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Pronouns in Dickinson's poetry
as a means of constructing a poetic *self*

Letizia Vezzosi

University of Florence

ABSTRACT

Poetic language is often defined by its apparent violations of ordinary language rules because of its usage of 'unacceptable' or at least very unusual constructions, under the label of 'poetic licence'. This is also true for Emily Dickinson's language, characterised as obscure, elliptical or ambiguous. The present paper is an attempt to show how the 'poetic forms' are nothing but an extreme exploitation of everyday language resources which can sometimes appear to be ambiguous or obscure only as a side effect of their extra-contextualisation. The case in point is the analysis of Dickinson's use of personal pronouns, which is not agrammatical, but resorts to the pragmatic and topicality conditions overruling the semantic rules of gender agreement, thus building her view and feeling of herself as a woman and a poet.

Keywords: poetic language, grammaticality, Dickinson, pronouns, language function.

> Primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient. I hope not. I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive.
>
> (Auden, *On the function of poetry* 1938)

1. Introduction

The Romantic notion of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"[1] seems to be negated by the modern views expressed by Eliot,

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[1]   This is the famous definition of poetry by Wordsworth (1802) which appeared in the *Preface* of the second edition of the *Lyric Ballads*.

when he states "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (Eliot 1919: 73).

Only superficially are these two conceptions of poetry in contradiction, as well argued by Stead (2007): Eliot's call to escape from personality does not coincide with his denial of the *self*, on the contrary it implies a search for a deeper *self*. Poets incorporate themselves into their work, but "transmute the passion" into something universal (Eliot 1919: 72). How this transmutation might happen is of no concern to Eliot who does not explicate how the poet can elevate their own feeling and emotion into a universal experience. Eliot's claim finds a direct correlation in the philosophical inquiry in the meaning of being and its linguistic expression, where Heidegger, inspired both by Karl Jaspers' (1938) idea of the limits of existence and by the Aristotelian dynamic notion of ἀλήθεια (Berti 1996), conceptualises ἀλήθεια as unconcealedness and the meaning of being as the phenomenogical analysis of temporality, the historicity of our being (Allen 2007: 9). Accordingly, he sees in the language of poetry the only language capable of articulating the meaning of being, since it discloses the meaning of things for human beings (Heidegger 1969, 1992).[2]

An explanation of how such universality of experience and such unconcealedness are linguistically achieved is offered by Jakobson's (1960) studies and definitions of the functions of language according to which poetry shares two main functions: the poetical function, that is the operative function focussing on the linguistic code and how it is used, and the emotive function relating to the addressee and expressing the internal state of the speaker, namely the poet. Deciphering the language of the poem commits the addressee to construct their own message, thus making it part of their own experience (1968). Poetry in its linguistic realisation is thus recognised to have the capability of both expressing awareness of our existence (cf. Jaspers 1932) in the encounter of one's own limits in death, sorrow, guilt, chance and the like, and of elevating one's own existence onto a general and universal level through the interplay between the poet and the addressee.

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[2]   In the early to mid-20th-century, Heidegger refined the definition of the concept of ἀλήθεια, starting from the pre-Socratic notion of disclosure, to arrive at the idea of "unconcealedness" (Heidegger 1992) as apparent from its etymology ἀ–λήθεια "not hidden, patent" (1975: 50). Thus, it is distinct from conceptions of truth as correspondence and coherence, and relates to how an ontological "world" is disclosed, how things are made intelligible for human beings (Heidegger 1972: 69).

The present paper focuses on a significant aspect linked to one's existence, the establishment and the recognition of the *self*, by looking at Emily Dickinson's poetry. In life, her public 'existence' was limited both as a woman and as a poet, in that she lived much of her life in seclusion and her poetic production was unknown to most. Nevertheless, she was rightly recognized as being a landmark woman poet, because she gave voice to her being a woman and a poet, by asserting the irrepressible creative female spirit in a household, in a society and a literary scene kept exclusive[3] by males. In particular, the construction of Dickinson's *self* will be traced through her use of personal and reflexive pronouns in some of her poems.

After a brief introduction to Jakobson's view on language and poetry, the choice of these linguistic elements will be explained following Benveniste's linguistic theory. Given that poetry exploits the resources concealed in the morphological and syntactic structure of language (cf. Jakobson 1960: 375) and that "for poetry, the standard language is the background against which the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work is reflected" (Mukařovský 2014: 43), it is useful to spend a few words on the present day usage of personal pronouns and reflexives in informal language and in varieties of English, which can help make sense of "the intentional violation of the norm of the standard" (Mukařovský 2014: 43) operated by Emily Dickinson, in using these linguistic elements to construct her identity as a woman and a poet.

1.1 A few words on the method

Before proceeding to the main argumentation, it is worth spending a moment on the approach applied in the present study and on the theoretical and scholarly background of the present topic.

