

Matthias Bauer, Nadine Bade, Sigrid Beck, Carmen Dörge,
Burkhard von Eckartsberg, Janina Niefer, Saskia Ottschofski*
and Angelika Zirker

Emily Dickinson’s “My life had stood a loaded gun” – An interdisciplinary analysis

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Abstract: In this article we analyse Emily Dickinson’s poem “My life had stood a loaded gun” using a specific methodology that combines 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 reflects the distinction between an objective interpretation of the text based solely on the rules of grammar and a subjective reading which draws on various external fields of reference. In combining both steps, we show why some interpretations of the poem are more plausible than others and how different lines of interpretation are related to each other. However, it is not our aim to provide one definite interpretation of the poem or to favour one reading over the others. Rather, we wish to show how Dickinson’s use of specific grammatical mechanisms leads to a number of interpretations which are more or less plausible. That is, we identify plausible interpretations on the basis of grammatical evidence, and we relate these to each other by pointing at instances in the poem where a divergence of interpretations is possible (cases of ambiguity, for example). This method is helpful for literary studies since formal linguistics helps produce a systematic and non-arbitrary analysis, and it is helpful for linguistic analysis since it uncovers which violations of grammar do or do not disturb the interpretative process, and which kind of structures need pragmatic enrichment.

Keywords: compositional semantics, methodology, literary analysis

*Corresponding author: Saskia Ottschofski, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany,
E-mail: saskia.ottschofski@uni-tuebingen.de

Matthias Bauer, Nadine Bade, Sigrid Beck, Carmen Dörge, Burkhard von Eckartsberg,
Janina Niefer, Angelika Zirker, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany

1 Introduction

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

“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” (Johnson 1961: 754; Franklin 1998: 764) was written around 1863 and published in 1929 (Johnson 1955: 574). It is one of Dickinson’s most controversial poems and has triggered a multitude of different interpretations, ranging from the description of a male-female relationship over the battle and subversion of an oppressed woman, to seeing it as a poem about language and what it means to be a poet (Leiter 2007: 145–147).² Weisbuch (1975: 25) even calls it “the single most difficult poem Dickinson wrote”. We have chosen this poem for analysis precisely because it seems to be difficult enough to prevent one straightforward interpretation. At the same time, it was written by a poet with the highest verbal competence and linguistic sensibility. Therefore we assume that the words are not chosen arbitrarily,

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

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”.

and that any difficulties the reader may experience when interpreting the poem are deliberate.

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 using 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, we assume, describe our knowledge of the language system. In our view, such a linguistic analysis will help determine plausible interpretations of the poem, which result from the application of grammatical rules that govern all texts and whose definition is the goal of linguistic theory. This approach can also show us the limits of objective interpretation, as it makes us see where rules start to apply that are not part of the grammar and therefore lead to a much greater variation in interpretation.

Accordingly, as a second step the more global perspective of a literary analysis will enrich the semantic level of interpretation with information about the wider context. Both sentence and text level interpretation will thus be affected by contextual knowledge and will interact in complex ways. It will become clear that (without insisting on just one interpretation) the interaction of these different analyses can reveal plausible readings of the poem and their relations to each other. By identifying different layers of interpretation, the methodology used makes obvious the interdependencies of different lines of interpretation for the whole text. It thus leads to a deeper understanding of the text, which cannot be gained by other less specific methodologies.³

The application of our method results in two main lines of interpretation, supplemented by a third one, which follows from combining the two options expounded throughout the paper. We do not wish to favour one interpretation over the others or to establish a ranking between different interpretations; rather, our aim is to provide a frame within which interpretations are plausible and to show how this frame is developed and constructed.

³ This does not mean that a literary analysis of Dickinson's poetry principally excludes 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 noted and studied in the past. However, the conscious and systematic use of linguistic, especially semantic and pragmatic, mechanisms, illustrated in this paper, has not been made explicit in previous commentaries. The approach taken here is part of project A2 of the Collaborative Research Center 833 "The Construction of Meaning" at the University of Tübingen.

