

A FUNCTIONAL-LEXEMATIC ANALYSIS OF EMILY DICKINSON'S DEATH POEMS¹



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I. INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to demonstrate the creative relevance of the topos of death in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, as it is central in about one quarter of her oeuvre. The approach chosen to examine these poems is Leocadio Martín Mingorance's Functional-lexematic model. As it will be explained in detail, the Functional-lexematic approach proposes an analysis of literary texts based on their Lexicon. In general terms, the Lexicon is conceived as a grammar itself able to account for all kind of lexical operations (metaphorical processes, lexical presuppositions, semantic domains, pragmatic features ...), and as a semantic net of relationships able to bring into light, in the case of narratives, the cognitive conceptual schemata upon which a literary text has been built.

Accordingly, under the Functional-lexematic scope the poem itself becomes the core of knowledge leaving the biographical data in a secondary position as the text unveils its significance in a very holistic way. In what follows, we intend to demonstrate that after having applied this method to Dickinson's death poems, we find that there is always a repetition of certain domains of knowledge and semantic structures which appear as thematic leitmotifs. In our view, these results are revealing for reading the poet's experimental language, in the sense that the metonymic structures which characterize her poetry originate indeterminacy and disruption of the traditional paradigms which make difficult the elaboration of a theory defining the meaning of death. As a result, this approach shows many advantages applied to literature considering that the extraliterary elements are not the focus for explaining the poems, but the information obtained of the dominions of knowledge are the aspects that provide the basic elements for interpreting the texts.

The reading stance we adopt is obviously interdisciplinary, in the sense that we intend to merge the linguistic aspects of the text with the literary grounds that conform it, in an attempt to broach the poems in a more comprehensive way. The advantages of this practice are manifold as it permits the possibility of uncovering the profound cognitive world of a writer's work, as well as the subordination of the bio-biographical aspects to its textual disclosure.

II. THE TOPOS OF DEATH IN DICKINSON'S POETRY

The presence of death in Dickinson's poetry has captivated readers and scholars who have devoted their efforts to classify, identify and clarify the ways in which the poet re-

¹ This paper is part of the research carried out in the project «Desarrollo de una lógica léxica para la traducción asistida por ordenador a partir de una base de datos léxica alemán, inglés, francés, español multifuncional y reutilizable» funded by DGICYT, code number PB 94/0437.

presents one of the most important experiences of human life.² For Dickinson the writing of death conveyed a painful process as she had to suffer the deaths of those she loved the last decade of her life: in 1874 it was her father and in 1882 her mother, among many other close friends and relatives which passed away in a relatively short period of time. Death became a familiar experience for this solitary woman who devoted part of her life to explore the terrors of loss and physical disintegration in her life and her poetry as well. In order to apprehend these sensations, Dickinson decided to live an existence of withdrawal and voluntary seclusion by the time she was thirty years old in 1860. In this regard, the early 1860's were the most creative period for the poet that explored the themes of living and dying with all the possible subtleties that a mind like Dickinson's could unfold:

- (1) One need not to be a chamber - to be Haunted -
 One need not be a House -
 The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
 Material Place - (333)³

The self-imposed captivity meant a kind of dying life—it was so regarded by her relatives and friends—but for the poet this seclusion represented an astonishing source of creative power she explored with a rich and prodigal paraphernalia.

Dickinson assumed the experience of death as a natural derivation of life, and she even incorporated its investigation to her poetry as a way of exorcising the terrors produced by the permanent social taboos that excluded the facing of death as a inherent process of life. The poet devoted her poetical energies to scrutinize death because for her the social contingencies of life were infinitely more painful than the fact of facing the dissolution of the self, as it is expressed in poem 335:

- (2) 'Tis not that Dying hurts us so -
 'Tis Living — hurts us more —
 But dying is a different way -
 A kind behind the door - (158)⁴

From these lines it may be inferred that Dickinson subverts the common beliefs of dying as painful experience. She even poses that living is a more distressing experience than the facing of the dissolution of the self.