Emily Dickinson's poetry, though neglected from the theory of the canon for years (Hagenbüchle 1998), has been long appreciated as a topic of research for its style and rhetoric (Hagenbüchle 1974), especially within gender studies (Erkkila 1984; Howe 1986; Smith 1991; Juhasz – Miller 2002; Gischler 2005). It has received similar attention within cognitive linguistics

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[3]   Although 'exclusive' may sound excessive, as one reviewer has rightly noticed, in the nineteenth century, neither households nor society nor the literary scene were "exclusively" male domains; using this adjective, I intended to be more faithful to women writers of the period for whom "your thoughts don't have words every day" (Dickinson, poem n. 1452). Later, the same feeling was expressed by Wolf in the phrase "a room of one's own".

(Budick 1985; Freeman 1995, 1996, 1997; Hamilton 2005; Young 2019) especially for the use of punctuation, ellipsis, metaphor and metonymy. Apart from very few exceptions (Perlmutter 1977), the results of linguistic research on ordinary language have not been applied to Dickinson's poetic language until the last couple of years, which saw the publication of two seminal studies, Panizza – Kannan (2020) and Bauer – Beck et al. (2020), which combine formal linguistics and literary studies[4] and aim to show that her apparent non-compliance with linguistic rules depends on her exploitation of the potential of English grammar. The present paper is aligned with this research perspective, and focuses on the English personal and reflexive pronominal system.

Strictly speaking, her natural point of reference is not Present-day English,[5] whose pronominal system has recently undergone and is still undergoing interesting changes. Nevertheless, what is pertinent to the present analysis concerns the semantic spectrum, whose nuances are present in the English pronominal system at any diachronic stage (Vezzosi 2008; Vezzosi – Semplicini 2017; Siemund – Dolberg 2011), and therefore it is justifiable to attribute it to Dickinson's language itself. The linguistic analysis of Dickinson's use of personal and intensive pronouns does not aim to establish the poet's grammar[6] nor to describe Dickinson's pronominal system. On the contrary, it is a text-centered approach to literary studies that draws from descriptive and theoretical linguistics, especially semantics and pragmatics. Linguistics can serve as a tool in reaching a better understanding of a literary text, as it can give a precise and detailed analysis of the text by applying linguistic structures, mechanisms and methods. According to the most recent publications,[7] this seems to be a very suitable approach to interpreting Dickinson's production.

In practice, I have created a sub-corpus of Dickinson's poems,[8] selecting those in which the poet's use of pronouns is remarkable and apparently non-compliant to grammatical rules. I argue that her uncommon use of language was part of her poetic strategy, which meant extending the range of linguistic expression as far as possible. The rules of the English language

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[4]   Unfortunately, these books were issued only after the submission of this paper; therefore, I could not consult them. It is quite comforting, however, to see that they share the approach I chose and that their suggestive results are in agreement with the interpretation I have hereby proposed.
[5]   I thank an anonymous reviewer for this remark.
[6]   Apropos, see Miller (1987).
[7]   Panizza – Kannan (2020) and Bauer – Beck et al. (2020).
[8]   I used Johnson's edition (1955).

are not suspended, but function differently: the poet bends and exploits the rules of grammar and she does it systematically. Therefore, the reader is able to adapt to such deviances. This adaptation process triggers a reflection in the reader about language and the way language works.

2. Language in poetry and the functions of language

Poetic language acquired a special status within the theory of language in the works of Jakobson, when its distinctiveness[9] as a medium of expression became a gradient feature.[10] However, Jakobson's seminal work followed, and integrated the previous models of Karl Bühler and Bronisław Malinowski.

Karl Bühler's *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache* (1934) formulated the Organon Model, according to which communication has three functions: the expressive function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*), the representation function (*Darstellungsfunktion*) and the conative function (*Appellfunktion*). In fact, his cognitive representation of language is based on three relational components involved in the communicative act – the things that are represented, the sender (whose inner states are professed) and the receiver (whose reaction is triggered)[11] – neglecting the role of context and code, which become central in Malinowski's thought on language. Being an anthropologist, Malinowski did not deny that language is an "instrument of thought and of the communication of thought" (Malinowski 1972 [1923: 297]), but he analysed it as "a cultural aspect in its own right" (Malinowski 1935, II: 10) and "an indispensable ingredient of all human action" (Malinowski 1935, II: 7), whose main function is "not to express thought, not duplicate mental processes, but rather to play an active part in behaviour" (Malinowski 1935, II: 7). Accordingly, any communicative act involves relational components other than the message, the sender (sender or encoder), the receiver (receiver or decoder); the channel or contact,[12] the

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[9] The term "distinctiveness" is used as in Benjamin (2012).
[10] I am using here the term "feature", following Jacobson's for "elementary informational units" (1961: 245).
[11] "Dreifach ist die Leistung der menschlichen Sprache, Kundgabe, Auslösung und Darstellung" (Bühler 1934: 28).
[12] Jakobson uses the term "contact", referring to the contact established by the medium of transmission of the message – for instance between the articulatory system of the speaker and the acoustic system of the hearer in the case of an utterance – "a physical channel and psychical connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling them to enter and maintain communication" (Jakobson 1987[1960]: 66).

context[13] and the code itself have to be considered as constitutive elements of the linguistic act. This is the starting point of Jakobson's theory of language and language functions.

