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**Emily Dickinson’s “My life had stood a loaded gun”—
An Interdisciplinary Analysis**

Abstract

In this article we analyse Emily Dickinson’s poem “My life had stood a loaded gun” using a specific methodology combining linguistic and literary theory. The first step is a textual analysis with the methods of compositional semantics. The second step is a literary analysis enriching the literal meaning with information about the wider context of the poem.

The division of these two steps distinguishes between an objective interpretation of the text based solely on the rules of grammar and an individual interpretation additionally based on global mechanisms. In combining both steps, we can show why some interpretations of the poem are more plausible than others.

The type of methodology used is helpful for literary studies, since the methods of formal linguistics help produce a systematic and non-arbitrary analysis. The methodology is interesting from a linguistic perspective, since it uncovers which violations of grammar do or do not disturb the interpretative process, and which kind of structures need pragmatic enrichment.

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –

In Corners – till a Day

The Owner passed – identified –

And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –

And now We hunt the Doe –

And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master's Head –
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die – ¹

1. Introduction

“My life had stood a loaded gun” (Johnson #754/Franklin #764) was written around 1863 and published in 1929 (Dickinson 1955: 574). It is one of Dickinson's most controversial poems

¹ All quotations from Dickinson's poems are from the 1961 print of Johnson's edition.

and has triggered a multitude of different interpretations, ranging from the description of a male-female relationship over the battle and subversion of a suppressed woman in the nineteenth century to seeing it as a poem about language and what it means to be a poet (Leiter 2007: 145–147).² Robert Weisbuch (1975: 25) even calls it “the single most difficult poem Dickinson wrote”.

We have chosen this poem precisely because it seems to be difficult enough to prevent one straightforward interpretation. At the same time, it was written by a poet with a very high competence and sensibility of language. Thus, we assume that the words are not chosen arbitrarily, that any difficulties the reader may experience when interpreting are built in on purpose. In our view a linguistic analysis will help determine plausible interpretations of the poem, since plausibility is based on an objective measure, the application of grammatical rules that are used in analyzing all texts and whose definition is the goal of linguistic theory. Following, this approach is well suited for specifying the point where an objective interpretation arrives at its limits. It determines where rules start to apply that are not part of the grammar and therefore lead to much variation in interpretation.

The following analysis and interpretation of “My life had stood a loaded gun” is based on a specific methodology that combines linguistic and literary theory and their approaches to interpreting texts (Bauer and Beck 2009; Bauer et al. 2010). It proceeds in two steps. The first step is a textual analysis with the methods of compositional semantics in the tradition of generative grammar (Montague 1973). This linguistic analysis will reveal how information about the local context and meaning of certain expressions can be reconstructed based on the actual wording of the poem. It is guided by the formal rules that describe our knowledge of the language system.

² S. Leiter (2007) expounds different interpretations; E. K. Sparks (n. d.) lists 20 different (though some similar) interpretations ranging from 1934 to 1992; and M. Freeman (1998: 271n18) notes seven main lines of interpretation of gun and owner.

This knowledge is extendable by facts that lie outside the text. The second step in interpretation is therefore a literary analysis, which, in addition to local analysis, considers a more global perspective. It enriches the meaning of the poem with information about the wider context it is written in. After these separate analyses the findings of both will be combined. It will become obvious that their interaction can reveal a plausible reading of the poem that cannot be gained by exploiting other less specific methodologies.³

2. The first stanza

We start with a closer look at the first stanza and try to reconcile it with more global considerations afterwards. Since structure influences meaning, a plausible syntactic analysis has to be found in order to assign an interpretation to the first stanza of the poem. While the following suggestion is not the only possibility, it is, as we shall see, a likely one and as such will be pursued. First of all, the sentence that is the first stanza is broken down into smaller parts. It consists of a matrix sentence ‘My life had stood in corners’, an apposition ‘a loaded gun’ and a subordinate clause ‘till a day the owner passed – identified – and carried me away’. The following bracketed representation illustrates the structure we assume:

[_{Matrix} My life had stood – [_{Apposition} a loaded gun] – in corners]

[_{Subordinate} till a day the owner passed – identified – and carried me away]

2.1. *Matrix sentence*

With this syntactic structure in mind, we can start a more detailed analysis of the matrix sentence ‘My life had stood in corners’. The first feature of this sentence to be examined is

³ Of course this does not mean that a literary analysis of Dickinson’s poetry usually does not provide a linguistic analysis: syntactic aspects (Miller 1987) as well as cognitive aspects (e.g. Freeman 1998) and ambiguity (Hagenbüchle 1984) in Dickinson’s poetry have been studied in the past. The approach taken here is part of the project A2 of the Collaborative Research Center 833 “The Construction of Meaning” at the University of Tübingen.

the occurrence of a past perfect: in order to illustrate how this is usually analysed in formal semantics (cf. von Stechow 2008), we shall use the simpler example in (1a). An intuitive description of its meaning is suggested in (1c), whereas the according formal semantic representation is given in (1b).

(1)

a. John had stood here.

(let ‘here’ refer the speaker’s living room, l)

b. $\exists t[t < t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ t_{\text{Topic}} < t_{\text{now}} \ \& \ \exists e[\tau(e) \subseteq t \ \& \ \text{John stand in l in e}]$

c. There is a time t before the time the discourse is about, which is before the speech time, and into t falls an event of John standing in location l.

The plural on ‘Corners’ is the second noteworthy feature; (1) will therefore be considered in the modified form in (2a) next. Its paraphrase in (2c) is represented by the formal term in (2b). Following a standard analysis for plurals (Link 1991; Beck and Sauerland 2000; Beck and von Stechow 2006), the sentence describes a plurality of standing events that take place in various corners. We take this to mean that John is habitually standing around.

(2)

a. John had stood in corners.

b. $\exists t[t < t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ t_{\text{Topic}} < t_{\text{now}} \ \& \ \exists E[\tau(E) \subseteq t$
 $\ \& \ \exists C[*\text{corner}(C) \ \& \ \langle E, C \rangle \in **[\lambda e. \lambda x. \text{John stand in x in e}]]]$

c. There is a time t before the time the discourse is about, which is before the speech time, and into t falls a plural event E such that there is a set of corners C such that in the relevant subevents of E, John stands in one of the corners.

Relating these two interpretations to the poem yields the reading that ‘my life’ was habitually standing around in corners at some point in the past. This leads to the most problematic feature of the matrix sentence which is the mismatch between ‘my life’ and ‘stand in corners’. This problem becomes evident if we take a closer look at the meaning of the verb phrase. First, we need to establish a lexical entry for ‘stand’ that specifies what the nature of this mismatch is. A basic lexical entry for ‘stand’ given that it appear with the prepositional phrase ‘in corners’ is provided in (3a). ‘Stand’ denotes a relation between an individual, a location and an event. (3b) adds a presuppositional component to ‘stand’⁴, namely that the individual argument for ‘stand’ is a physical object that has a vertical dimension. The mismatch ‘my life’ and ‘stand’ is therefore a presupposition failure: Since ‘my life’ is not a physical object, the verb cannot apply to the subject. Thus, the meaning of the matrix sentence will be undefined. The linguistic notion of undefinedness describes that a sentence lacks a truth value, which means that it can neither be judged true or false (Frege 1892). This will disturb the interpretation process.

(3)

- a. $[[stand_1]] = [\lambda e.\lambda x.\lambda y.y \text{ stand in } x \text{ in } e]$
- b. $[[stand_2]] = [\lambda e.\lambda x.\lambda y: y \text{ is a physical object that has a vertical dimension. } y \text{ is in location } x \text{ in } e \text{ and } y \text{ is vertically oriented in } e]$
- c. $[[stand]]([[my \text{ life}]])$ is undefined.