The fact that Dickinson remained secluded in her home does not imply her isolation from the changes of the American society. Her contact with the world was intense through a fluid correspondence and the reading of newspapers and magazines. From our point of view, one of the aspects that may have influenced Dickinson's fixation with the recreation

² See Katharina Ernst's «Death» in *the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992). Virginia H. Oliver, «Emily Dickinson's Dialogue of Death» in *Apocalypse of Green. A Study of Emily Dickinson's Eschatology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989). Daneen Wardrop, *Emily Dickinson's Gothic. Goblin with a Gauge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996).

³ All references to Dickinson's poems appear in parentheses and follow citations directly. The poem numbers refer to Johnson's edition of Dickinson's poems.

⁴ All parenthetical volume and page references to Dickinson's poems are to *Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975).

of death was related to the social anxiety that provoked the removal of cemeteries from the centers of growing cities. Kenneth Silverman (1993) mentions this fact as the direct cause of the origin of a popular eagerness for hearing about the dead and with this purpose people «photographed relatives and friends in death or kept locks of their hair. From American publishers, newspapers, and magazines came scores of consolatory books on mourning, countless poems on death, the dead, and dying» (19). Likewise, Whitman, Poe and other nineteenth century writers recreated death and the dead as a result of the profound transformations of the cities that neglected the presence of the dead among the living.⁵

Before getting into the analysis of the poems we will explain the bases of the Functional-lexematic approach and of its application to the analysis of literary texts. As most of the terminology is from Linguistics, and probably very uncommon for literature scholars, we intend to describe in detail the main sources of our analysis.

III. THE FUNCTIONAL-LEXEMATIC APPROACH

According to Faber and Mairal (1994), Martín Mingorance's proposal tries to link structural semantics and prototype theory, providing a frame where semantic dimensions can reflect the structure of conceptual schemata. His Functional-lexematic model entails the integration of Dik's *Functional Grammar* (1989), Coseriu's *Lexematics* (1977), and some basic assumptions of cognitive grammar (Jackendoff (1987), Lakoff (1982), and Lakoff and Johnson (1980)). It postulates a fully-specified Lexicon which is a grammar in itself. The word is the central component of linguistic description, its properties providing syntactic, morphological, semantic and pragmatic information. This information is represented through the structure of «predication» or «predicative frames, » which are formulae to express «The State of Affairs.» As the model entails a synthetic type of grammar (Dik's F.G.) and an analytic grammar (Coseriu's Lexematics), the structure of the Lexicon carries two axes: paradigmatic (semantic fields) and syntagmatic (syntactic structure). On these grounds, Faber & Mairal (1997) propose that there is an iconic relationship between these two axes which gives rise to the derivation of cognitive conceptual schemata within the Lexicon.

III.1. AN INSTANCE OF THE APPLICATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL-LEXEMATIC MODEL TO THE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY TEXTS: EMILY DICKINSON'S «A SPIDER SEWED AT NIGHT»

1.1. *Predicative Frames and the State of Affairs*

Dik's Functional Grammar (1989) posits that predicative frames are formulae which contain all the semantic information of a predicate. In this study, we will focus our attention only on the most basic and nuclear information of a predicate: the typology of the State of Affairs⁶ and the semantic roles.

⁵ See Ann Douglas, «The Domestication of Death» in *The Feminization of American Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 200-226.

⁶ «Nuclear predications consist of terms which designate entities in some world, and of predicates, which designate properties of, or relations between such entities. The nuclear predication as a whole designates a set of states of affairs (SoAs), each member of the set being defined by the particular property or relation designated by the predicate.» (Dik 1989: p. 89).

The most important parameters for a semantic typology of the SoAs are developed mainly around the features of [+dyn], if the SoAs implies any change, and [+con], related to the possible existence of a «controller» of the SoAs. These features interrelate with each other as follows:

(3) (SoA)

[-dyn]		[+dyn]	
SITUATIONS		EVENTS	
[+con]	[-con]	[+con]	[-con]
POSITION	STATES	ACTIONS	PROCESSES

(4) [John believe [-dyn][-con] the story] position.

(5) [The storm destroyed[+dyn][-con] the harvest]process.

