assail*. In order to make sense of the first sentence under this reading, we have to accommodate that S is emotionally closed off or even trapped.

The two options are very important for our reading of the text as a whole. The first interpretation, the horror movie scenario, cannot literally be the intended meaning, since the subsequent text reveals that the poem is about an emotional (mental, spiritual, etc.) struggle. The scenario evoked by the first sentence has to be an image for something. When read literally, the first sentence is a plea for the destruction of the speaker's self, and the poem receives a masochistic reading. This is not the case on the second interpretation, where we reinterpret locally. The plea to assail the speaker can be read as a plea for help: in line 5, the S compares her/himself emotionally to an

usurped town—not a happy state of affairs, in which help from outside would be very welcome. Here, S does not need to be masochistic.

The comparison of S to a usurped town therefore establishes “heart” as metaphorical, i.e. as the seat of emotion. But literal and figurative readings constantly influence and reshape each other in this poem. The (literal) action of battering leads up to the idea of a battering ram which is needed to break through the gates of the town. This simile (“Like an usurpt towne ...”) thus leads us back to line 1 and to a metaphorical reading of “heart”. But then this “heart” does not just stand for S’s psyche, soul, or inner nature but for something that is much more specific. The heart is a prison from which S desires to be liberated. This local reinterpretation is made plausible not just by the lines that follow but also by an implied reference to notions of a hard or stony heart (e.g. Job 41: 24 “His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone”) or to the heart as a seat of emotions that may lead astray without the guidance of reason. Semantic analysis thus provides criteria for the literary analysis of the poem and enables us, for example, to criticize readings such as Stachniewski’s (1981), who maintains that the poem gives expression to “masochistic strivings” (689) motivated by the author’s puritanical or Calvinistic leanings, which lead him to the feeling of absolute worthlessness (“brutalized self-esteem”). Young (1987) and Strier (1989) do not agree but neither do they give any specific textual reasons for their disagreement. The local reinterpretation of “Batter my heart” is able to do so: a prayer for liberation does not make much sense if the speaker does not believe in being worth the effort.

From a linguistic point of view, we have discovered another interesting source of evidence. The first sentence of Donne’s poem combines several aspects of interpretive flexibility. The metaphorical reading of *heart* is the least exciting because we are very familiar with it. But it leads directly to a reinterpretation of the verb *batter* from something that applies to a solid physical object to something that may apply to a closed off, impenetrable abstract entity. We may speak about *coercion* here, as a case of enriching literal meaning with a pragmatically provided meaning component under the pressure of combinatory requirements. This reinterpretation in turn requires a step of presupposition accommodation (the presupposition that S’s emotional center is closed off)—a strikingly complex interplay between several mechanisms language has to pragmatically adapt meaning.

So far, we have analysed only the first part of the first line of the poem but we have already seen that Donne’s subtle interplay between literal and the metaphorical meanings contributes to a complexity that has triggered off a multitude of critical responses to this sonnet (see Donne 2005: 221-275). We hope to show that there are criteria of complexity which are far more reliable than, for example, schematic notions of ‘poeticity’ or ‘poetic function’, and furthermore enable us to criticize readings that regard poetry mainly as the outcome of abstract (theoretical, ideological) positions.

### 2.3 William Shakespeare

Sonnet 29

When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my out-cast state,  
And trouble deafe heaven with my bootlesse cries, 04  
And looke vpon my selfe and curse my fate.  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possesst,  
Desiring this mans art, and that mans skope,  
With what I most inioy contented least, 08  
Yet in these thoughts my selfe almost despising,  
Haplye I thinke on thee, and then my state  
(Like to the Larke at breake of daye arising)  
From sullen earth sings himns at Heauens gate, 12  
For thy sweet loue remembred such welth brings,  
That then I skorne to change my state with Kings.