In order to assign a meaning to the matrix clause, we either have to reinterpret the Verb Phrase or the subject or both at the same time. A possible reinterpretation of ‘stand in corners’

⁴ The notation used for adding a presuppositional component to a lexical item is taken from Heim and Kratzer (1998).

would be ‘remain unnoticed, neglected’. ‘My life’ could be read as ‘I’, or as ‘what is important about me’. Taking these possibilities into consideration, we arrive at the following new readings:

(4)

- a. I stood around in corners. (NP reinterpretation)
- b. My life remained unnoticed. (VP reinterpretation)
- c. I (what is important about me) was neglected. (NP/VP reinterpretation)

Let us recall the decisions underlying this analysis: Firstly, we take ‘stand’ to denote a relation between an individual and a location, which is the literal meaning of the verb as in ‘I stood in Central Square’. Apart from that, we consider the plural on ‘corners’ as the trigger of an event cumulative reading which, in turn, makes sense as a habitual interpretation. Although an episodic interpretation is available as well, the former is a more plausible linguistic option and shall as such be considered.

2.2. *Apposition*

Another important decision the reader has to make pertains to the interpretation of the apposition ‘a loaded gun’ for which there are two obvious possibilities: one, in which ‘a loaded gun’ is taken to be an apposition in the sense ‘I am a loaded gun’ (see (5a) for a formal representation). The other relevant interpretation is one where the apposition is an implicit comparison with ‘a loaded gun’. The interpretation can be found in (5b).

(5)

- a. $\lambda y.y$ is a loaded gun

(cf. My brother, a physicist, anticipates the worst.)

b. λy.y is like a loaded gun

(cf. This gardening catalogue, an invitation to buy more plants, is lying on the table.)

This analysis shows that the appositive Noun Phrase denotes a property that has to be applied to some individual introduced in the matrix clause. Taking the possible reinterpretations of ‘my life’ from above, either the speaker herself or the speaker’s life are such individuals. In combination with the matrix clause, this gives us the following plausible interpretations:

(6)

- a. The speaker (S), who was a loaded gun, had stood habitually in corners. In the following: S_{gun}
- b. The speaker (S), who was like a loaded gun, had remained neglected (or S’s life/essence was like a loaded gun and had remained neglected). In the following: S_{ind}

In summary, at this point, we have two basic interpretive possibilities: The poem’s speaker could be a gun, or the poem’s speaker could be a person who is compared to a gun. Both readings require reinterpretation. In the first case, ‘my life’ cannot be taken literally, and in the second case, the predicate cannot be taken literally. Apart from that, an important addition must be made for the second possibility S_{ind} . We need to find a possible reading for the comparison with ‘a loaded gun’. It could mean that the speaker is ready to free the potential he or she is loaded with. The comparison with a gun makes this process sound dangerous and threatening. A picture of someone arises who is so enraged that she or he is about to explode.

2.3. Subordinate clause

A further step is to identify those parts of the subordinate clause ‘till a day the owner passed – identified – and carried me away’ which require clarification. The first issue is the meaning of ‘until’ and what it tells us about the temporal order of events described in the poem. The second issue is the definite description ‘the owner’ and the third issue is the structural ambiguity in the Verb Phrase.

To get a clearer understanding of the meaning of ‘until’ once more a simpler example is analysed first: In (7c), a paraphrase of the interpretation of the sentence in (7a) is given. (7b) is the corresponding formal representation of this reading. Matters may become more tangible if we imagine a time bar. On this bar, the event of John’s standing in a certain location is situated on the left and followed by ‘until’, which sets the right boundary of the standing event.

(7)

- a. John had stood here until Mary arrived (passed).
- b. $\exists t[t < t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ t_{\text{Topic}} < t_{\text{now}} \ \& \ \exists e[\lambda(e) \subseteq t \ \& \ \text{John stand in } l \ \text{in } e] \ \& \ t \infty t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ \exists e'[\tau(e') \subseteq t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ \text{Mary arrive in } e']$
 ($t \infty t_{\text{Topic}}$ means that t abuts the topic time)
- c. There is a time t before the time the discourse is about, which is before the speech time, and into t falls an event of John standing in location l , and abutting t is the topic time into which falls an arrival of Mary’s.

Firstly, this structure carries an implicature that John’s standing here ends with Mary’s arrival. Secondly, the use of ‘pass’ is interesting because it is not entirely clear what is meant. The

most likely meaning would be ‘to go by and move past’ (OED “pass”, v. III.10). It indicates, at any rate, a lack of goal-orientedness on the part of the subject.

The subject of the sentence is ‘The Owner’. As can be seen in the lexical entry suggested in (8a), ‘Owner’ denotes a relation between two individuals that holds at a time: an owner owns an owned entity at a certain time. The definite article ‘the’ triggers a uniqueness-presupposition: ‘there is exactly one owner such that this owner owns an owned entity at a certain time’. The according lexical entry for ‘the’ can be found in (8b).

(8)

- a. $[[\text{owner}]] = \lambda t.\lambda y.\lambda x.x \text{ owns } y \text{ at } t$
- b. $[[\text{the}]] = \lambda f\langle e,t\rangle$: there is exactly one x such that $f(x)=1$.
the unique x such that $f(x)=1$
- c. $[\text{the} [\text{owner } t] [\text{(of) } _NP]]]$
PSP: there is exactly one x such that x owns $_NP$ at t

In order to make this a felicitous use of the definite article, we ought to determine what the owned entity is, as well as when the ownership holds, and then verify the presupposition triggered. Schematically this is presented in (8b) and (8c). Neither the time of ownership nor the owned entity are introduced explicitly in the poem. Moreover, no referent is provided for the definite description. Thus, the content of the presupposition is not entailed by the immediate context. In order to proceed with the interpretation we therefore have to accommodate certain facts. That is, we take it that the presupposition is fulfilled in the context and add the relevant information to our background assumptions. First, we assume that something is owned. Plausible candidates are S or S ’s life, since they are the two entities that occur in the context prior to the point where we encounter ‘The Owner’. Second, we assume

that there is a unique individual that is owner of S/S's life. This leads us to the following range of interpretations:

(9)

- a. S_{gun} : our unique x is the owner of the gun.
- b. S_{ind} : our unique x is the owner of the speaker S , who is a slave.
- c. S_{ind} : our unique x is the owner of the speaker S 's life.
- d. S_{ind} : our unique x is the owner of the place where S is situated.

It has to be remarked that interpretations (9b) and (9c) are nearly equivalent, even though what is accommodated in (9c) is less clearly defined. On the one hand, (9c) could describe all kinds of asymmetrical interpersonal relationships, such as an unequal marriage or economic dependence of a worker on his master. On the other hand, considering the perspective of S , we become aware of the question of who owns our lives. Interestingly, what would usually be our answer to this question, namely 'My life is mine', seems not to be true for the speaker of the poem. (Here we should keep in mind the theological perspective mentioned in Section 7: S 's life may well not be his/hers but belong to Christ, who has power over S 's life and death). With regard to the time of the ownership relation, though we are not given any additional information, two possibilities arise: the time is long, i.e., it encompasses, in terms of (7), t , t_{Topic} and t_{now} , or the time is shorter: it is the time starting from t_{Topic} . The first option has a flavour of fate: there is someone who is destined to own S , whereas the second option is reasonable in conjunction with the assumption that S is *acquired* at the topic time by someone passing by. In the first interpretation, S is merely 'identified' but has always been owned. All options require presupposition accommodation again, i.e., additional assumptions that we make in order to establish the existence of a unique x who owns S (ff: O , the owner).

The last issue arising in the subordinate clause is the coordination we find in the Verb Phrase: The structure in (10a) invites two analyses: either as a coordination of two Verb Phrases with an apposition in between the two conjuncts (see (10b)), or as a coordination of three verbal categories (see (10c)).

(10)

- a. The owner passed – identified – and carried me away
- b. [VP [VP passed] [APP – identified –] and [VP carried me away]]
- c. [VP [VP passed] [VP [VP identified _] and [VP carried _] me away]]

The first version would mean that O was identified, presumably by S. The second version would entail that O identified S. The latter may seem more plausible, but it comes with a slight syntactic glitch: ‘me’, in this analysis, is the object of ‘identify’ and of ‘carry away’. It can be right-node-raised to the periphery (Ross 1967; Abbott 1976). But the particle ‘away’ of the particle verb ‘carry away’ follows it, so this cannot be seen as right-node-raising. Raising ‘me’ past ‘away’, on the other hand, is phonologically ill-formed since full NPs can very well do this whereas weak pronouns cannot. The structure in (10c) might simply be the best option from a syntactic point of view. At least it is less complex than (10b) as the phrases are assumed to be built parallel. This is why we shall focus on (10c) in the following.