(6) [They have landed[+dyn][+con] on Mars]action.

(7) [The substance was red [-dyn][-con]]state.

In (4) the SoAs created by the predicate «believe» is a «position» because it is a non dynamic situation with control. In the cases of (5), (6) and (7) the predicates are «destroyed, » «landed» and «red» being their SoAs: «a process, » «an action» and «a state» respectively.

Nuclear semantic functions are described in the following terms:

Agent: The entity controlling an **Action**.

(8) **JOHN (Ag)** was reading a book

Positioner: The entity controlling a **Position**.

(9) **JOHN (Po)** kept his money in an old sock.

Force: The non-controlling entity initiating a **Process**.

(10) **THE EARTHQUAKE (Fo)** moved the rock.

Processed: The entity that undergoes a **Process**.

(11) **THE ROCK (Pro)** moved.

Zero: The entity primarily involved in a **State**.

(12) **THE CUP (0)** was on the table.

The experiencer: Dik (1989) considers this role as an additional feature to any of the SoA of (3). This role is due to the mental or sensorial faculties of a human being. An experiencer is someone who feels, perceives, experiences ... It is the «human role» *par excellence*.

(13) John dreamt of his mother that night.

1.2. Application of the Functional Lexematic-model to Emily Dickinson's «A Spider Sewed at Night»⁷

1.2.1. *Predicative Frames:* In this first stage the poems are analyzed in predicative frames, focussing on the typology of SoAs and its main semantic roles. As predicates are the ru-

⁷ There is an application of the Functional-lexematic approach to horror fiction in Feu (1997).

lers of the SoAs, they are placed at the beginning of the «predicate formulae»; terms are inside the brackets in parentheses and the semantic role of each term is specified outside parentheses: ((x1)Fo(force); (y1)Lo (locative), etc.). Finally, at the end of brackets, the type of State of Affairs appears. In order to make the predicative frame analysis more understandable, we have stressed all the predicates of the poem.

1.2.1.a. First Stanza

A Spider **Sewed** at night / Without a Light / Upon an Arc of White.

V[((x1)Fo) ((y1)Lo(y2)Ins(y3)Lo)]Process

1.2.1.b. Second Stanza

If **Ruff** it was of a Dame

(x1)N [(x2)]State

Or Shroud of Gnome

(x1)N [(x2)]State

Himself himself **inform**.

V[(x1)Fo(x2)Go]Process

1.2.1.c. Third Stanza

Of Immortality His Strategy Was **Physiognomy**. (1138)

(x1)N [(x2)]State

The semantic scenario displayed by this poem is mainly based on states (SoAs without dynamism and control) and processes (dynamic SoAs without control). From these results, it may be asserted that Dickinson's death poetry brings into play her powerful imaginative elaboration of an experience marked by its extreme corporeal sensations, though her visionary elaboration adumbrates the impossibility of altering the natural sequence of dying.

1.2.2. Domains of Knowledge

The «domains of knowledge» of the poem are built by the text-predicates which provide two types of information: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. In the domains of knowledge we are dealing with the semantic nucleus of a sentence (its predicate) and its lexical «dimension» or the paradigmatic axis of this predicate.

We understand «dimension» as «the point of view» of a lexical field (Geckeler, 1994), i.e: the dimension of «quick, » «fast, » «swift», etc. is «moving quickly.» As an example of the concept of «dimension» in literary texts, in the first stanza of Dickinson's «A Spider sewed at Night» the predicate is «sew» which, as an lexical item, pertains to the lexical dimension of [linking with a thread]; we will say that the «domain of knowledge» of «A Spider **Sewed** at night / Without a Light / Upon an Arc of White» is [LINKING WITH A THREAD]. We should not misunderstand the terms «dimension» and «domains of

knowledge.» In talking of «dimensions» we are alluding to the paradigmatic expression of any lexical item; however, the «domains of knowledge» are the specific dimensions of predicates, or the intersection between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of a particular predicate.

1.2.2.a. A Spider **Sewed** at night / Without a Light / Upon an Arc of White.