According to Jakobson (1960), for any given act of verbal communication or speech event, there are six fundamental elements or factors which must be present for it to be operable: (1) addresser (speaker, encoder, emitter; poet, author; narrator); (2) addressee (decoder, hearer, listener; reader; interpreter); (3) code (system, *langue*); (4) message (*parole*, the given discourse, the text); (5) context (referent) and (6) contact. Each factor is the focal point of a relation, or function that operates between the message and the factor. Therefore, for each factor one function of language is devised, which determines an orientation within the verbal message on that factor,[14] namely: (1) emotive; (2) conative; (3) metalingual; (4) poetic; (5) referential and (6) phatic. Related to the Addresser (speaker) is the Emotive function, which allows the Addresser to externalize feelings and moods, as well as desires or the level of interest or passion, that is it "aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about" (Jakobson 1960: 354); therefore, it is also called 'expressive' (Waugh 1980: 58). The conative function, also called 'appellative', engages the Addressee directly, in that it is the function of mandate and question, where the Addresser tries to influence the behaviour of the Addressee. The referential function, corresponding to the context, is also referred to as 'denotative', 'cognitive' or 'ideational' (Waugh 1980: 58) and describes a situation, object or mental state function. The referential function is often associated with the *énonciation récit* of Benveniste (1966: 240-241). Connected to the variable of contact is the phatic[15] function which "contributes to the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact" (Lyons 1977: 53-54) and keeps up the channels of communication. Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need

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[13] The mathematical model of communication developed by Shannon and Weaver (1948-49) presupposes the intervention of five variables in any linguistic act: they do not take into account the context. The role played by their model in Jakobson's works is made clear by himself in Jakobson (1961).

[14] As for the choice of the term and its definition, see also Jakobson and Tynyanov (1980[1928]).

[15] Malinowski introduces the notion of 'phatic': "There can be no doubt that we have a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention – a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words […] phatic communion serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas" (Malinowski 1936: 314-316).

to check whether they are using the same code, whenever the linguistic code talks about itself, speech performs a metalingual function, proper to metalinguistic thought.

Special attention is reserved to the poetic function of language, which is defined as "[t]he set (*Einstellung*) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake" (Jakobson 1960: 357). As with every function, the poetic function is not restricted to poetry, but is operative in any utterance which focuses on the *signifiant*, that is the linguistic code and how it is used. Indeed, in communicative events, verbal messages do not fulfil one single function. They are instead a hierarchical bundle, a "set" or a "setting (*Einstellung*)" of hierarchically organised functions. The structure of any message and its diversity depends on its particular hierarchical setting of functions (cf. Jakobson 1963). Accordingly, it is plausible to claim that in poetry the poetic function forms poetry, being dominant over the referential (cognitive) function, which is the leading task of most messages, including the poetic expression (cf. Jakobson 1963, 1968). That is, repeating Sir Philip Sidney's words in his *Defense of Poetry*, "Now for the Poet, he nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth".

2.1 Relation between poetical language and ordinary language

Consequent to Jakobson's theory of language and language functions is the question concerning the relationship between poetic language and ordinary language. If poetic language focuses on the message in itself, then it contains the principle of organization and its own aim. That means the poetic language is not instrumental to anything (Jakobson 1931), while ordinary language is instrumental to an external aim, such as knowledge, communication, or persuasion – all objectives for which the word is a means, but not a goal *per se*. Hence it follows that ordinary language is structural, in that it has its structural principle in the language grammar. On the other hand, poetic language appears to be structurally freer, less rigorously respectful or rather disrespectful of the language grammar.

The relationship between ordinary and poetic language can be accounted for in terms of gradience and in a so-called inverse correlation, which Jakobson sees in the relation among the functions, *in primis* between the poetic and the referential functions as a sort of battle for supremacy: the more the message "talks" about itself and refers to itself (the poetic function), the less it talks about the context and refers to it (the referential function) and vice versa.

> Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry [...] The supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous. The double-sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee, and besides in a split reference, as it is cogently exposed in the preambles to fairy tales of various. peoples, for instance, in the usual exordium of the Majorca storytellers: 'Axio era y no era' ('It was and it was not'). (Jakobson 1960: 370-371)

As clearly stated by Mukařovský (2014 [1970]), the *differencia specifica* between the language of ordinary discourse and language of poetic discourse does not lay in different grammars nor in adherence to or absence of a grammar, but in the process of foregrounding or de-automation, a technique to 'defamiliarise' discourse elements in the act of composition. Foregrounding, however, is possible because most of the poetic composition is backgrounded, rooted in ordinary or 'automatized' language. Linguistic fictions owe their existence to "the grammatical forms of the discourse", paraphrasing Bentham's words (Odgen 1932: 44). Poetic language is "either grammatical or anti-grammatical but it is never agrammatical" (Jakobson 1960: 368).[16] Only against the background of the ordinary language's grammar can the (grammatical) contrivances in poetry be understood. In other words, the poetic effect originates from the poet's use of his own language grammar, from the potentiality of the words extrapolated from their 'automated' context. "L'effort du poète porte sur les mots et les mots sont ce qui attire l'attention du lecteur ou de l'auditeur" (Benveniste 2011: 642), a goal reached by the poet by resorting to the potentiality of his own language: "the figure of sound" and the "figure of grammar" are a constitutive principle in verse (Howpkins 1959). Partially in disagreement with the Saussurian analysis of poetry, according to which "les mots ne sont pas des signes", Benveniste claims that it "consiste en une émotion verbalisée" (2011: 199).