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, the most likely one and as such will be pursued. The first stanza is broken down into smaller parts: 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:

- (1) $[_{\text{Matrix}} \text{My life had stood} - [_{\text{Apposition}} \text{a loaded gun}] - \text{in corners}]$
 $[_{\text{Subordinate}} \text{till a day the owner passed} - \text{identified} - \text{and carried me away}]$

2.1 Matrix sentence

The first feature of the matrix sentence to be examined is the occurrence of a past perfect, the second is the plural on “corners”. In order to illustrate how these features of grammar are usually analysed in formal semantics, we shall use the simpler example in (2)a. An intuitive description of its meaning is suggested in (2)c, whereas the relevant formal semantic representation is given in (2)b. Following a standard analysis of tense (cf. von Stechow 2008), the past perfect is analyzed as situating the time of the described event before the time the discourse is about, which, in turn, took place before the speech time. 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 corners. We take this to mean that John was habitually standing around before the speech time.

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

Relating this interpretation to the poem yields the reading that “my life” was habitually standing 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”.

The combination of "My Life" and "stand" is in itself not problematic. Although it requires reinterpretation, it is a conventional combination found, e.g., in the phrase "My life stood still". However, the prepositional phrase "in Corners" adds a physical dimension to the verb which is inconsistent with "My Life". "Stand" denotes a relation between an individual, a location and an event. Moreover, there is a presuppositional component to "stand",⁴ namely that the individual argument for "stand" is a physical object that has a vertical dimension (a standard lexical entry of "stand" together with its presuppositional content is represented in (3)a). The mismatch between "my life" and "stand in corners" 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 where a sentence lacks a truth value, which means that it can neither be judged true nor false (Frege 1892). This unconventional use will thus stimulate the interpretation process.

- (3) (1) [[stand]] = [$\lambda e.\lambda x.\lambda y$: y is a physical object that has a vertical dimension.
 y is in location x in e and y is vertically oriented in e]
 (2) c [[stand]]([[my 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" would be "remain unnoticed, neglected". "My life" could be read as "I", or as "what is important about me" (especially considering the speaker's consistent later use of "I" and "we" to talk about him- or herself). Taking these possibilities into consideration, we arrive at the following new readings:

- (4) a. I had stood in corners. (Subj NP reinterpretation)
 b. My life had remained unnoticed. (VP reinterpretation)
 c. I (or what is important about me) (NP/VP reinterpretation)
 had been neglected.

2.2 Apposition

There are two possibilities to interpret the expression "a loaded gun": one, in which it is taken to be an apposition in the sense "I am a loaded gun" (cf., e.g.,

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

“My brother, a physicist, ...”). The other, where the apposition is an implicit comparison with “my life” (cf., e.g., “This gardening catalogue, an invitation to buy plants, ...”). Taking the possible reinterpretations of “my life” from above, either the speaker herself or the speaker’s life are such individuals. We take the possible reading of “a loaded gun” as an apposition to “had stood” to offer the same alternative meanings. In combination with the matrix clause, this gives us the following plausible interpretations:

- (5) 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}

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.

2.3 Subordinate clause

The following issues in the subordinate clause need to be explained: firstly, the meaning of “till” and what it tells us about the temporal order of events, secondly, the definite description “the owner” (O), and thirdly, the structural ambiguity in the Verb Phrase. To get a clearer understanding of the meaning of “till” (i.e. *until*), a slightly simplified version of matrix and subordinate clause combined is given in (6)a, which is paraphrased in (6)c; (6)b is the corresponding formal representation of this reading.

- (6) a. My life had stood in corners until the owner passed.
b. $\exists t[t < t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ t_{\text{Topic}} < t_{\text{now}} \ \& \ \exists e[\lambda(e) \subseteq t \ \& \ \text{My Life stand in } l \ \text{in } e] \ \& \ t \infty t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ \exists e'[\tau(e') \subseteq t_{\text{Topic}} \ \& \ O \ \text{passed in } e']]$
($t \infty t_{\text{Topic}}$ means that t abuts on 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 S standing in location l , and abutting on t is the topic time into which falls the passing of the owner.

Until has a meaning which sets the right boundary for the described standing event. The whole subordinate clause thus has an implicature that S has been standing here at O’s arrival. In addition, 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, the strong impact O has on S.