Another interesting point is the verb ‘identify’. We can paraphrase the simpler example (11a) arriving at (11b) which can receive the formal representation in (11c).

(11)

- a. I identified this as a seedling of *Sanguisorba minor*.
- b. I came to know that this is a seedling of *Sanguisorba minor*.

c. $\lambda P.\lambda y.\lambda x$: x did not know that y is P. x comes to know that y is P

In the poem, all three arguments of the verb ‘identify’ are not overtly specified due to the elliptical structure of the first stanza. Supposing that the individual arguments are O and S, we still don’t know *as what* S is identified. However, the absence of an explicit first argument suggests a default interpretation of ‘identify’ if it refers to an individual, in this case: O realizes who S is.

If we put things together for the subordinate clause, we arrive at the following reading:

(12) There is a unique individual O such that O owns S and there is an event of O encountering and identifying S and taking S away.

Given the various possibilities discussed above, this could describe different scenarios:

(13)

- a. Acquiring a gun.
- b. Identifying a gun (as one that one owns?) and taking it.
- c. Acquiring, or recognising and taking a subordinate associate.

In terms of S_{gun} , it is not obvious how to read ‘identify’. We know the gun would have to be very special in some way for us to make sense of the encounter described, but we do not know what it is that makes the gun special. The lack of a third argument for ‘identify’ is more problematic in this case, since it would specify the property that makes the gun special (e.g., ‘O identified S as a Smith and Wesson’). An S_{ind} interpretation is hence slightly favoured at this point (‘O realized who S was’).

In addition, the use of “me” instead of “it” rather strengthens the S_{ind} reading (‘gun’ and ‘life’ are neuter, an individual is not). In terms of S_{ind} , it suggests that O recognizes S as a desired inferior of some kind. The verb ‘carry away’ confirms the implicature that the standing around in corners is ended. In addition, if we think of the cliché which occurs in love stories, the sequence “carried me away” in the literal and metaphoric sense could hint at the relationship between a man and a woman (cf. also OED “carry”, v. I.20: “To impel or lead away as passion does, or by influencing the mind or feelings”, and “carry”, v. I.21: “to be carried: to be rapt, to be moved from sober-mindedness, to have the head turned”).

2.4. *Result*

Although there is room for filling various gaps in various ways, two basic interpretations can be distinguished by locally interpreting the first stanza: one in which S is a gun (see (14a)) and one in which S is an individual (see (14b)).

(14)

- a. S_{gun} : a rather special gun stood around loaded, disregarded, until it was recognized, possibly bought, and taken by its (new) owner.
- b. S_{ind} : a person lived a neglected life, unrecognised in her or his dangerous nature, until someone came, recognized and took her or him as a suitable subordinate associate. The nature of this asymmetrical relationship as well as the gender of the two people is not entirely clear yet.

Both readings require reinterpretations and leave open questions. For example, we still do not know what kind of relationship we are dealing with. It could be the relationship between the gun and its owner and it could be the relationship between two individuals, one of which is

comparing herself to a gun. From a linguistic point of view, both options look similarly plausible. In addition to these two readings, both of which are based on local reinterpretations in order to achieve a coherent reading of the text, there is also the possibility of a global reinterpretation of the S_{gun} reading. The gun-story as a whole is to be understood allegorically. Towards the end of our analysis we shall consider one such possibility, reading the poem as a text about language and writing poetry.

Interpreting S as a gun is something that is manifested in the text of the first stanza. At this point other interpretations are extra-linguistically determined and cannot be drawn from what the poem offers to the reader. The present textual analysis therefore differs from other analyses in that it is supported by non-arbitrary linguistic knowledge. From an extra-linguistic perspective we would tend to assume a female speaker and a male “owner”, keeping in mind the female author of the poem and what we think about stereotypical gender roles of the time.⁵ Of course this kind of world knowledge plays an important role in interpreting texts. However, it is less specific in that it incorporates knowledge that is not validated by the grammar. This leads to a lot of variation between individual speakers, who approach the poem with their individual stereotypes in mind. The power relations in the poem could also be seen as a kind of role playing similar to that of female characters disguised as men in some of Shakespeare’s plays (for example, Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Viola in *Twelfth Night*). In these plays, what we would suppose to be the traditional roles of man and woman are reversed and someone who would stereotypically be rather passive becomes the most active force. In “My life had stood” we will find a similar reversal — S (being either a gun and therefore by definition has no volition of its own, or a human being subordinate to O and therefore less active than he) seems to be the main agent of the poem. And just as the false identity in Shakespeare’s plays cannot always be kept up with perfection and is always abandoned in the

⁵ Cf., for example, Coventry Patmore’s description of the ideal wife in *The Angel in the House*.

end, S's attempt to assume a role not innate to S seems to fail, as will be seen, in the last stanza of Dickinson's poem.

3. The second and third stanzas

As established in (5) above, there are two interpretative possibilities regarding the identity of S at the end of stanza one which we called S_{gun} and S_{ind} . They trigger the possible interpretations laid out in (14a) and (14b). The reader's decision about the interpretation of stanza one determines how he or she will interpret the following verses, since they are compatible with both readings. However, there are linguistic factors that cause a slight tendency towards S_{ind} . We will look at these factors next by comparing the interpretation of the second and third stanza according to an S_{gun} and an S_{ind} reading, respectively.

3.1. *The second stanza according to S_{ind}*

Stanza two begins with a complex conjunctive sentence consisting of three conjuncts (C1-C3):

[And [now we roam in sovereign woods]_{C1} and [now we hunt the doe]_{C2} and [every time I speak for Him the mountains straight reply]_{C3}]

The first two conjuncts describe collaborate activities of S and O. The personal pronoun shifts from the singular ('my life'; 'me') to the plural 'we', thereby stressing the cooperation between the two and their close relation. This fact already points in the direction that we are dealing with two individuals rather than a gun and an individual.

Moreover, there is a shift from passive to active mood in the predicates describing S. In the first stanza, S was 'passed', 'identified' (as pointed out above, the analysis follows (10c) and

regards S as the object of identification) and ‘carried [...] away’. The only verb form attributed to S is a state (‘stood [...] in corners’). Opposed to that, in stanza two, the verb forms associated with S refer to activities (‘roam’, ‘hunt’ and ‘speak’). The personal pronoun ‘we’ therefore suggests that the activities are conducted both by S and O. Taken literally, this is only possible if we assume S to be human. Therefore, an S_{ind} interpretation seems to be slightly favoured.

3.2. *The second stanza according to S_{gun}*

Following the S_{gun} interpretation one would have to reinterpret the predicates since inanimate objects do not ‘roam’, ‘hunt’ or ‘speak’; this is manifested linguistically via the presuppositions of these verbs: essentially, the act of speaking is associated with human beings. Hence, the verb ‘speak’ usually only allows for animate subjects to be its external argument. This is captured by assuming a lexical entry for ‘speak’ like in (15a) that has this restriction incorporated as a presupposition. If S is not human, then the indexical “I” will refer to an inanimate entity because of its presupposition, which is stated in (15b)⁶. Combining verb and subject would yield a presupposition failure in this case, as (15c) shows.

(15)

- a. $[[\text{ speak }]] = \lambda x: x \text{ is human. } x \text{ speaks}$
- b. $[[I_1]]^{g,c} = \lambda g: g(1) \text{ is the speaker in } c. g(1)$
- c. $[[\text{ speak}_2]] ([[I_1]])$ is only defined if $g(1)$ is human

However, a reinterpretation of ‘speak’ is also possible by presuming that it is used metaphorically and human properties are transferred to the properties of a gun. A plausible

⁶ The interpretation of pronouns is also following the analysis of Heim and Kratzer (1998).

way to do this is to find a generalization for ‘speak’ that can function as parallel between properties of both guns and humans. One possibility is to read ‘speaking’ as a special way of making sounds. When humans speak, they emit sounds. Guns, on the other hand, emit sounds when they are fired. The content of what a human says could therefore correspond to the bullet fired from the gun. However, a very important distinction needs to be made between the interpretation of ‘speak’ for S_{ind} and S_{gun} . A human being can speak of its own accord, thus it becomes ambiguous what ‘I speak for him’ means under the S_{ind} interpretation. Possible paraphrases are given in (16) a. and b. below.