In conclusion, what characterizes poetry and distinguishes it from other genres (literary and textual in general) is not simply the predominance of the poetic function. However, because of that, poetical language differs from ordinary language in that it is not purely referential: in poetry, the

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[16]   The precise quotation is the following: "rhyme is either grammatical or anti-grammatical but it is never agrammatical" (Jakobson 1960: 368). However, Jakobson himself extends this statement to the poet's language: "The rhyme technique is 'either grammatical or antigrammatical' but never agrammatical, and the same may be applied as well to poets' grammar" (Jakobson 1968: 605).

communicative intent is to make the addressee experience an experience through the organization of words (cf. Benveniste 1966). Other functions, such as the emotive function, are then operative.[17]

The poetic intent is achieved through the peculiarities of poetic language, e.g. the peculiar use of such constructions, words, or sounds on the side of the poet, and the systemic analysis of it and of its interrelation with the ordinary language usage on the side of the reader. The more an act is automatized, the less conscious it becomes for that act to be interpreted; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become for that act to be executed or interpreted: the reader is thus made part of the poet's experience. Consequently, we can argue that grammatical concepts find their widest applications in poetry as the most formalised manifestation of language, because through them the poet's intent is expressed.

2.2 Personal pronouns in English

Any linguistic sign, grammatical category or construction, can conceal poetic resources (Jakobson 1960: 375). In ordinary language, it is generally assumed that the relation between concept and sign is formalised, automated, given *a priori* and therefore unconsciously processed. In poetry, it is admitted that this relation becomes dynamic, in *statu nascendi*, when the correspondence between the sign and the object has to be newly established. In poetry, each linguistic element does not necessarily occur contextualised in the real external world, but it is often extra-contextualised, that is contextualised in the interior word of the poet, thus deepening its semantic dimension (Agosti 2007). This holds for any linguistic element, including relational and grammatical units, such as pronouns:

> The pivotal role performed in the grammatical texture of poetry by diverse kind of pronouns is due to the fact that pronouns, in contradistinction to all other autonomous words, are purely grammatical, relational units […] (Jakobson 1968: 606)

The term *pronoun* literally means that it stands for or refers to another noun, and accordingly it is generally defined as a word, or more technically a pro-

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[17] This holds for lyrics in particular. Contrarily, epic poetry "strongly involves the referential function of language" (Jakobson, 1960: 357). The identification of the functional configuration (e.g. the identification of the secondary, tertiary and so on function) is decisive for a typology of poetic genre.

form, that functions like a noun and substitutes for a noun or noun phrase. Unlike nouns, pronouns lack a descriptive content and are empty signs, that is they are not referential with respect to reality or the extra-linguistic world. They become 'full', acquire a content, as soon as the speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse (Benveniste 1971: 210-220). Of particular interest are personal pronouns, since their reference is either cata- or ana-phorically established and it is successful if the speaker and the hearer either share the extra-contextual knowledge or the discourse in which they occur. In English, furthermore, personal pronouns constitute the only class, marked according to gender. Still further, in English, gender is not a class-feature, or a fixed property of nouns, stored in the lexicon and assigned by means of language-specific rules, i.e. assignment rules (Corbett 1991); but it is a morphosyntactic property, in that it becomes visible in context through agreement. If a noun by its form[18] cannot be assigned any gender in English, through pronominal coreference it can be classified as feminine, masculine or neuter according to whether the noun denotes animates or inanimates.

In more informal registers, there are cases, even in ordinary language, where the straightforward semantic rules are overridden by emotive and affective factors (Vachek 1964) as in (1). Especially in colloquial usage, considerable variation is possible: humans may be downgraded by the use of *it*, and inanimates upgraded by the use of *he* or *she*, only if they are countable and individuated (2 a-b). Another feature determining gender fluctuation is the individuality parameter (Siemund 2008; Kortmann – Scheider 2004): feminine and masculine pronouns are also used with inanimates if characterised by the feature [+individuated], but never with mass nouns (cf. 3). Sometimes, subtler and elusive factors seem to be at play, such as the protagonist vs. the narrator's perspective (4), or the personal vs. impersonal perspective (5) as well as the specific vs. generic reading.

(1)   You said the black knife, you said. I said the sharp one this one *he*'s fairly cheap but they use *him* a lot [BNC KD0]

(2a)   Is *he* washable? [thus an American female customer at a store refers to a bedspread] (Corbett 1991: 12)

(2b)   I can understand why they took the silverware etc. But why did *it* [the robber] take my piggy bank? (Mathiot 1979: 11)

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18   I refer to those few lexical pairs whose gender is marked by the occurrence of a special suffix, such as *lion* vs. *lioness*, *actor* vs. *actress*, *hero* vs. *heroine* and those lexemes related to one gender only, such as *hen* vs. *rooster*, *queen* vs. *king*.