The subject of the sentence is "The Owner". As can be seen in the lexical entry suggested in (7)a, "Owner" denotes a relation between two individuals: an owner owns an owned entity. The definite article "the" (combined with the singular form "Owner") triggers a uniqueness-presupposition: "there is exactly one owner such that this owner owns an owned entity":

- (7) a. [[owner]] = $\lambda y.\lambda x.x$ owns y
 b. [[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. [the [[owner] [(of) _NP]]]

This is part of ex. 7.c. In order to make this a felicitous use of the definite article, we ought to determine what the owned entity is, and then verify the presupposition triggered. Schematically this is presented in (7)b and (7)c. The owned entity isn't 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:

- (8) 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.
 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.

Interpretations (8)b and (8)c are nearly equivalent, even though what is accommodated in (8)c is less clearly defined. On the one hand, (8)c could describe all kinds of asymmetrical interpersonal relationships; on the other hand, considering the perspective of S, we become aware of the question of who owns our lives. 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.

The last issue is the coordination we find in the Verb Phrase: The structure in (9)a invites two analyses: either as a coordination of two Verb Phrases with an

apposition in between the two conjuncts (see (9)b), or as a coordination of three verbal categories (see (9)c):

- (9) 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 structure in (9)c might simply be the best option from a syntactic point of view. At least it is less complex than (9)b as the phrases are assumed to be built in a parallel way. This is why we shall focus on (9)c in the following.

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

- (11) 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:

- (12) 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 special in some way for us to make sense of the encounter described. An S_{ind} interpretation is hence slightly favoured at this point (“O realized who S was”).

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. Furthermore, the ambiguous expression “carry away” shows the strong impact O may have on S’s emotions (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 Results

The poem provides a frame within which several points of variability allow for more than one plausible interpretation, so that two basic interpretations can be distinguished by locally interpreting the first stanza:

- (13) 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, until someone came, recognized and took her or him as a subordinate associate. The nature of this asymmetrical relationship as well as the gender of the two people is not clear.

Both readings require reinterpretations and leave open questions. 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. Considering that there are still local inconsistencies that cannot be resolved, the gun-story as a whole may 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. In the first stanza, all the information that the poem offers to assist with the interpretation of S is that S is either a person or a gun. The present textual analysis therefore differs from other analyses in that it is supported by non-arbitrary linguistic knowledge.

3 The second and third stanzas

The readers' decision about the interpretation of stanza one determines how they will interpret the following verses, which are compatible with both readings.

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

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

- (14) [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 their joint enterprise and close relation. Moreover, there is a shift from passive to active mood in the predicates describing S. In the first stanza, S was

“passed”, “identified” 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” suggests that the activities are conducted jointly by S and O. Taken literally, this is only possible if we assume S to be human.

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”. Hence, the verb “speak” usually only allows for animate subjects to be its external argument, i.e., it 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 (14)b. Combining verb and subject would yield a presupposition failure in this case, as (14)c shows.

- (14) a. $[[\text{speak}]] = \lambda x: x \text{ is human. } x \text{ speaks}$
 b. $[[I_1]]^{S,c} = \lambda g: g(1) \text{ is the speaker in } c. g(1)$
 c. $[[\text{speak}_2]] ([[I_1]]^{S,c})$ 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 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. And indeed, “speak” is conventionally used with reference to firearms (cf. OED “speak, *v.*”, I.7.c). 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 his or her own accord; thus it becomes unclear what “I speak for Him” means under the S_{ind} interpretation. A gun, on the other hand, cannot fire itself. The intent is coming from O.

The third conjunct in the second stanza describes reactions evoked by S. They have to be reinterpreted in both readings. One of them is “And every time I speak for him – The Mountains straight reply”. Mountains, since they are not human, cannot reply in the same sense that human beings can, hence there is a presupposition failure and a need for reinterpretation, which works analogously to the reinterpretation of “speak” in (14). Similarly, the reply of the mountains can be reinterpreted as the echo of S_{ind} ’s speech or S_{gun} ’s reverberation. 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.⁵ 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:

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

Thus, S's smile evokes the existence of a cordial light. We need to reinterpret "smile" under the S_{gun} interpretation. Analogous to "speak" and "reply", "smile" is a concept conventionally associated with human beings. If we follow the S_{gun} interpretation, a similar mismatch between the verb "smile" and its subject argument occurs as in the cases above. The smile can be reinterpreted as the muzzle flash of the gun (both smiling and a muzzle flash being temporary phenomena that manifest themselves 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.