[LINKING WITH A THREAD]

1.2.2.b. If **Ruff** it was of a Dame

[WOMAN'S CLOTH]

1.2.2.c. Or **Shroud** of Gnome

[CLOTH OF DEATH]

1.2.2.d. Himself himself **inform**.

[TELLING TO OTHERS]

1.2.2.e. Of Immortality / His Strategy Was / **Physiognomy**.

[FACE FEATURES]

1.2.3. Relationships Between Domains of Knowledge

In this section the «domains of knowledge» are grouped into higher domains according to their meaning in the text.

1.2.3.a. [LINKING WITH A THREAD]

1.2.3.b. [WOMAN'S CLOTH OF DEATH] [TELLING TO OTHERS]

1.2.3.c. [FACE FEATURES]

1.2.4. Conceptual Net Schemata

This is the final step of the analysis where higher domains of knowledge are related to each other in a conceptual network. This network is created according to the global meaning of the text, and should be read from top to bottom.

(14) [LINKING WITH A THREAD]

[TELLING TO OTHERS]

[WOMAN'S CLOTH OF DEATH]

[FACE FEATURES]

1.2.5. Interpretation of the Poem

The conceptual net schemata shows four basic and intertwined concepts: linking with a thread / telling to others / woman's cloth of death / face features. We find in this poem that Dickinson is actually defining, through poetry writing, her own death. She is sewing / writing artistically the shroud with her face features, her own *écriture*, and her own fa-

ce. The metaphor of sewing-writing is transformed into the breaking of the taboo-silence of death. Dickinson depicts with the act of writing her own feminine image of physical and spiritual disintegration. Writing becomes exhaustion; life is dying, so writing becomes the recreation of this process. In this regard, it is fundamental to draw attention to the fact that the conceptual net schemata introduces the discussion of Dickinson's feminine construction of death and the urgency of leaving to posterity a testimony of her undermining vision of death, which is related to a certain extent with her position of alterity within society.

IV. THE DEATH POEMS IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

In this section we have analyzed, following the Functional-lexematic approach, five of the most relevant Dickinson's death poems. Each sample is preceded by its correspondent «Conceptual net schemata» upon which the interpretation of the poem has been elaborated.

IV.1. «*Tis not that Dying hurts us so*» (335)

(15) [NOT FEELING PAIN] [OTHERNESS]
 [ACCEPTING] [DEATH] [MOTIONLESS CREATURES]
 [CIRCULAR MOVEMENT]
 [WRITTEN OBLIGATION]

The conceptual net schemata of 'Tis not that Dying hurts us so« shows clearly the existing correlation between dying, living and writing. It is obvious that for Dickinson her terrifying motionless solitude is more painful than the imagination of death. Within this conceptualization of death, writing becomes an obligation to inscribe her apprehension of otherness. Dickinson's awareness of her alienation is the result of her marginal vision of life. She does not share her representation of death as a logical result of life. Furthermore, there is no Christian resurrection for those who accomplished the creed. For her the only possible immortality is writing, even though she only published ten poems during her lifetime, her writing activity was based upon absolute isolation. It may be inferred from her successive allusions to the same issue that the future generations would be prepared to understand her approach to death and writing.

IV.2. «*I felt a Funeral in my Brain*» (280)

(16) [CAUSING DAMAGE IN THE BODY]
 [CIRCULAR MOVEMENT] [NOT STANDING MENTAL ACTIVITY] [LACK OF PERCEPTION]
 [THE PERCEPTION OF MOVING FROM THE GROUND]
 [BODY] [PERCUSSION INSTRUMENT]
 [REACHING THE END] [OTHER RACE]

In «I felt a Funeral in my Brain, » the speaker starts the poem recreating a funeral service and it comes to its conclusion in terms of a real burial. In other words, the reader is introduced in the actual description of the materiality of entombing a living corpse.

Dickinson's powerful imagination is capable of representing the agony of the closed space. From the domains of knowledge it may be observed that there is a powerful mental activity capable of dramatizing death with an outstanding sense of realism. Following the different stages of a burial from the coffin where she is secluded, the closed space becomes the place of maximum anguish and terror. The protagonist of this episode is a motionless body that reverberates, like a percussion instrument, the unpleasant sounds of the funeral.