(3)   [H]ow did they do that [sc. Baking] again? Well, y-you see, you and-, had – 'twas hearth fires then, th., th-, right down on the hearth, you see, and they had a big round iron with a handle on '*n*, and they used to put *he* under the fire and *he*'d get hot; then they used to put some – take some fire from the corner o'the fireplace like and put *it* here where you was going to bake to, and put this iron on top of *it* [South West England (Wakelin 1986: 103-4)]

(4)   The fly was beating its wings furiously, trying to break loose and free itself. "First" said Charlotte "I dive at him … Next I wrap him up"

(5)   […] he went out on to the ice and hammered a hole in it with his heavy wooden shoe, and carried the duckling home to his wife. There *it* soon revived. The children wanted to play with *it* but the duckling thought they were going to ill-use *him*, and rushed in his fright into the milk pan …

In other words, Standard English gender agreement rules can be disregarded or rather be flexible for semantic, pragmatic or stylistic reasons. In ordinary language, the interpretation depends on the communicational and cultural context, in poetry on the poet's message. In particular, Emily Dickinson fully maximises such flexibility to convey her own experience, emotions, and in particular to construct her identity as a woman and a poet.

2.2.1 Intensive pronouns or intensifiers and reflexives

A special instance of pronouns are the reflexives, which consist of a personal pronoun + *self*. Like any pronoun, reflexive pronouns lack a descriptive content and are expressions which are prototypically used to indicate that a non-subject argument of a transitive predicate is coreferential with (or bound by) the subject: *himself* acquires a content meaning because it cannot possibly refer to anyone but John in *John$_i$ saw himself$_i$ in the mirror*. Reflexive pronouns in English are identical in form to the so-called intensifiers or intensive pronouns, differing in terms of distribution: both make reference to antecedents, but intensifiers are adjoined to either NPs or VPs and function as adverbial or adnominal modifiers, not as arguments of verbs (König – Siemund – Töpfer 2005).

Intensifiers are always prosodically prominent, i.e. they always carry a sentential stress. Such focusing and stressing is associated with the semantic effect of establishing contrast, i.e. of evoking alternatives to the referent of

the expression they are in construction with and structuring them as the periphery of the asserted (=central) value (the meaning of the noun phrase or the referent of the pronoun they follow).[19] In (6a), *the artist* is opposed to the *dust* produced by his activity as sculptor. Thus, in certain contexts the use of an intensifier raises and excludes the evoked alternatives, or more precisely, excludes the question of delegation, help or joint action, as in (6b), when the person interested in the action is also the direct agent.

(6a)   Since cleansing river breezes never found their way through the walls, a patina of stone dust covered everything. Even the artist himself wore a fine grey powder like a second skin. (E. Georg, WSM, p. 9)

(6b)   "If you don't go up and get it for me" he said "I'll just have to go up and get it myself." (Hole 2001: 136)

One restriction concerning the status of the noun or pronominal phrase modified by an intensifier is that it has to be accessible, in Lambrecht's terms (1994): in other words, it must be either situational or textual or inferentially accessible and 'anaphorically recoverable' (Halliday 1985).

A special occurrence of reflexive pronouns is that of the so-called 'locally free reflexives', 'untriggered reflexives', 'viewpoint reflexives', or 'perspective logophors' of English (Gast 2002), such as in *So what can a fine Tory gentleman like yourself have to do with a manufacturing Whig like Braithwaite?* [LOLAC 1985.205:2382], *The bottom stacks were compressed but the upper layers were soft and would provide comfort for everybody soon, including myself* [LOLAC 1985.200:2080], *Silvia was no helpless, downtrodden flower. Which meant that something else, apart from the defence of Silvia, had provoked her own furious outburst yesterday evening. Some more personal resentment that had come from within herself* [BNC JXT 2086]. This special type of reflexives has been differently interpreted by scholars: some have viewed them as reflexives bound by a minimal subject of consciousness within their discourse (Zribi-Hertz, 1989), some as personal pronouns (Reinhart – Reuland 1993), some as intensifiers without pronominal heads (Baker 1995; König – Siemund 1999). Formally identical to reflexives, they are not bound to any antecedent in the same clause, but either in a higher clause or outside the verbal context in the speech situation. They also evoke alternatives to their reference value,

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[19]   For a more precise description of intensifiers see (Baker 1995; König – Siemund 1999; Gast 2002).

which is structured into a centre and a periphery according to the following relations and are much like intensifiers:

    a   X has a higher rank than Y in a real-world hierarchy
    b   X is more important than Y in a specific situation
    c   Y is identified relative to X (kinship terms, part-whole, etc.)
    d   X is a subject of consciousness, centre of observation, etc. (logophoricity).

Although locally free reflexives are of quite limited use in Standard English, diachronically they are relatively frequent in Early and Late Modern English (Vezzosi 2005). In particular, they are a frequent feature of Dickinson's poetic language.