(Shakespeare 1609)

In this case, the main interpretive problem arises from syntax – and it is quite surprising that none of the three most frequently cited current annotated editions (Arden, Cambridge, Oxford) even mentions (let alone explains) it, neither does the most extensively annotated edition to date, Booth (Shakespeare 1977) or the most recent one, West (Shakespeare 2007). The reason for this may be that those editions could be said to actually produce the problem that they fail to explain. In the 1609 Quarto, on which all editions, for lack of an alternative, should rely, the first sentence ends with a full stop in the fourth line. All of the current editions change the Quarto text and replace the full stop at the end of line 4 with a comma. To the extent that we take orthography to reflect linguistic properties, the way these first four lines are printed in the Quarto makes perfect sense. The punctuation would plausibly reflect a structure according to which there is a main clause, the conjunction “[I ... state] and [trouble ... cries] and [looke ... fate]”, preceded by the temporal clause “When in disgrace ...”. Weeping and crying and looking and cursing result from being in disgrace. The next sentence, according to the Quarto punctuation, begins with a conjunction of non-finite clauses “[Wishing ... possesst] (and) [desiring ... skope] (and) [with ... least] (and) [yet ... despising]”, followed by a main clause, “Haplye I think on thee”. A contradictory and conflicting mental activity may coincidentally lead to thinking about the addressee, which will then bring about a radical change of mood.

- S1 [When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes]  
[I ... state] and [trouble ... cries] and [look ... fate]  
S2 [Wishing ...] (and) [desiring ...] (and) [with ... least] (and) [yet ... despising]  
[haplye I thinke on thee]...

The reason why all the modern scholarly editions are dissatisfied with this version of the poem can only be speculated about. Replacing the full stop in line four with a comma, as all five editions do, suggests a different syntactic analysis and plausibly

produces syntactic ambiguity. Obviously the editors must have felt the overall meaning of the sonnet to demand that ambiguity, or they would not have changed the only version dating from Shakespeare's lifetime. But then only the Cambridge edition, in the textual apparatus, even admits the change,<sup>2</sup> which goes back to Edmund Malone's 1780 edition. All we get by way of explanation is the conviction that "certainly the punctuation offered by the printer [of the Quarto] often destroys the sense and cripples the rhythm" (West in Shakespeare 2007: 102, referring to Duncan-Jones in Shakespeare 1998).

In the version printed by modern editions, it is possible to regard line 2 as the first main clause, and make the participial clauses in lines 5-8 dependent on it. In this case, not only weeping and crying and looking and cursing result from being in disgrace (as in the Quarto) but also wishing and desiring and being "contented least". Then follows an adversative clause ("Yet ... despising") which is dependent on the main clause "Haply I thinke on thee".

- S1 [When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes]  
[ [I ... state] and [trouble ... cries] and [look ... fate]  
[Wishing ...] (and) [desiring ...] (and) [with ... least]]  
S2 [Yet in these thoughts my selfe almost despising]  
[haplye I thinke on thee]...

This version or reading takes into account the tradition of the Italian sonnet that is marked by a volta or 'turn' in line 9, frequently indicated by such words as "but" or "yet". It contrasts the downcast state of the speaker's mind in lines 1-8 with a hopeful one in lines 9-14, the change setting in with the speaker beginning to despise himself for his own self-pity and discontent.

However, such a reading would best be reflected by a punctuation that put a full stop or at least a semicolon after "least" in line 8. The modern editors obviously become afraid of their own courage, for none of them prints it, even though it is suggested by their own removal of the full stop in line 4. In fact, they do not print any full stop at all before the end of line 14, thus giving rise to an alternative reading, in which "I all alone beweepe my out-cast state" is not a main clause but part of the temporal clause beginning in line 1. The main clause only comes in line 10. There is only one sentence then: "When ... I beweepe ... [then] Haply I thinke on thee".

- S [When – in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes –  
[I ... state] and [trouble... cries] and [look ... fate]  
[Wishing...] (and) [desiring...] (and) [with ... least] (and) [yet ... despising]  
[haplye I thinke on thee]...

In this reading the weeping almost becomes a condition for the speaker's remembering the addressee. This version is in agreement with the English form of the sonnet, consisting of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet, where the argument is marked by an ongoing process rather than by a sudden shift or reversal.

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<sup>2</sup> Booth (Shakespeare 1977) prints the Quarto version alongside with his edited text.