(16)

- a. When I speak, it is for his good.
- b. He is the reason for my speaking.

A gun, on the other hand, cannot fire itself. The intent is coming from O. Thus it would be transparent how ‘speak for him’ is most likely interpreted under S_{gun} , namely parallel to (16b): the reason for my firing is he, since he pulls the trigger.

The third conjunct in the second stanza describes reactions evoked by S. They have to be reinterpreted in both readings. One of them is described in the second line “And every time I speak for him – The Mountains straight reply”, the interpretation of which is given below.

(17) $\forall t. \text{ speak}(\text{speaker})(t) \rightarrow \exists t'. t' \subseteq t. \text{ reply}(\text{the_mountains})(t')$

Mountains, since they are not human, cannot reply in the same sense that humans can. Reinterpretation works analogously to the reinterpretation of ‘speak’ in (15).

Again, decoding the metaphor is possible when taking properties of humans or guns to be transferred to properties of mountains. The reply of the mountains can be reinterpreted as the echo of S_{ind} 's speech or S_{gun} 's reverberation. The resounding noise a gun creates when fired is also called "report" (OED "report", *n.* 7.a), which in turn in a less technical sense usually refers to human speech, so that the mountains' "reply" can also be compared to a (spoken) 'report' (NB also the use of "report" in J1651 below). In both readings it is implied that S is powerful (being able to roam, hunt, speak and smile) and uses the potential of 'a loaded gun' that was described at the beginning of stanza one.

3.3. *The third stanza according to S_{gun} and S_{ind}*

The third stanza begins with a sentence consisting of a matrix clause and a subordinate clause with subject-auxiliary inversion. The matrix clause verb is very plausibly 'glow', although it has the wrong inflection.⁷ The inversion in the subordinate clause is assumed to have a temporal clause meaning. These assumptions together yield the following structure for the first sentence:

[And when I smile, such cordial light glows upon the Valley]

Thus, S's smile evokes the existence of a cordial light. The interpretation looks as follows:

$$(18) \quad \forall t. \text{smile}(\text{speaker})(t) \rightarrow \exists t'. t' \subseteq t. \text{glow}(\text{light})(t')$$

Again, we need to reinterpret 'smile' under the S_{gun} interpretation. Analogous to 'speak' and 'reply', 'smile' is also a concept associated with humans, since it expresses a pleasurable

⁷ Miller (1987: 64–66) points out Dickinson's frequent use of verbs without inflection.

emotion. This is supported by the fact that the reaction is a “cordial light”. If we follow the S_{gun} interpretation, a similar mismatch between verb and its subject argument occurs as in the cases above. The smile can be reinterpreted as the muzzle flash of the gun, both being a temporary phenomenon that manifests itself nonverbally. Moreover, it is also consistent with the appearance of light. However, this reinterpretation is not as clear-cut as the reinterpretation of ‘speak’: A smile, for example, can occur without speaking, but, following the reinterpretation of ‘speak’ for S_{gun} , a muzzle flash can only occur in combination with shooting. Furthermore, one would have to assume that Emily Dickinson’s use of “cordial” is ironic in this interpretation, since the light produced by a gun is certainly not perceived as pleasant. It does make sense, however, to compare the ‘cordial light’ evoked by a gun to a ‘Vesuvian face’ that lets ‘its pleasure through’, since volcanoes, too, are perceived as being dangerous but described as pleasant in the poem.

This comparison happens in the second half of the stanza, where we suppose an ‘if’ is deleted.

(19) [It is as if a Vesuvian face Had let its pleasure through]

The pronoun ‘It’ could not only refer to the cordial light that is previously mentioned but also to the event argument introduced by ‘smile’.

The reinterpretation necessary in order to satisfy the S_{gun} interpretation in the second stanza is thus more complex than the literal understanding that is possible if we take S to be human. It becomes clear though that S is dangerous and amiable at the same time, the second quality being more difficult to attribute to a gun.

Overall, the words used in stanzas two and three indicate a positive atmosphere: ‘smile’, ‘cordial light’ and ‘pleasure’. S seems to be able to evaluate the situation and show emotions. Since inanimate objects cannot do that according to our world knowledge, these expressions,

as well, favour the S_{ind} interpretation. In the interpretation S_{gun} a gun must be able to have human properties within the poem. This reading is less compatible with the facts of the actual world, however, when interpreting a poem, we do not refer the information in the text to the actual world but to possible worlds. Thus, given the context of a poetic text, we can very well imagine a possible world in which guns can have human features (cf. Bauer and Beck *in preparation*).

3.4. Result

From a local perspective, the activities described and the evaluative description used in stanzas two and three indicate a human being as the speaker of the poem. This is due to the fact that no reinterpretation of the predicates would be necessary under that assumption. However, the S_{gun} interpretation remains valid and cannot be excluded, since both line two and line three are compatible with the S_{gun} and S_{ind} interpretation, respectively. Reinterpretation of the predicates is necessary that makes them fit for non-human external arguments. Additionally, the S_{gun} interpretation seems to require a more global perspective in that the reader has to make assumptions that are not compatible with the facts of the actual world she relates to but can only be attributed to the possible world described by the poem (cf. Bauer and Beck *in preparation*). Emily Dickinson seems to be playing with the fact that we are automatically trying to match our world knowledge with the facts we take from the poem. Since the reading in which S or S's life is compared to a gun is slightly more prominent at this point in the poem exactly for this reason, the nature of the relationship between S and O is the more pressing question. One important factor with regard to this question is the gender of S. We are given no definite answer yet. The hints we have again depend more on our world knowledge than on what is actually said in the poem; for example, the fact that hunting was a primarily male activity at the time of Emily Dickinson favours the reading where S is male.

There still remains the question why Dickinson chose “doe” instead of the more common and expected “deer”. In the first place, does have no antlers and are therefore usually not hunted for trophies. Their meat is also more tender and more valuable as food. Secondly, “doe” rhymes with “foe” and “glow” in the poem. Although the poem is not rhymed throughout, there are a quite a few words that do rhyme (also, e.g., “die” – “I” and “day” – “away”). Thus, the use of “doe” might also simply be explained by the more compatible sound of the word. Thirdly, in literary tradition, hunting is also linked to and used as a metaphor for amorous pursuit (consider, for example, the representation of Cupid shooting with bow and arrow, as well as the use of hunting imagery in Renaissance love poetry like Wyatt’s “Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind” and Spenser’s *Amoretti* #67 “Like as a huntsman after weary chase”). In this sense, S’s and O’s hunt for a doe could also be seen ironically as simply a depiction of men chasing after women.

Again, if we look at the poem with stereotypical gender roles in mind (active man, passive woman), then we could imagine this stanza as the author’s ironical exaggeration of manliness and machismo (which then hits a peak in stanza 5, where S can apparently kill others by just ‘looking’ at them). Gelpi notes that the killing of a doe has a parallel in Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* (published in 1841), where it is linked to being (or not being) manly: “Come, Deerslayer, fall to [...] and prove your manhood on this poor devil of a doe” [...] “Nay, nay, Hurry, there’s little manhood in killing a doe, and that, too, out of season; though there might be some in bringing down a painter, or a catamount [both dangerous predators in contrast to the doe]” (Cooper 1995: 6, also quoted in Gelpi 1979: 127).