3. How Emily Dickinson uses personal pronouns

Emily Dickinson's choices are partly due to sort of contrasting paradigms in her poetry and her poetic language. On the one hand, her language has often been described as obscure, ambiguous and indeterminate (Gross 1969), characteristics often attributed to the high degree of intimacy (Hagenbüchle 1974). Her language has also been "accused" of "noncommunication" (Gross 1969), but she herself explicitly expressed her faith in the power of words and language (Anderson 1960) to understand the world and to be eternal.[20] While her language has been seen as "familiar" (Hagenbüchle 1974), her love for sophisticated, 'unusual' and studied vocabulary (Howard 1957) is patent, as she admitted it, when she wrote that her "Lexicon" was her only companion (Letters 404). I think that the source of this apparent paradox lies in Dickinson's deep knowledge and extremely original use of grammatical units, lexis and constructions in either unusual or unexpected contexts, which allow her to emotionally express her thought and feelings, but also produce an effect of disorientation and estrangement in the reader, who has to assess the context and the co-text by themselves, thus participating actively and empathically in the poetic creation.

       This is particularly true for the personal pronouns whose meaning depends on the co-text and on the context. To determine the referent of

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[20] A few poems express Dickinson's poetic concerning language and in particular words as vehicles of her messages. Just a few lines often quoted by literary critics in this regard: *A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the Power to die* (J.1651), This loved Philology (J.1651).

a personal pronoun is strategic when the poet reflects on the poetic creation, on the status of the poet and on her condition as a woman, because they unveil what she thought about. In the following few paragraphs, I will analyse some poems by Dickinson, where her metalinguistic thought is assumed to be more evident.

A significant number of Dickinson's poems is dedicated to and focuses on the poet as language-maker and the act of poetic creation and writing. *This is a Poet* (J448) is a clear statement on both the actor and the act of writing poems: the poet's theory of poetic creation, according to which the poet can create incredible wonders from the ordinary (life and language), unperishable unlike the real world from which the poet takes their inspiration. If the reader can quite easily grasp the sense of the poem, they are at a loss when trying referentially to interpret the pronouns. Knowing how personal pronouns can be used in both formal and informal registers, the semantic features underlying their usage, and the pragmatic inferences implied by the intensive pronouns can help the interpretation of the poetic message.

Leaving aside the interplay between different spaces and different times established by the alternation of *This – That* and of verbal present vs. past, it is not plain what *it* stands for, although it is clear that it does not refer to any inanimate antecedent. Such indeterminacy forces the reader to make sense of it, searching in their repository of other less standard ordinary functions of this pronoun:

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

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

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

        Of portion – so unconscious
        The Robbing – could not harm
        Himself – to Him – a Fortune
        Exterior – to Time (J 448)

It in the first verse can both refer to *this* and *poet* as well as function as a dummy subject introducing the complement that-clause. A clue to the meaning and function of this unidentified *it* might be found in the following verses: in "it was not Ourselves" *it* plausibly refers to the poet, who does not belong to the same community as the speaker – *ourselves*, *us* –; in "arrested it" *it* might even hint at the poem, the art of the poet. In this poem Dickinson is speaking as a reader and not as a poet, as she considers herself a part of the admiring, ordinary crowd. Accordingly, she depicts a poet as a public figure and accordingly as a male poet, who creates effortlessly and easily, so that for him poetry is a source of pleasure and richness from which the speaker's community is excluded. The mutual exclusion of the poet's and the speaker's worlds is emphasised by the use of intensifying pronominal forms: *ourselves* identifies *the poet* as an alternative to a central *we*, which includes the speaker and the other poets whose poetic creation is a painful delivery, while *himself* excludes any alternative values other than *the poet* from the joy of his writing poetry. The choice of *it* to introduce the poet and his art is not a neutral one, but a means to express the speaker's attitude towards the 'professional' famous poet. When, in colloquial and informal English, *it* is used with animates and even humans, it implies taking a distance from its referent,[21] downgrading it or a preference for a generic and impersonal reading. Accordingly, *it* for Dickinson indicates a generic situation and at the same time expresses her sense of distance with respect to the generic figure of a poet and a general representation of the act of composing poetry. But it also implies a sense of estrangement and non-identification of Dickinson with the public figure of the poet. As a confirmation of that, when the speaker's voice moves to the present situation, the poet is marked by a masculine pronoun – "it is He [...] Himself – to Him" – as to reinforce Dickinson's sense of exclusion from the poet's world as a woman and as a female poet.

This is not the only example in which the poet caught up in the creative act is referred to with a masculine pronoun: in *The Spider as an Artist* (J1275), in *A spider holds a Silver Ball* (J605) or in *A Spider sewed at Night* (J1138), the spider's work symbolises the artwork, and the spider, which personifies the artist, namely the poet, is referred to by means of a masculine pronoun. Curiously, masculine pronouns seem to be the preferred option not only

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[21] The use of *it* to distance herself from the person she's referring to is a frequent device in Dickinson's poetry: an explicatory example is *If it had no pencil* (J921), where she is appointing her Master who does not reply to her letters, who does not write to her by means of *it* instead of the more obvious *thee* or *you* to distance herself from her own suffering by referring to him generically.

with reference to whatever symbolises the socially recognised poet, but even to poetry itself (A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die / Cohesive as the Spirit / it may expire if He – /Made Flesh and dwelt among us […] J1651):

(8)   The Spider as an Artist
        Has never been employed –
        Though his surpassing Merit
        Is freely certified

        By every Broom and Bridget
        Throughout a Christian Land –
        Neglected Son of Genius
        I take thee by the Hand – (J1275)

Masculine pronouns do not refer only to men, but they also identify women. Dickinson dedicates three eulogies to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as a sign of what she meant for her:[22] Dickinson looked to her as a role model and a politically ally. Expectedly in these three poems Dickinson refers to her by means of a feminine pronoun – "Her – last poems –" (J312), "[…] That Nature murmured to herself" (J593), "I went to thank Her – / But She Slept" – (J363). Nevertheless, in J449 Dickinson genders her as male: "He questioned softly". Here Dickinson deals with Keats and the ideal of beauty in poetry, a theme dear to Browning who in *A Vision of Poets* said "[…] These were poets true, / Who died for Beauty, as martyrs do / For Truth –…" (ll. 289-291). The reference is clearly not to the woman Elisabeth Barret Browning, but to her as a poet, as an artist and as an actively involved theoretician.