The state of semiconsciousness the voice claims is a perception related to the margins; she knows that she has crossed the threshold between the world of reason and the realm of sensations. In a certain way, she becomes the other race in the sense that no one who belongs to the rational world is allowed to envision the liminal world with such clairvoyance. Dickinson's crossing of the boundaries contests the imposed limits between life and death. The speaker of «I felt a funeral in my Brain» transgresses the limits of discourse in an act of rebellion as she is speaking being dead, something which is logically impossible.

IV.3. «I heard a Fly Buzz- when I died -» (465)

(17) [ANIMAL SOUND PERCEPTION] [THE LACK OF LIFE]
 [PHYSICAL CHANGE] [KEEPING THINGS TOGETHER]
 [ANIMAL SOUND] [LACK OF SUCCESS] [HUMAN WRITTEN LEGACY]

Once again Dickinson plays the role of a dead person. She dramatizes her own death adopting the form of a corpse. The domains of knowledge show in the first stanza how the animal sound is the most relevant sign for a speaker who does not exist in a conventional way. The hearing of the buzz of the fly signifies the sounding announcement of the corruption of the body as well as the transformation of energies. Furthermore, it could be asserted that the significant presence of an insignificant insect is the most ironical evidence of Dickinson's refusal of Christian immortality. The fly becomes the foremost agent of transformation, the key being in a chain of important changes. In particular, physical change is another way of dismissing the supreme primacy of the spirit separated from the body. Traditionally, the body has been neglected by the Christian culture which considers it the symbol of human depravation and its sinful condition.

From Katharina Ernst's point of view «the fly is the obstacle that prevents the speaker from looking beyond» (146). We contest this interpretation because the fly enhances the idea that life is an infinite cycle of renovation and transformation. At the same time, it is also a way of «keeping things together» in the sense that the body still outlives its own corporeal existence.

Throughout the poem the visionary eye observes the transformation of the body and the dissolution of the self. This certainty contributes to the need of writing about the human legacy. Dickinson's poetical legacy is, in real terms, her own private construction of an immortality. The poem represents the testimony of the poet as a the result of a visionary experience between two worlds.

IV.4. «Because I could not stop for Death» (712)

(18) [NOT ENDING THINGS] [CONTAINING] [ENDING THINGS]
 [WISDOM] [GETTING RID OF THINGS]
 [DYING] [LOSING PERCEPTION]
 [MIND] [LIFE AFTER DEATH]

The lyrical voice explores, once again, the meaning of life and death in «Because I could not stop for death.» Things are useless and the first thing we have to do in order to understand the impossible separation of life and death is to get rid of material things. According to the speaker, it is wiser to think about the essence of existence instead of struggling for useless objects. The lyrical voice suggests the urgency of pausing and posing a more holistic explanation for life, that immortality may be found in life, not in another world. In this regard, the poem seeks to reconcile the dramatic separation between life and death and it solves it through the encompassing of both facts as a meaningful continuum. Similarly, this vision is related to Whitman's sense of transcending life through the transformation of the body into energy or other being as it is depicted in «Song of Myself»: «If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles» (89).⁸ In the case of Whitman, the presence of death as a logical consequence of death establishes a logical cycle that is envisioned by the poet as a joyful manifestation of the wonders of nature.

Dickinson's view is not so centered on celebrating the fact that there is not a Christian heavenly life after death, on the contrary, she reaches these conclusions after having undergone all sort of terrors and strugglings between the Christian faith of redemption and the discovery that there is not such hope but the individual facing of death in solitude with the transcendental wish of transmutation into another force.