In literary analyses of the poem, the use of doe (and also of “eider-duck,” equally restricted to the female animal of the species) is sometimes seen as the (female) speaker’s turning against others of her sex, a turning away which serves to make S stronger by eliminating female

weakness⁸. Thus, S (if we take S to be feminine), in showing aggression towards other females, increases her own power. We find a similar power reversal in, for example, the representation of ancient goddesses — Artemis/Diana killing Actaeon for having seen her naked and “shepherd[ing]” “untamed” and “bold-hearted men” (Anacreon 1988: 47–49), and Shakespeare’s depiction of Venus taking the more active role in seducing the vulnerable and soon-to-be-killed Adonis. However, in these myths we are confronted with a complete power reversal, as well as with a destruction of men, not women, while in Dickinson’s poem S hunts female creatures, and the hunting activities are performed together by S and O, creating a sense of community, not opposition. Also, the roles of S and O are not quite fixed, so that S seems to be quite active for most of the poem but turns out to be powerless in the last stanza. In the end it remains unclear why exactly Dickinson chose “doe” over “deer” — neither poem nor context give us enough information to pin down one particular reason for her choice of “doe.”⁹ Furthermore, from a linguistic point of view it makes no difference whether they hunt deer or doe. Only by assuming a special symbolic meaning of ‘doe’ do we arrive at the possible interpretations just outlined.

The second and third stanzas, with their strong emphasis on ‘sovereignty’, freedom (‘roaming’), untamed wilderness (‘doe’), mountains and the uncontrollable force of nature (‘Vesuvian’ power) remind us very much of the sublime.¹⁰ S, by interacting with this sublime scene, acquires some of its power, and in return, nature seems to ‘call back’: the gun “speaks”, and the mountains will reply; the gun “smiles”, and this is linked to a “Vesuvian

⁸ Cf. Gelpi (1979: 124–29), who sees the doe-hunt as S’s rebuff of her female side and the reference to eider-downs as one to “female masochism” (129).

⁹ The only other use of “doe” in Dickinson’s poetry is found in J565/Fr527, which describes the hunting of a single, terrified doe.

¹⁰ Cf., for example, Burke’s (1990: 66) statements that “Greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime. [...] Of these the length strikes least; an hundred yards of even ground will never work such an effect as a tower an hundred yards high, or a rock or mountain of that altitude. [...] And the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished”; and “Amongst [domestic animals] we never look for the sublime: it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of [wild animals]” (Burke 1990: 60–61).

face”. Moreover, in accordance with the role of a Romantic poet, S becomes a mouthpiece of sublime nature: the mountains reply only because the gun speaks, and the mountain gets a “face” only because S makes a corresponding comparison. Thus S also has the poet’s power to depict and animate nature.

4. The fourth and fifth stanzas

4.1. The fourth stanza according to S_{ind}

Stanza four is a continuation of the events described by S in stanzas two and three. It consists of a temporal clause with an apposition and a matrix clause. One possible structure for the temporal clause is the following:

[And when I guard my master’s head at night [after our good day is done]_{Apposition}]_{TempClause}

According to the S_{ind} interpretation, the Verb Phrase “guard my master’s head” can straightforwardly be interpreted as an actual guarding activity. Since guarding a person is usually not restricted to her head, this makes it plausible to take “my master’s head” to be a metonymy and really stands for “my master”. In linguistic terms this rhetorical figure has been described as an instance of predicate transfer (Nunberg 1995). It requires a functional relation between the predicate described (“guarding the head”) and the predicate derived (“guarding the person”). In this case the relation is therefore defined via heads and their owners. The predicate transfer leads the reader to believe that the relationship between S and O is close.

This is stressed by the following matrix clause, which contains a comparative construction.

[It is better than the Eider-Duck’s pillow to have shared]

This kind of judgement evokes the impression that S takes pleasure in protecting O, even in an uncomfortable position, and that all of S's actions are voluntary and conscious. Again, S seems to be capable of feeling and evaluating, which is more straightforwardly compatible with an S_{ind} interpretation.

At the same time, the relation is once again described as being unequal. On the one hand, guarding someone implies that there is a difference in strength and power; on the other hand, the description "my master" implies that the guarding person is inferior to O. This would suggest a very deep emotional dependency. This is supported by a more global perspective. Dickinson's use of the word "Master" reminds us of her 'Master Letters' and of other poems making reference to a 'master'.¹¹ The Master Letters are three drafts of letters written between 1858 and 1861 and addressed to an unknown "master" adored by the female speaker (Franklin 1986: 5–7). While the tone of the master letters is quite different from that of J754/Fr764, some topics are remarkably similar. In the third letter, the speaker compares herself to Vesuvius, talks about speaking and being silent, and about the "face" of a volcano: "Vesuvius dont talk, Etna – dont – one of them – said a syllable – a thousand years ago, and Pompeii heard it, and hid forever – She could'nt look the world in the face, afterward".¹² The speaker expresses the wish to "breathe where you breathed" and "just to look in your face, while you looked in mine", a wish for closeness and intimacy also found in J754/Fr764, and in the second letter she relinquishes human qualities: "open your life wide, and take me in forever, I will never be tired – I will never be noisy when you want to be still."

As in J754/Fr764, in spite of the master's obvious superiority, the Master Letters are concerned mostly with the speaker's thoughts, feelings and wishes, not those of the

¹¹ There are, of course, also many poems by Dickinson which present a similar relationship without explicitly using the word "master", for example, many of the poems where the speaker is identified with a daisy also show an unequal relationship of the "daisy" to a higher being on whom the daisy is dependent (see e.g., J85/Fr87, J106/Fr161, J339/Fr367 and J481/Fr460).

¹² All quotations from the Master Letters come from Franklin (1986: 12–44).

master/owner. Likewise, the speaker's use of "it" to refer to the master (especially in the third letter) contributes to push the master's personality into the background and lets us focus more on the speaker. Still, the speaker is decidedly dependent on the master.

4.2. *The fourth stanza according to S_{gun}*

The fact that S is described as a possession and is protecting O is again more compatible with an S_{gun} interpretation. The closeness implied by the use of "head" could refer to the position of the gun: it is put close to O. If an S_{gun} interpretation is assumed, "guard my master's head" has to be reinterpreted. When we take the interpretation where the speaker is a gun with human properties seriously, however, the active mood is not surprising, since then the poem talks about worlds where guns are actually capable of "guarding". No reinterpretation would be necessary in this case.

When taking into consideration our knowledge about the actual world, we understand that the implicit agent of the guarding event has to be human, and it is more reasonable to think that not the gun itself is doing the protecting but that it is O that uses the gun for his own protection. However, in the poem, the gun is not described as a passive instrument. The active mood is chosen on purpose. This fact underlines the presence of a reading in which a human speaker is comparing herself to a gun (a human being is, after all, an active being, while an inanimate weapon is not), especially since the question in an S_{gun} interpretation arises *why* the feelings of a gun should be so important. It allows for an interpretation where S sees herself as a dangerous instrument as well as a human being capable of reflected decisions. These reflections are not the ones of a defenseless individual but the ones of a dedicated, unconditionally loyal person.

4.3. *The fifth stanza according to S_{ind} and S_{gun}*

The interpretive difficulties that arise seem to be largely independent from S being a gun or a human being. In both cases stanza five stresses how protective S is of O and how dangerous. This becomes especially obvious in the first sentence of the stanza where the argument of ‘foe’ is fronted so that it receives emphasis:

[To foe of his I’m deadly foe]

The impression is underlined by the use of the adverbial modifier ‘deadly’. This fits an S_{gun} interpretation, since guns are known to be deadly instruments. On the other hand “being foe” to someone requires human feelings and high emotional involvement, which strengthens the S_{ind} interpretation.

The second sentence of the stanza consists of matrix clause and relative clause. The matrix clause is a quantificational statement. The relative clause that follows functions as a restriction of the quantifier “none”:

[None [on whom I lay a yellow eye or an emphatic thumb $_{\text{Relative}}$] stir the second time $_{\text{Matrix}}$]

Extrapositing the relative emphasizes how dangerous S is. It is, however, unclear what “yellow eye” and “emphatic thumb” mean in this context; even under the assumption that S is human. There is no clear semantic conflict or mismatch between the adjectives and the nouns. All four words are properties. The meaning of the NP should therefore be determined by intersecting the two sets the adjective and noun denote, respectively. Intersecting the predicates yields a set of individuals that have both properties. This is shown in (20).