        Shifts from the expected feminine pronoun for female referents to a grammatically unmotivated masculine pronoun are not rare in Dickinson's poems on marriage and love, something that in Dickinson's time could be paradoxical. If loving would take to marriage and marriage was regarded as an inevitable and longed for step in a woman's life, Dickinson was aware that it might well require the woman to renounce her own identity, to subordinate her own life and desires to those of her partner. Such a paradox is the topic of J732: the voluntary choice amounting to self-abnegation.

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[22]   One of the most influential writers for Emily Dickinson was Elizabeth Barrett Browing, whose portrait was ne of three hanging on her bedroom wall, together with George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle. In a letter she wrote to Samuel Bowles: "if you touch her Grave, put one hand on the Head for me – her unmentioned Mourner" (J312, J593, J363).

(9)   She rose to His Requirement, – dropped
        The Playthings of her Life
        To take the honorable Work
        Of Woman and of Wife.

        If aught She missed in Her new Day
        Of Amplitude, or Awe,
        Or first Prospective, – or the Gold
        In using wore away,

        It lay unmentioned, – as the Sea
        Develops Pearl and Weed,
        But only to Himself – be known
        The Fathoms they abide. (J 732)

In the first stanza, marriage in women's lives is expected to mark adulthood and is depicted as a means of acquiring a social status, as suggested by the verb *to rise*. However, by the end of the line the poet has undercut her initial claim that the wife's new honourable position involves any real elevation. The verb *dropped* both applies to its object ("The Playthings of Her Life"), and, due to its end-line position, to the woman who drops all her expectations after the disappointment of the marriage. Such dissatisfaction is known "only to Himself". According to the roles of English grammar, *himself* should refer to a masculine entity and consequently to the husband. The grammatically most plausible interpretation turns out to be contextually unconvincing: the husband would know about his wife's dissatisfaction, while the wife herself would not be aware of her own state. On the basis of the rules governing the felicitous use of intensifiers, *Himself* can select an extra-contextually high ranked entity: it could refer to God as the highest ranked entity in the world, thus suggesting that only God knows her discontent.

However, this interpretation, although plausible, is not totally convincing, because it is not in line with the structure of the poem, where everything moves around the figure of the woman. As the second (and second to last) stanza is a continuation of the previous one, specifying what women imagine marriage should mean in their lives, the reader would expect the same topic to be maintained in the last one, there being no sign of a turn change. Furthermore, it is undeniable that a parallelism between the sea and the referent of *Himself* is suggested by the conjunction *as*: as the sea is aware of its treasure concealed in its abyss from everybody's sight,

so the referent of *Himself* is the only one who knows the woman's qualities buried in the innermost part of her *self*, unrecognised and forgotten ("unmentioned") by the external world. Were it not for the gender of the pronoun, the identification of *Himself* with the woman would be immediate: not only is she the topic of the entire poem, but she will be at the end the centre of the perspective through which the institution of marriage is seen. In this way, the parallelism with the sea is even more effective: the poet highlights the oceanic depth, breadth and wealth of life she does not reveal to others.

But why did Dickinson not use the feminine form? Probably for the same reason why she genders Elisabeth Barret Browning as a male, when addressed in her role of a poet. In the 19th century, and surely in Dickinson's society and community, women were often regarded as being hardly more serious than children, instinctive and emotive, but not rational. By using a masculine pronoun, the poet confers a masculine status on the woman to mark her as a subject of consciousness and power, that is, 'male' qualities in her times.

As a matter of fact, in Dickinson's poems there are just ten instances of *herself* which turns out to be the least frequent form of the *self*-paradigm, and only one in explicit relation to a woman: it cannot be casual that that happens with her muse, Elisabeth Barret Browning (J592). The feminine pronouns generally refer to Nature, Flowers, and Birds, sometimes as metaphors for women, or Emily Dickinson herself. An analysis of three poems may shed some light on the symbolic and poetic meaning conveyed by gendered pronouns.

In all three, Dickinson metaphorically identifies herself with the Bird and poetry with the bird's singing (*Her smile was shaped like other smiles* J514) and freedom (*They shut me up in Prose* J613). The *Bird* has *herself* as a coreference marker in J514 when it presents the poet-girl, who enthusiastically approaches poetry, from which she then withdraws remembering the suffering caused by previous experiences. Like the bird being hit by a bullet, the memories of previous frustration and incomprehension stop and make her baffled about her right and the possibility to 'sing'. The image of the song as beads scattered in the mud is particularly vivid.