The two interpretative possibilities are supported in different ways by the fact that the reaction is a "cordial light": Although "cordial" is here applied to the (inanimate) light, the adjective "cordial" is derived from Latin "cor", 'heart' (OED, "cordial, *adj.* and *n.*"), and the use of the word thus emphasises positive feeling and emotion (cf. Webster's *Dictionary*, where "cordial" is defined as "warm; affectionate" or "reviving the spirits").⁶ When we relate this definition

⁵ Miller (1987: 64–66) points out Dickinson's frequent use of verbs without inflection.

⁶ There seems to be no precedent for the phrase "cordial light", however, in Ouida's novel *Under Two Flags* (published 1871) the expression is also used: "[...] his eyes rested with a kindly, cordial light on the new-comer [...]" (13). There are two more peculiar uses of "cordial" in the book: "[...] the face of the Lancer broke up into a cordial smile [...]" (62) and "He had cordial sympathies with the soldiers [...]" (372). Interestingly, the novel deals partly with the intimate relationship between a master and his servant.

to the effect of firing a gun, we have to assume that the combination of “smile” and “cordial” is ironic here, since the firing of a gun is unlikely to be perceived as affectionate or reviving.

In any case, the combination of S’s smile and the valley’s glow and their possible interpretations links the two global interpretations S_{ind} and S_{gun} to each other. If S is an individual, S’s smile can be taken literally, while the valley’s glow must be seen metaphorically. If S is a gun, however, S’s smile can only be interpreted metaphorically, while the valley’s glow would be read literally as a valley glowing with a gun’s fire.

It makes sense 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 (and volcanoes, too, are in principle inanimate and are here endowed with the emotions of an animate being). This comparison takes place in the second half of the stanza, where we suppose an “if” is deleted.

(16) [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”.⁷ It becomes clear 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 also support 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 such human features (cf. Bauer and Beck 2014).

⁷ Several words in the poem give the idea of S as something face-like, for example a mask or helmet: the use of “smile”, “speak” and “Vesuvian (i.e., non-human) face” that “let[s] its pleasure through” as well as the activity of “guard[ing] My Master’s head.” However, since this possibility is not taken up throughout the poem, we shall not pursue it further.

3.4 Results

From a local perspective, the activities described and the evaluative description used in stanzas two and three allow for both interpretations of S. This is due to the fact that in either case a reinterpretation of some of the predicates will be necessary, which will not be necessary if we assume the other interpretation. The stanzas also show us where linguistic interpretation leaves room for interpretation based on literary and world knowledge. We are not given any definite information about gender, for example. It comes up in 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 use of hunting imagery and female deer in Renaissance love poems like Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind" (Wyatt 1981: 77) and Spenser's *Amoretti* #67 "Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace" (Spenser 1958: 223; see the article by López Maestre in this issue: López Maestre 2015). 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.⁸

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. 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 face". Moreover, much 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.

⁸ The only other use of "doe" in Dickinson's poetry is found in J565/Fr527, which describes the hunting of a single, terrified doe. 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 weakness, cf. Gelpi (1979: 124–29).

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. A plausible structure for the temporal clause is the following:

- (17) [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 their head, this makes it plausible to take “My Master’s head” to be a metonymy that really stands for “my master”. Still, the use of “Head” points at their close relationship, as do the next lines:

- (18) [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 strong dependency, which is also 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”.⁹ While the tone of the master letters is quite different from that of “My life had stood”, 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.¹⁰ The speaker expresses a wish for

⁹ 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). There are, of course, also many poems by Dickinson which present a similar relationship without explicitly using the word “master”. Dickinson’s use of “Master” is also evocative of George Herbert’s repeated use of “Master” and “servant” in “The Odour” (Herbert 2007: 603).

¹⁰ All quotations from the Master Letters come from Franklin (1986: 12–44).

closeness and intimacy also found in the poem, e.g., in the second letter: “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 the poem, in spite of the master’s apparent superiority, the Master Letters are concerned mostly with the speaker’s thoughts, feelings and wishes, not those of the master/owner. 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. 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. 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.