(20)

- a. [[yellow eye]] = {x: x is yellow and an eye}
- b. [[emphatic thumb]] = {x: x is emphatic and x is a thumb}

The meaning of the phrase in (20b) is underspecified. The rule of Predicate Modification (Heim and Kratzer 1998) is usually applicable for this type of combination but does not produce a meaningful result. It is also not clear what other rule of compositional interpretation could be at play in combining the two denotations. The same holds for (20a). Although it is possible for an eye to be yellow (for example, if someone suffers from certain diseases), it is unclear what it means to “lay a yellow eye on someone”. It seems that “yellow” contributes to the meaning of the clause in ways not defined by its denotation but by its connotation.

The same holds when S is supposed to be a gun. But in this case, “eye” and “thumb” also have to be reinterpreted. The only plausible meaning is a metaphoric one where the predicates “having an eye” and “having a thumb” are human properties that now have to fit for a gun. If “eye” and “thumb” are seen as body parts, the question arises to which parts of a gun they might refer.

Our linguistic knowledge seems to be insufficient to determine the meaning of part of the phrase used. Hence, it might be useful to consider a more global view and the associative power of the words. As already pointed out, if we consider S literally as a gun, the “Yellow Eye” could be the muzzle flash seen by the opponent immediately before being shot — the visual, ‘looking’ activity accompanying the ‘speaking’ in line 7 (Dickinson uses the expression in a similar way in J590/Fr619: “Did you ever look in a Cannon’s face –/ Between whose Yellow eye –/ And yours – the Judgment intervened –/ The Question of ‘to die’.”¹³ If we consider S to be talking about a literal ‘eye’ (i.e., considering a human speaker), we get

¹³ The metaphor “yellow eye” for a flash of light can, for example, also be found in Stephen Crane’s tale “Flanagan and His Short Filibustering Adventure” (1897): “One night the *Foundling* was off the southern coast of Florida and running at half speed toward the shore. The captain was on the bridge. ‘Four flashes at intervals of one minute,’ he said to himself, gazing steadfastly toward the beach. Suddenly a yellow eye opened in the black face of the night and looked at the *Foundling* and closed again.” (Crane 1995).

another association. The colour yellow is traditionally that of jealousy, and till 1858 the use of “yellow” to mean “jealous” is indeed documented, for example in the *Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux* (1819): “Yellow, jealous; a jealous husband is called a *yellow gloak*.” (OED “yellow”, *adj.* and *n.* A.2.a). The expression “yellow eye” can also be used to refer to jaundice (involving yellow skin and eyes), and “jaundiced” (i.e., ‘yellow-coloured’) can, in turn, be used figuratively for people “coloured or disordered by envy, jealousy, spleen, etc.” (OED “jaundiced”, *adj.* 3).

The expression “emphatic Thumb” could be associated with the holding and handling of a gun (the cocking piece of a gun, that can be manipulated with the thumb). Still, one must wonder why exactly this action should be “emphatic”. Looking at it as a human gesture we can find the idiom “to bite the thumb at” someone (OED “thumb”, *n.* 5e, and OED “bite”, *v.* 16). Although this expression was no longer used in Dickinson’s time, she is likely to have known it from *Romeo and Juliet*, where an entire dialogue is dedicated to it:

Gregory. I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.

Sampson. Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.

Abram. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Sampson. I do bite my thumb, sir.

Abram. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?

Sampson. [*Aside to Gregory*] Is the law of our side if I say ay?

Gregory. [*Aside to Sampson*] No.

Sampson. No sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir. (Shakespeare 2003: 1.1.37–47)

Thus, the emphatic thumb could be seen as an allusion to this expression and therefore as an insult or threat towards the person glared at with a “yellow Eye”. If, as pointed out above as one possibility, the poem describes a male hunting scene from a female, ridiculing perspective, the instant killing described in stanza 5 might be seen ironically as a display of power that is unrealistic and exaggerated.

The adjective “emphatic” is usually used to describe utterances or verbal statements (see OED, “emphatic”, *adj.* and *n.*). Therefore, the use of “emphatic” leads into the direction of the third possible interpretation outlined below, relating S’s action to language and poetry.

4.4. *Result*

At the end of stanza five the reader of the poem knows that the individual described as O is male (due to the pronouns “him” and “his” and “My Master”) and that what is hunted in stanza two (the “Doe”) is female but knows very little about the identity of S yet. When assuming that S is an individual one is drawn to see a relationship between a man and a woman based on the emotional component of the relationship that is implied. This component primarily comes in through the adjectives and nouns S uses to describe the surroundings and the activities (“sovereign woods”, “cordial”, “pleasure”, “good day”). This conclusion must be considered to be highly influenced by our extra-linguistic knowledge, since it works with connotations, not denotations, of the words used.

Moreover, if we assume that S is a (female) individual, no problem arises with interpreting the Verb Phrases in the preceding stanzas. The two individuals are described as working together, more specifically they hunt. S is powerful and takes pleasure in the activity. If a romantic relationship is described, then it is unequal, not sexual and far from being stereotypical. S does not share the pillow of O; she perceives him as her master and is at the same time the one that protects him. S is getting more active, which is represented by the mood of these four

stanzas. That is opposed to the passive mood in the first stanza. But the reader gets the impression that she is only becoming active as an instrument of O. This is evidence that, even though slightly less plausible in the preceding stanzas, the interpretation where S is an actual gun is kept a possibility throughout. In this case, we have to assume that a special gun which has human properties is described in the poem. Otherwise mismatches between the agent and the predicates that are used for the description (“speak”, “smile”, “eye”, “thumb”) would occur. As human feelings are also assigned to the gun, this interpretation would result in supposing that O has a deeply emotional, almost intimate, relationship with his gun.

5. The final stanza

The last stanza displays increased linguistic complexity again. It is therefore useful to consider the two sentences that make up the last stanza first separately and then in conjunction in the analysis. These two sentences are given in (21) and (22) and will be referred to as S1 and S2 in the subsequent discussion.

(21) [S1 Though I than He may longer live, He longer must than I]

(22) [S2 For I have but the power to kill, Without the power to die]

5.1. Interpretation of S1

First of all, the structures of S1 and S2 have to be determined. To simplify things, the structure considered for the first sentence will be the one in (23), where the word order is adjusted and the ellipsis filled.

(23) [S1 [subord though I may live longer than he]
[matrix he must live longer than I]]

The subordinate clause is analyzed in (26). The comparison can be in the scope of the modal (25a) or vice versa (25b). The modal force of a possibility modal like ‘may’ is existential. This means it claims the existence of a possible world; in this case a possible world where S lives longer than O. The relation R below is the accessibility relation between possible worlds and the actual world (cf. Bauer and Beck *in preparation*). It tells us which worlds are relevant for us to consider. This could be worlds compatible with the law (deontic reading), or worlds compatible with what we know (epistemic reading), or worlds compatible with the facts (circumstantial reading), or worlds compatible with what we desire (bouletic reading) in the actual world (Kratzer 1991).

(24) I may live longer than he.

(25)

a. [may [[-er than he live _ long] [I live _ long]]]

b. [[-er than he may live _ long] [I may live long]]

(26)

a. $\exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) > \text{Lifespan}(w)(O)]$

= it is possible that I live longer than he.

b. $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d]) > \max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d])$

= my maximum life expectancy exceeds his maximum life expectancy.

The matrix clause is analyzed in (27). It is ambiguous in a parallel way. A necessity modal like ‘must’ has universal force. It indicates that a specific fact — in this case that O lives

longer than S — holds for all worlds that stand in a certain relation to the actual world (defined via R).

(27) He must live longer than I.

- a. [must [[-er than I live _ long] [he live _ long]]]
- b. [[-er than I must live _ long] [he must live long]]

(28)

a. $\forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) > \text{Lifespan}(w)(S)]$

= it is necessary that he live longer than I.

b. $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d]) > \max(\lambda d. \forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d])$

= the minimum required lifetime of his exceeds the minimum lifetime required of me.

Putting together two ambiguous sentences, we theoretically have a total of four possibilities:

(29)

- a. Although Subord (a), Matrix (a).
- b. Although Subord (b), Matrix (b).
- c. Although Subord (a), Matrix (b).
- d. Although Subord (b), Matrix (a).