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Thus we see that when orthographical matters are treated in the flexible manner in which they were commonly treated in the Early Modern period, a three-way syntactic ambiguity is present in this sonnet that leads to three subtly different interpretations of the text. We take the Quarto text seriously but also take into account the fact that we do not know to what extent its printer followed Shakespeare's manuscript or instructions. This is why there may be a point in what modern editors do after all, especially if it leads to our uncovering and explaining the ambiguities inherent in Shakespeare's text. Among other things, the ambiguities serve him to show that what may appear as a sudden inner change or resolution has been prepared for by our mental attitudes all along. The happy memory is both contrasted with the discontent and develops from it. Shakespeare's tools for bringing the ambiguity about are interesting. The integration of especially the non-finite clauses is underdetermined syntactically, and so is their semantic connection to the main clause(s) (that this connection changes between the three readings is perhaps clearest in the case of "yet ... despising", which is adversative only on the second analysis). This under-determinacy is exploited by Shakespeare to produce three only subtly different interpretations of the text, all of which make sense. The contribution of a detailed analysis here is not so much to narrow down interpretive possibilities as it is to explain why a range of interpretations is possible.

Shakespeare's strategy of linking conceptual fields by leaving certain elements of the poem underdetermined can also be seen in the use of single words. For example, in line 2, "state" refers to the speaker's social position as an outcast, in line 10 it apparently means 'state of mind' and in line 14 it refers to both his outward and inner condition. This change of meaning is particularly interesting because, to a reader in Shakespeare's time, 'state' inevitably evoked its Latin etymon 'status' which according to Cooper (1578) meant "State: fourme: fashion: gesture of the body. The condition or state of ones life or other thing. Among oratours, the principall point wherein the contouersie consisteth: the issue." The evocation of the various meanings of this word therefore implies a reflection on discourse itself, on the point or issue to be made by an utterance. This reconstruction of a context is further suggested by Shakespeare's use of the word "scope" (line 7), which could mean "the subject, theme, argument chosen for treatment" (*OED* "scope" *n.*<sup>2</sup> 3.a., quoted by Burrow in Shakespeare 2002: 438). Booth (Shakespeare 1977: 180) points out that the *OED* here quotes from a 1549 source which links the two words: "The scope or state of the boke, tendes to dysuade the kinge from hys supremycye". In this reading, Shakespeare's speaker would regard the subject he has chosen for his text as "outcast", i.e. treated as irrelevant by those who have other, more fashionable topics to write about. This changes when the speaker remembers the love of his addressee, which will immediately provide him with a wealth of ideas (the *copia* necessary in literary production) and will be a better topic than even royalty itself. The ambiguous meaning of "state" thus represents the progression from an outward perspective ("Fortune and mens eyes") to an inner one, which then comes to include or supersede external considerations. This enables us to integrate the poem with the context of Shakespeare's sonnets, where—e.g. in the famous Sonnet 18—such a process of

overcoming external limitations is regularly linked with a reflection on the status of poetry itself.

### 3 Conclusion

Our case studies investigate how a plausible interpretation of a text may arise through the combination of local and global mechanisms. Roughly speaking, linguistics (more specifically, semantics) represents expertise with regard to local mechanisms of interpretation, while the study of literature has particular expertise regarding the text as a whole. We hope to have shown that the combination of the two leads to a more solidly grounded interpretation of the text than could otherwise have been achieved.

A better understanding of texts would in itself be a worthy goal. Our ambitions reach beyond that, however. Lyrical texts will probably seem like a strange source of evidence to most formal semanticists. Nevertheless, they must be considered real data, being the result of language production by competent speakers of the language they are written in. Our readings suggest that they are actually a type of data that it is particularly rewarding to study, providing us with a rather rich source of interesting examples. Perhaps this is because of the fact that the poet has better intuitive access to her/his linguistic competence than your average speaker. We are consulting an expert, so to speak, about her/his intuitions (but without the bothersome problem that consulting a linguist always has: that your consultant immediately begins to theorize for their own professional benefit). Another effect of our joint enterprise is that the close reading of texts is put back on the agenda of literary studies without reverting to narrow new critical goals. Concepts and criteria developed by linguistics – here in particular formal semantics – help the literary scholar to come to terms with the problem of evaluating the relevance of potentially innumerable contexts.

Thus it is part of our goal to bring together more closely our two respective fields – literature and linguistics – for their mutual benefit in an area where they naturally meet: the interpretation of texts. In other words, an old claim is to be pursued with modern tools.

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