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. At the same time, “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”:

- (19) [None [on whom I lay a yellow eye or an emphatic thumb_{Relative}] stir the second time_{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. 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. 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. If we consider S literally as a gun, the “Yellow Eye” could be the muzzle flash seen by the opponent immediately before being shot. 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’”.¹¹ On another note, the colour yellow is traditionally that of jealousy (OED “yellow, *adj.* and *n.*”, A.2.a). The expression “emphatic Thumb” could be associated with the holding and handling of a gun (the cocking piece of a gun, which can be manipulated with the thumb). Still, one must wonder why exactly this action should be described as “emphatic”.¹² The adjective “emphatic” is commonly used to describe utterances or verbal statements (see OED, “emphatic, *adj.* and *n.*” and Webster “emphatic, *emphatical*, *a.*”). Therefore, the use of “emphatic” leads into the direction of the third possible interpretation outlined below, relating S’s actions to language and poetry.

11 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): “‘Four flashes at intervals of one minute,’ he said [...]. Suddenly a yellow eye opened in the black face of the night and looked at the [ship] and closed again”. (Crane 1995).

12 Webster lists “Oversight; inspection” as a definition for “eye” and gives as an example the proverb “The eye of the master will do more work than both his hands” (“Eye, *n.* 16”), while one of his definitions for “emphatic” includes “striking to the eye; as, emphatic colors” (“Emphatic, *emphatical*, *a.* 4”). These definitions suggest a link between both expressions. Looking at the “emphatic thumb” as a human gesture we can find the idiom “to bite the thumb at” someone (OED “thumb, *n.*”, 5e, and OED “bite, *v.*”, 16), which describes a depreciatory and insulting gesture. 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 (1.1.37-47). Lastly, there is also the idiom “to be under someone’s thumb” – which with respect to the poem would add an ironic touch, since S (whether human or gun) is certainly under the Master’s thumb, regardless of whether S threatens others with an “emphatic Thumb”.

4.4 Results

At the end of stanza five the reader of the poem knows very little about the identity of S yet. When assuming that S is an individual one is drawn to see an intimate relationship between S and O. However, this conclusion must be considered to be highly influenced by our extra-linguistic knowledge, since it is based on connotations, not denotations, of the words used.

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; S perceives him as her master and is at the same time the one that protects him. As compared to S's passive mood in the first stanza, S is getting more active in the next four stanzas. But the reader gets the impression that S is only becoming active as an instrument of O. This ensures that, even though slightly less prominent in the preceding stanzas, the interpretation of S as an actual gun is kept a possibility throughout.

5 The final stanza

The last stanza displays increased linguistic complexity again. Its two sentences are given in (20) and (21) and will be referred to as S1 and S2 in the subsequent discussion.

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

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

5.1 Interpretation of S1

To simplify matters, the structure considered for the first sentence will be the one in (22), where the word order is adjusted and the ellipsis filled.

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

The subordinate clause is given in (23). The comparison can be in the scope of the modal (24)a or vice versa (24)b. The modal force of a possibility modal like "may" is existential. This means it claims the existence of a possible

world, in this case one where S lives longer than O. There is also an accessibility relation (“relation R”) between possible worlds and the actual world (cf. Bauer and Beck 2014). It tells us which worlds are relevant for us to consider (Kratzer 1991).

(23) I may live longer than he.

- (24) a. [may [[-er than he live _ long] [I live _ long]]]
 b. [[-er than he may live _ long] [I may live long]]

- (25) a. $\exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) > \text{Lifespan}(w)(O)]$
 = it is possible that I live longer than he.
 b. $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(d_S)] > \max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d])$
 = my maximum life expectancy exceeds his maximum life expectancy.

The matrix clause is given in (26). 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).

(26) 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]]

- (27) 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.

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

We will now only pursue the most plausible combinations, which are the parallel ones ("Although Subord (a), Matrix (a)", as well as "Although Subord (b), Matrix (b)"). 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 (29) and (30). Let us first consider (29):

- (29) 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. (29) 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 of "must".