(10)   Her smile was shaped like other smiles –
       The Dimples ran along –
       And still it hurt you, as some Bird
       Did hoist herself, to sing,

> Then recollect a Ball, she got –
> And hold upon the Twig,
> Convulsive, while the Music crashed –
> Like Beads – among the Bog – (P514)

Contrarily, the same image of the bird symbolising the poet in J613 is referred to by means of *himself*. Here the bird stands for the poet-adult, who is aware of what she wants and what she suffers, who is conscious of having been silenced and imprisoned in a male-dominated world of commonplace dullness, obliged to silently accept its values and its roles. But she also is aware that it was as futile as shutting up a bird in a pound, because a bird can easily escape a pound by flying away. And as easily, she let her imagination and creativity express themselves. The parallelism with her own life is striking: she shut herself up in her own room so as to prevent herself from assuming the roles society would impose on her, and thus be free to be a poet.

(11)   They shut me up in Prose –
     As when a little Girl
     They put me in the Closet –
     Because they liked me "still" –

     Still! Could themself have peeped –
     And seen my Brain – go round –
     They might as wise have lodged a Bird
     For Treason – in the Pound –

     Himself has but to will
     And easy as a Star
     Look down upon Captivity –
     And laugh – No more have I – (J613)

The link between the social and cultural role of the poet and a referential masculine pronoun is even more evident in *A Spider sewed at Night* (P1138), a dense and enigmatic vision of the poet-spider, working at night, as Dickinson is well known to have done. That Emily Dickinson identifies herself in the spider is undoubted: the spider is said to sew, as she often self-portraits herself in the creative act (Don't put up my Thread & Needle / I'll begin to Sow /When the Birds begin to whistle […] J617). It is not the only instance of the spider metaphor for the poet, but here the spider's art

is turned into an emblem of immortality. In other words, this poem, often described as a riddle, can be interpreted as a manifesto of the poetic art: the poet with only the guide of his (her) own inner vision sews his (her) meaning on the *tabula rasa* of the paper (Arc of White), with the self confidence that the essence of his (her) own words will be immortal. Out of no casualness does Dickinson refer to herself with a male pronoun in this declaration of hers as espousal of the idea of *l'art-pour-l'art ante litteram.*

(12)   A Spider sewed at Night
        Without a Light
        Upon an Arc of White.

        If Ruff it was of Dame
        Or Shroud of Gnome
        Himself himself inform. (J617)

4. Conclusions

Emily Dickinson withdrew from social and public life at the age of thirty-five, avoiding meeting strangers or even acquaintances. She left no biographical traces behind; her poems, though they number almost 1,800, are the only testimony to her private world. She was perfectly conscious of the power of the "Syllable" as soon as it is "delivered" (L342a), and equally aware that she used language to give voice to her creative ambition or imagination, but also to balance the contrasting aspects of her life. Being the daughter of a conservative Trinitarian in 19th century America, she knew she was expected to be a wife and a mother, but her ideals were against the conventions of her time and the Puritan and patriarchal society she lived in, which would deny her the right of being a poet. Her culture is a culture where gender designated difference, whose expression was controlled by hierarchical structures. Language can also be understood as a structure, and, like many other social structures of her time, a male-controlled realm. Thus, Emily Dickinson used language in an unpredictable and indeterminate way, apparently adhering to its norms, but practically endowing the standard pattern with unexpected functions and meanings the reader is required to decipher: that is, the reader has to build the *signifié* of the linguistic sign by means of inquiring into its *significant*. In other words, reading Dickinson's poetry turns into a 'signification process' leading to a new experience, that of the readers, thus achieving a "super-natural and lasting value" in Mukařovský's words (1940).

In her hands, the pronoun becomes a powerful instrument, if not weapon (*There is a word / Which bears a sword / can pierce an armed man* […] J8) with which to construct her identity (*a Columnar Self,* J789) as a woman poet in a male-hierarchically structured society and in a male world of literary and poetic language. Exploiting the possibility of pronouns to identify not exclusively biological sexes, but also to refer to the properties prototypically attributed to either of the two sexes or to the sexually unmarked and inanimate, she uses the neuter pronoun for the general, and the male pronoun to indicate a member or a representative of the male-world wielding social power and authority. Therefore, it is the male referential pronoun that designates her as a source of critical consciousness, as a self-confident poet, inasmuch as male is the wielder of control and authority, and male is the poet-type whose poetic creation is publicly recognised and socially accepted. Accordingly, the gender shifts from masculine to feminine, when Emily Dickinson represents herself as a would-be poet or even more impressively after the poetic creation (cf. J1339) when she gets back to her condition of a silent woman to whom an independent public voice is denied: *Remain for her – of rapture / But the humility.*

Obviously, a linguistic and structural analysis of poetry is not sufficient to understand its meaning exhaustively, and linguistic interpretations are not the only possible ones. What linguists can do is to delineate the 'limits of interpretation', by showing which interpretations are or are not motivated by the text and what the consequences of a particular interpretation are.

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Address: LETIZIA VEZZOSI, Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology, University of Florence, Via Santa Reparata 93, 50129 Firenze, Italy.
ORCID code: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7635-2657