Since only the two parallel ones are the most plausible, they will be pursued further (29a, 29b). Since it will make the syntactic analysis clearer and since the difference is not relevant to make our point, we will here treat ‘although’ simply as ‘and’. The two interpretations and paraphrases for S1 are given under (30) and (31). Let us first consider (30):

(30)

a. $\exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) > \text{Lifespan}(w)(O)] \ \&$
 $\forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) > \text{Lifespan}(w)(S)]$

b. It is possible that I live longer than he, and it is necessary that he live longer than I.

If the relation R that picks out the relevant worlds to consider is the same for the two modals ‘may’ and ‘must’, we get a contradiction: it is not possible that all relevant worlds are such that his life extends beyond mine and that there is a world in which my life extends beyond his. However, we know that there are various possibilities for R. (30) becomes non-contradictory if we suppose, for example, that the natural facts are such that I might live longer than he, but my desires are such that he must live longer than I. That is, if we assume a circumstantial reading of ‘may’ and a bouletic reading for ‘must’.

Next, the second interpretation will be considered, which is given in (31).

(31) $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d]) >$
 $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d]) \ \&$
 $\max(\lambda d. \forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d]) >$
 $\max(\lambda d. \forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d])$

a. My maximum life expectancy exceeds his maximum life expectancy, and the minimum required lifetime of his exceeds the minimum lifetime required of me.



The conjunction under (31a) is not contradictory. It would be true for instance if, given all the relevant facts, S might die anytime between t_1 and t_4 , while O might die anytime between t_2 and t_3 . This means that the day of O’s death can be narrowed down more than the day of S’s death.

Given what we already know about S and O, the interpretation under (30) might be the more plausible, since it is the more relevant one. But to be able to disambiguate the second sentence might be of importance.

5.2. *Interpretation of S2*

For the second sentence we will consider the structure in (32) below, assuming that ‘but’ means ‘only’ in this case (an interpretation of “but” as a conjunction would make no sense at all here, while regarding it as a modifier does).

(32) [S2 I have only the power to kill, Without the power to die]

If we consider the S_{gun} interpretation, this sentence is trivially true, since inanimate objects cannot die. The apparent banality of the statement invites the interpretation that more is meant than what is literally said. For example: this weapon will always exist. Again, also a small interpretive difficulty arises with “power to kill”. It is not a gun itself that has this power.

If we consider next the interpretation where S is an individual, the sentence is false, and once more rather trivially so since all people die. Again, the apparent banality as well as the factual falsity invites reinterpretation. For example: I cannot choose my death.

5.3. *Putting things together*

The overall structure is “S1 for S2”. This will be read as “S1 because S2”, and we will paraphrase S2 for now as “S can kill but S cannot die”. Taking the two readings for S1 and putting them into this context yields the paraphrases in (33) and (34):

(33) It is possible that I live longer than he,
and it is necessary that he live longer than I,
BECAUSE I can kill but I cannot die.

(34) My maximum life expectancy exceeds his maximum life expectancy,
and the minimum required lifetime of his exceeds
the minimum lifetime required of me,
BECAUSE I can kill but I cannot die.

If we assume everyday meanings for both ‘live’ and ‘die’ in (33), S is wishing for something impossible. If she cannot die, then her lifespan necessarily exceeds the lifespan of any animate owner. However, given our world knowledge, this interpretation is only plausible if S really is a gun. Then it can be the case that O lives longer, since he is capable of living at all, whereas a gun can only exist. But this is contradicting the first line where the possibility that S — a gun — lives longer is admitted.

It seems that, according to this reading, a reinterpretation of ‘live’ and ‘die’ is necessary. For S_{gun} to ‘live’ might mean that it exists. This interpretation fits with the beginning of the poem. The gun’s ‘life’ was standing in corners; hence it existed although it was not used. The gun only functions and operates in the way described in the poem because O took it, but it existed even before O passed. The necessity that O exists longer is therefore only possible in a bouletic reading. Given the facts of the world, the length of existence of the gun can easily exceed the length of existence of the human owner.

Accordingly, ‘die’ cannot be the opposite of ‘live’, since ‘to stop living’ is impossible for inanimate objects. ‘To die’ has to mean ‘to stop existing’ in this case. What remains problematic is the interpretation of “power to kill” then. Strictly speaking it is not the gun that is killing but O. If “power to kill” rather means ‘can be used for killing’, then “without the power to die” has to be interpreted as ‘lacking the ability to be used for its own destruction’. This means that the gun cannot end its own existence. It is damned to uselessness without O, since it cannot take actions itself. It will always be able to function and never be able to stop existing. This could explain the causal relation between the existence of O and the existence of S when it is assumed to be a gun.

A similar reinterpretation process has to be triggered in (34). If S cannot die, then the minimum lifespan reached in all worlds tends towards infinity and cannot be shorter than that of any animate owner O. Hence, under a normal reading, the sentence in (34) also describes something that cannot be true.

Both interpretations completely change when S is assumed to be an individual. It is unproblematic to interpret “I have the power to kill” under this assumption. It is, however, unclear what it means for a human being to lack the ‘power to die’. If we argue the same way as for the gun-case above, then “without the power to die” means that S is not capable of killing herself. She has to live, but her life will be an existence in corners without O. It

remains unclear why she compares herself as an instrument that is incapable of destroying itself. It seems to imply that all her choices, even the ones that concern her own death, are really the choices of O. This reading is consistent with the analysis of the preceding stanzas since it suggests a very deep emotional dependency, too. The overall tone of the poem does not speak for an interpretation according to which this dependency is seen as unfair or negative. As mentioned above, one could also see the power play described in the poem as a kind of role-playing with S taking different stances.

The use of the expression “power to die” does not seem appropriate for the negative associations of death and especially the passivity of dying. From a religious point of view, the “power to die” could be understood as the reassurance to die and be saved after death by Christ.¹⁴

In J1651/Fr1715, Dickinson also uses the expression “power to die”, this time in an explicitly religious context:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength –

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die

¹⁴ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel's (1993: Ch. 6) statement that mankind has achieved the power to die only through the death of Christ, that is, the power to die without fear in the knowledge that man's sins are forgiven through Christ's sacrifice.

Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He –
“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology.

In this poem, the “Word made Flesh” comes to life, and only through this coming to life can it then be subjected to life and death (Bauer 2006: 374), similarly to the gun in “My life had stood”. A single word “that breathes distinctly”, however, is only an instrument, and like S in “My life had stood” it has – standing on its own – only the “power to kill, / Without – the power to die” (Bauer 2006: 383–84). It can however, be made cohesive and “expire” through the power and condescension of Christ (“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”).

5.4. *Result*

Taking the two lines of interpretation, S_{gun} and S_{ind} , that guided the previous analysis together one finds that there is a complex interplay between them. This is due to the fact that neither of the two can be applied without arriving at some interpretative difficulty at some point in the text. Specifying what this interplay consists in and what overall interpretation it yields goes beyond the linguistic analysis of the text. It is, however, possible to rephrase the readings of the poem under both assumptions to see the restrictions grammar imposes on what are interpretive possibilities. This is done in (35) and (36), where (35) reflects the S_{gun} interpretation and (36) reflects the S_{ind} interpretation.

(35)

I am a loaded gun and my existence was neglected until a day my owner came, identified me and carried me away. And now he takes me to roam in woods and hunt the doe and every time he shoots with me there is an echo in the mountains. And when the muzzle flash of the shot appears, light appears upon the valley, it glows and is like the face of Vesuvius when it erupts. And when he is done hunting at night and poses me next to his bed, this creates a comfortable atmosphere. He takes me to kill his foes, and I am very efficient. Although I may longer exist than he does, in order for me to function it is necessary that he lives, since I am an instrument for killing, but I have no life of my own.

(36)

I am a human being who is like a loaded gun; my life has been neglected until its owner came, identified me and took me with him. And now we roam in sovereign woods together and hunt the doe, and every time I speak for him, the mountains straight reply. And my smile is as pleasant as when the valley glows. The glow is like Vesuvius when it erupts. And when at night I guard him it is better than to have shared pillows with him. I will kill all his foes, and even though it is possible that I live longer than he it is my wish that he will live longer, since I have power with him but no life without him.