Next, the second interpretation will be considered, which is given in (30):

- (30) $\max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d]) > \max(\lambda d. \exists w[R(@,w) \ \& \ \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d]) \ \& \ \max(\lambda d. \forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(O) \geq d]) > \max(\lambda d. \forall w[R(@,w) \rightarrow \text{Lifespan}(w)(S) \geq d])$
 a. My maximum life expectancy exceeds his maximum life expectancy, and the minimum required lifetime of his exceeds the minimum lifetime required of me.
 b. t1 t2 t3 t4
 |-----|-----|-----|-----|----->

The conjunction under (30)a is not contradictory. It would be true for instance if, given all the relevant facts, S might die anytime between t1 and t4, while O might die anytime between t2 and t3. 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 (29) might be the more plausible one, since it is more relevant. But to be able to disambiguate between the different interpretations, the second sentence might be of importance.

5.2 Interpretation of S2

For the second sentence we will consider the structure in (31) 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).

(31) [_{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, it is not a gun itself that has the “power to kill”. 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 (32) and (33):

(32) 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.

(33) 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.

These are the most plausible interpretations of the last stanza a grammatical analysis can offer, and on which more global interpretations can be based. If we assume everyday meanings for both “live” and “die” in (32), S is wishing for something impossible. If S cannot die, then S’s 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. 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 usually exceeds 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. 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 is triggered in (33). 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, without such a reinterpretation, the sentence in (33) 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. S has to live, but her life will be an existence in corners without O. This reading seems to imply that all her choices, even the ones that concern her own death, are really the choices of O. 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.¹³

¹³ 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. 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. In J1651/Fr1715, "A Word made Flesh", Dickinson also uses the expression "power to die", this time in an explicitly religious context; cf. Bauer (2006) for an analysis of the power of words in J1651.

5.4 Results

Taking the two lines of interpretation, S_{gun} and S_{ind} , 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 (34) and (35), where (34) reflects the S_{gun} interpretation and (35) reflects the S_{ind} interpretation.

- (34) 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. 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 puts 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.
- (35) 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. 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 The poem as a reflection about language

So far we have considered two lines of interpretation, one where S is a gun and one where S is an individual. Although both readings present quite a different setting, they are related to each other in that they both contain a strong self-reflexive element and a reflection about language. It is precisely

the combination of these two readings, which constantly makes the reader think about meaning and language and about the interpretative options the poem offers, which draws attention to language itself. Therefore, another line of interpretation arises through the interaction of both readings, where this attitude of self-reflexion is made more explicit.

There are two additional 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 text: for example, "speak" and "reply" are verbal actions, the "Sovereign Woods" evoke the notion of *silva* as a common title for writings of mixed content,¹⁴ the use of "emphatic" is linked to speech, and the idea of immortality is also linked to poetry.

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 (note 13), Dickinson also uses the expression in J1651/Fr1715, linking it to religion but also to literature and speech. 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 option 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 a common notion familiar since antiquity.¹⁵ Interestingly, a dichotomy parallel to the 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.¹⁶

14 Cf., e.g., Simon Pelegromius's 17th-century dictionary *Silva Synonymorum*, Ben Jonson's *Timber*, and Horace's *Ars Poetica*: "As the forests shed their leaves [...], so perish those former generations of words [...]" (Horace 2005: 60–62).

15 The *Metamorphoses* end with "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). Cf. the ending of Shakespeare's sonnet #18: "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).

16 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.

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. The necessity of reinterpretation creates flexibility, which in turn leads to more than one plausible reading. 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 we cannot decide in favour of one or the other. The juxtaposition of the two readings we have presented leads to a reflection about language itself, since the reader constantly has to think about the meaning of the text in order to proceed with interpretation.

The methods combined in this paper for analyzing the poem make explicit which interpretative options there are and how and why different possibilities arise. By using structures that are often deviant from standard 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 grammar as strictly as other mechanisms. The reader is left with a certain freedom. This freedom is created by choice points within a fixed structure, which is not arbitrary but created on purpose by Emily Dickinson to guide interpretative processes while at the same time leaving them open to some extent.

As we have seen, there is no unique interpretation of the poem. Rather, there is a set of plausible interpretations which can be identified, and considering the relation between these different interpretations adds another level of meaning to the poem. The claim we make is that all plausible interpretations function parallel to the ones we describe: S_{ind} , S_{gun} , S_{poet} , S_{poetry} . These interpretations vary only with respect to how points of interpretative variability are filled within the fixed structure.

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