IV.5. «The Last night that She lived» (1100)

- (19) [HUMAN EXISTENCE]
- [MAKING PARTS OF THE DAY]
- [FORGETTING] [TIME LOSING]
- [WRITTEN EMPHASIS] [REACHING AGITATION AND GUILT]
- [DYING]
- [RESISTING]
- [CONCEDING]
- [END OF EXISTENCE] [HUMAN BODY ACCOMPLISHING]

In the poem «The last Night that She lived, » the voice is not the protagonist but the observer of a dying person. The scenario generates the meditation on the human existence and the anxiety derived from the need of organizing time and avoiding its waste. Forgetfulness becomes Dickinson's main obsession related to death. Through writing, the poet organizes time and memory; and resists the effects of time passing. The domains of knowledge reveal Dickinson's concern about the continuous struggle of human existence between resisting and conceding death. In addition to this idea, the presence of ordering signifies in this context the necessity of putting things in a rational and linear way as a sign of resistance to the circularity of movement that is related to the unconsciousness.

V. PROPOSAL FOR AN AUTHOR'S DICTIONARY

In this section of the essay, we would like to give an example of a further extension of the Functional-lexematic model applied to the study of narrative texts. Consequently, we

⁸ Walt Whitman, «Song of Myself,» *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Norton, 1973), 28-89.

propose the creation and development of an author's dictionary. In this type of dictionary lexical entries are built upon the particular text relationships a lexical item creates in a specific author. As it has been explained, the predicates of a literary text, due to the structure of «domains of knowledge» and its relationships, develop their own conceptual net of meaning connections. These relationships, instances of the author's world conceptualization, can be reflected in lexical entries. A case in point might be a lexical entry on the topic of death.

First of all, in order to compare Emily Dickinson's text relationships with other concepts, we have taken into account the definition of «death» given by the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*:

- (20) *CCELD*: **Death**: Death is the permanent end of the life of a person or animal, when the heart stops beating and all other functions of the body and brain stop too. EG. *After the death of her parents she went to live with her aunt.*
- (21) **Death**: V[(x1)Fo(x2)Go]Process. In Dickinson's poetry, death is considered as force, a dynamic entity without control which instigates «processes.» Death is women's cloth represented in her face features. It is also the obligation of writing, of telling to others through written signs the real meaning of death. Death is the lack of physical sensations and movement, the struggle between conceding and resisting, the moment of abandoning and giving others, the time of human body accomplishing. However, death also entails physical change, becoming another race where life turns into mental activity.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that Leocadio Martín Mingorance's Functional-lexematic method is an effective tool for approaching literary texts. It is also reasonable to assume that after having employed this analytical framework, Dickinson's death poems appear to show a series of concomitant results that clearly speak about a certain dickinsonian grammar of knowledge. We interpret these results to the efficacy of the method which has to do in great part to its interdisciplinary quality where linguistics and literature are bound by the word. In fact, this is an instance of how powerful might be the exploration of hybrid readings of literature that derive its results from the text and not from the biobibliographical data. This assumption does not imply the absolute dismissal of the historical aspects of the literary production; on the contrary, we seek to reconcile all the aspects that may help to elucidate the text as a point of departure. We are accustomed to thinking of literature from a historical point of view, ignoring most of the internal aspects of literary language. In so far as we are capable of reading literature from within the texts and not from outside the texts we may formulate a coherent discourse based on the writer's own linguistic and literary system. In this manner, we start from the lexicon as a conceptual builder of the textual world which is the basis of human knowledge.

Unfortunately, due to the space limits of the present publication, there are some aspects of the linguistic interpretations of these poems that have not been explored so far. For instance, the case of the state of affairs. In our view, the fact that the lyrical voice is most of the time an experiencer involved with processes, and that the poem has been constructed by states and processes is striking for literary interpretation. These data are linked to the atmosphere of decay and physical immobility that contradicts the astonishing mental activity displayed by Dickinson's immense imaginative world.

VII. DISCUSSION

To conclude, as it has been pointed out the Functional-lexematic approach may be an excellent method for deciphering traditionally abstruse authors like Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, H. D., Ezra Pound, Vicente Aleixandre or César Vallejo, to mention just a few. This fact is extremely important due to the difficulty that our students have in understanding poetry. Besides, from the point of view of linguistics, it is always interesting for the students of language to see a practical application of the linguistic descriptions. As a result, we encourage language and literature scholars to follow this type of interdisciplinary approaches.

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