6. An alternative interpretation

So far we have considered two lines of interpretation, one where S is a gun and one where S is an individual. It has been shown that both are plausible options throughout the poem, allowing for a wide range of interpretative possibilities. However, they also result in interpretative difficulties that cannot be resolved with grammatical knowledge alone. It would therefore be presumptuous to claim that other interpretations that do not follow strictly from

the logic of the grammatical system are negligible. One of these interpretations regards the poem as a text about language. There are two main reasons for considering this reading. From a more global perspective it is the fact that, since Dickinson was a poet, her life was eminently a literary one. From a local point of view it is the fact that references to language reverberate through the poem: “speak” and “reply” are verbal actions, the “Sovereign Woods” evoke the notion of *silva* as a common title for writings of mixed content (e.g., Simon Pelegromius’s 17th-century dictionary *Silva Synonymorum*), the use of “emphatic” is linked to speech, and the idea of immortality is also linked to poetry (see below).

Especially if we consider the vagueness of the last line, we should keep in mind that weapons are not the only things without a “power to die”. As we have seen above, Dickinson also uses the expression in J1651/Fr1715, linking it to religion but also to literature and speech. The “consent of Language” and “loved Philology” are compared to Christ’s power over life and death, transforming a single “Word that breathes distinctly” into a “Word made Flesh”. It is possible to read “power to die” in two different ways, either as the possession of eternal life or as the impossibility of dying (thus, a kind of powerlessness). One possibility therefore is to assume that the speaker of the poem is a poem/poetry, since words cannot die. But words are also powerless without someone who uses them. A second possibility hence is that the speaker of the poem is a poet who becomes immortal through the texts she writes. The idea that poetry has the power to immortalise its subject is an old idea already found in earlier writings (for example, in the ending of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in Horace’s Ode IV,9, and in some of Shakespeare’s sonnets, for example sonnet #18).¹⁵ Interestingly, a parallel dichotomy as in the

¹⁵ The *Metamorphoses* end with “[...] a work which neither Jove’s anger, nor fire nor sword shall destroy, nor yet the gnawing tooth if time. [...] If there be any truth in poets’ prophecies, I shall live to all eternity, immortalized by fame.” (Ovid 1980: 357). In Horace’s Ode IV,9, the speaker states, “I shall not pass you over in silence, unhonoured by my pages; nor shall I allow jealous oblivion to erode your countless exploits.” (Horace 2004: 247). Shakespeare’s sonnet #18 ends with “But thy eternal summer shall not fade, / Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st, / Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st. / So long as men can breathe and eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee.” (Shakespeare 2000: 19).

two interpretations discussed above arises: we have an interpretation S_{poet} according to which the speaker is an individual, and we have an interpretation $S_{\text{poem/poetry}}$ in which the speaker is not human.

In “My life had stood” we additionally get an ironic twist: S cannot die (which is seen as a lack of power) but can kill instead. Again, one can regard the poem itself as the “killer”, since it can have destructive power by for example destroying clichés, relations or reputations with its content. On the other hand, one could also see the words as powerless without their creator, the poet, and that she has the power to destroy.

For example, we get a similar idea in Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, where the power(lessness) of words over the course of time is described. Here, what gives power to words (or takes it from them) is that words are being used (or not used) by human beings:

As the forests shed their leaves, as the year declines,
And the oldest fall, so perish those former generations
Of words, while the latest, like infants, are born and thrive.
We’re destined for death, we and ours [...]
[...] our mortal works will vanish,
The beauty and charm of speech no more like to live.
Many words that are now unused will be rekindled,
Many fade now well-regarded, if Usage wills it so,
To whom the laws, rules, and control of language belong. (Horace 2005: 60–72)

In J1212/Fr278, Dickinson describes the same notion:

A Words is dead
When it is said,

Some say.

I say it just

Begins to live

That day.

In Dickinson's poems, words can either live or die, or they are able to bring life or death. In J118/Fr103, Dickinson links the power of guns to the power of words, in this way giving words the power and status of weapons:

My friend attacks my friend!

Oh Battle picturesque!

Then I turn Soldier too,

And he turns Satirist!

How martial is this place!

Had I a mighty gun

I think I'd shoot the human race

And then to glory run!

The poem presents "Soldier" and "Satirist" — a usually literary activity — as two alternatives complementing each other and involving the same kind of action ('attacking'). Of course, it is not possible to shoot all of mankind literally, but it is possible to shoot them in a literary way (as a satirist), and attain glory just as a soldier might attain glory through fighting. And, in fact, Dickinson does possess a "mighty gun" in the form of language. In the manuscript of J754/Fr764, line 23 originally read "For I have but the art to kill" (Dickinson 1955: 574) —

“art” is a poet’s strongest and only power. The “Owner” could then also refer to the power that inspired S to write poetry (and to write this particular poem), a muse or divine inspiration. This could also explain O’s depiction as very powerful and S’s depiction as more submissive (though S is of course the one who must necessarily speak throughout the poem). D. Porter (1981: 209–18) sees “My life had stood” as a poem about an instrument (S) and a purpose (dependent on O), and, more specifically, as a poem about a poet and what he or she should do. He cites several other poems where language is used as a weapon or has the power and impact of a weapon (e.g., J479/Fr458, “She dealt her pretty words like Blades”).

If we adopt this interpretation, we can see the use of the gun image as a twofold metaphor. In the first place, we must assume a human speaker, since only human beings can speak. This speaker uses the gun metaphor to express his/her feelings. But the gun itself is then endowed with human sentiments and thoughts and thus acquires characteristics of a human being. In this way, the gun is not only a metaphor to express the state and feelings of a human speaker; in addition, the gun leads the way to a second metaphoric level, where human characteristics become a metaphor for explaining the motives of the gun: A human being becomes a gun and speaks through the gun – a gun, which then becomes animate and ‘human’, and speaks with a human voice.

The interpretation of S as a poet or as a poem/poetry could be summarised as follows:

(37)

S_{poet}: I am a poet with the potential of a loaded gun, a potential which was not used till language, the owner of my art, came and inspired me. And now I roam through the jungle of words, and every time I write it has an impact on the things around me, and my writing is powerful like Vesuvius when it erupts. And at night I prefer my service to language over soft pillows and intimacy. When someone does not appreciate my art

I harm them through my writing. Though I may live longer than the language inspiring me, it should live longer than me, since I can only do harm through my writing, but (my poetry being immortal) I cannot die as a poet.

(38)

S_{poem/poetry}: I am (in the beginning yet unwritten) poetry with the potential of a loaded gun, a potential which was not used till one day a poet came and wrote me. And now I am free through the poet, and we roam through the jungle of words, and every time the poet writes poetry I create a powerful impact on the things around me, as powerful as Vesuvius when it erupts. Being poetry is better than soft pillows and human intimacy. When someone does not appreciate my poet's art I help the poet to harm them through me. I, as written poetry, am immortal and will live longer than the poet, but he should live longer than me, since I am able to do harm, but I am nothing without the poet writing me and cannot even die.

7. Conclusion

In this poem, Emily Dickinson is primarily playing with the two interpretive possibilities that a gun or a human being are reflecting on their respective lives. By looking at the poem in more detail it becomes obvious that neither of these two possibilities allows for an interpretive process to run coherently throughout the whole poem. Both readings remain prominent, since the use of reinterpretation creates flexibility. This fact causes the appearance of additional readings in which the speaker is something inanimate that shares certain properties with “a loaded gun” as described in the poem. The methods combined in this paper for analyzing the poem make explicit how and why these possibilities arise. By constantly using structures that are deviant from grammatical form, Emily Dickinson prevents the reader from deriving a

literal interpretation from mechanisms of grammar. Since readers are aware that they are dealing with a special text form, they reinterpret the text to reach a plausible interpretation of the poem. However, reinterpretation processes do not follow the rules of the grammar as strictly as other mechanisms. The reader is left with certain freedom. This freedom is created by choice points within a fixed structure which is not arbitrary but created by Emily Dickinson.

It follows that there cannot be one unique interpretation of the poem. It has been shown that there is, however, a set of plausible interpretations that can be identified. The claim we make is that these interpretations function parallel to the ones we describe: S_{ind} , S_{gun} , S_{poet} , S_{poetry} . All these interpretations vary only with respect to how open spaces are filled within the fixed structure.

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