
Features of Syntactic Disorders in Cummings' Poetry

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Résumé

En littérature, les transgressions des règles établies sont délibérées. Dans le langage des malades, les ruptures avec les normes linguistiques ne le sont pas, mais elles échappent plutôt au contrôle du malade qui s'exprime. En littérature, les transgressions sont appelées déviations ; dans la vie courante, elles relèvent du désordre langagier. Généralement, on ne raisonne pas en termes de désordre langagier lorsqu'on étudie les transgressions dans les œuvres littéraires. Mais lorsque les personnages sont des malades ou lorsque le thème développé est la folie, on peut se permettre de faire des analyses en termes de désordre linguistique. Widdowson a une fois fait allusion à ce qu'il a appelé la folie apparente de la poésie de Cummings.

Notre article, ancré dans le cadre général des troubles de la communication, essaie de montrer que les distinctions entre déviations en littérature et les désordres en pathologie ne sont pas toujours fondées. Il examine quelques poèmes de Cummings, classés comme poésie de la folie, et montre comment ils présentent certaines caractéristiques du désordre langagier. L'article prend aussi en compte d'autres poèmes de Cummings non classés comme poésie de la folie et montre que même ces poèmes, *a priori* sains, peuvent être considérés comme des cas de production du désordre langagier. Après avoir montré la similarité entre les déviations de Cummings et le désordre langagier, nous soutenons que le poète pourrait être en train d'imiter sciemment le discours pathologique.

Mots-clés: déviations, désordre langagier, poésie, (par)agrammatisme, communication.

Abstract

In literature, departures from established rules are deliberate. In the language of sick people, departures from linguistic rules are not deliberate, but beyond the control of the diseased speaker or writer. In literature, deliberate departures are called deviations or deviances. In everyday life, the non-deliberate departures are called disorders. Normally, it is not expected to argue in terms of language disorders when studying deviations in literary works. But when characters in literature are diseased people or when the theme developed is madness, we find a pretext to analyze rule-breakings in literature, especially in poetry, in terms of linguistic disorders. Widdowson once mentioned what he called "the apparent madness of Cummings' poetry".

Our paper, anchored within the broader framework of communication disorders, is an attempt to show that the distinctions between deviations in literary language and disorders in pathological language are not always relevant. It examines some of E. E. Cummings' poems classified as madness poetry, and shows how they share some features of linguistic disorders. The paper extends the study to other Cummings' poems, which are not labeled as madness poetry, and shows that even these *a priori* madness-free poems can be considered as instances of disordered language production. After showing similarities between Cummings' poetic language and linguistic disorders, we argue that the poet might be deliberately imitating the speech of sick people.

Keywords: deviations, disorders, poetry, (par)agrammatism, communication.

0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show that some deviations in Cummings' poems are similar to some features of pathological languages. In general, Cummings' poems exhibit many and diverse deviations from linguistic rules. Researches attesting their departure from accepted rules of syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology and lexicology abound. Among these researches, are worth mentioning Bloom (2003), a comprehensive and research guide presenting a biographical, critical, and bibliographical information on the author and his best

known poems or most important poems, and Mead (1975), a doctoral dissertation focused on the meaning of his sonnets. But the most prominent deviations of Cummings' poetry, apart from the transgressions of punctuation rules, seem to be syntactical.

Actually, Cummings, a prominent American modernist poet, is well known for his transgressions of conventional rules. His deviations are so eccentric that Widdowson (1986: 30) once underlined what he called "the apparent madness of Cummings' poetry". The mere fact of characterizing E.E. Cummings' poetry as "apparent madness," offers a good pretext to envisage the study of language disorders in his work. But there is a better argument: some of Cummings' poems like "am was. are leaves few this, is these a or", "there is a here and", " the way to hump a cow is not" and "n(o)w", are classified as madness poetry (see <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/poems/t/on-madness>). So it seems quite normal to study a pathological language in madness poetry or poetic madness, "a state of transcendent ecstasy or frenzy" (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 609)? In a paper entitled "Disordered Language in Creative Writing", Marshall and Gurd (1993) discussed some deviant productions in literature present also in pathological language. Tanner (2015) wrote an article entitled "Agrammatic and Nonsentential Prosody in E.E. Cummings' 'anyone lived in a pretty how town'". Though the word "Agrammatic" is used in the paper as simply synonymous to "that which is not grammatical" (according to the author himself), it makes it possible and legitimate to think about the study of language disorders in Cummings' poetry.

This paper will focus on the similarity between purposeful syntactic deviations in Cummings' poems and the syntactic errors committed by mentally sick people found in agrammatism and paragrammatism. These syntactic errors are found among others in aphasia, "an acquired language disorder which affects the speaker's ability to produce and understand spoken and written language" (Edwards & Knott, 1994:91).

Agrammatism is specific impairments of syntax. "In general, an error is agrammatic, when a necessary grammatical element is missing. The missing element could be an inflectional morpheme, a function word or an auxiliary or modal verb in a complex verb phrase." (Wallesch and Kertesz, 1993). Paragrammatism is a particular organization of sentence as a result of selection errors, ellipses, inversions and metaphesis of monemes. Agrammatic and paragrammatic features are some examples of syntactic features in language pathology, especially in aphasia. Cummings (2008: 346-7), Tissot et al (1973) and others have listed a number of features of agrammatism and paragrammatism. The syntactic features

considered in this paper, and listed below, are just some of the dominant features of agrammatism and paragrammatism displayed in E.E. Cummings' poetic work:

- Misuse of function words
- Absence of a necessary grammatical element
- Loss of agreement between person and form of the verb
- Violation of the rules governing the sequential organization of the sentence structure and sentence termination.
- Use of parenthetical clauses or phrases

To show the features of syntactic disorders in Cummings' poetry, we'll need to explain how the features listed above are illustrated by a number of poems we have selected from the author *Complete poems* (E. E. Cummings, 1994) that will be referred to as CP.

Deviations used by Cummings are intentional, contrary to syntactic impairment of diseased people. In general, deviations are apprehended through the theoretical framework of foregrounding. According to van Peer and Hakemulder (2006), it refers to specific linguistic devices, i.e., deviation and parallelism used in literary texts in a functional and condensed way. Writers need to use foregrounding in order to make prominent specific aspects of their writing and achieve a specific effect. Since both deviations and disorders pose a communication problem, our paper is anchored within the broader framework of communication disorders which includes language problems both in literature and pathology (Ferguson and Armstrong, 2009; ORLIKOFF R.F. et al, 2015; KENT, R.D., 2004). So apart from determining the similarity between features of language disorders and deviations in Cummings' poems, we'll show the meaning of the examples of deviations used to illustrate the features of syntactic disorders.

1. Misuse of function words

The misuse of function words consists mainly in transforming function words into non-function words. Examples of this transformation are apparent in Cummings' poetry in the following ways:

Function words such as "here", "if", "how", "why", "same", "not", "when" are used like nouns through a process of category shift. In the poem "there is a here and" (CP: 505), the adverb "here" is used twice as a noun in these first three lines: "there is **a here** and /**that here** was a /town (and the town is". In the poem "i like my body when it is with your" (CP: 218),

we have this line "i like its **hows**, i like to feel the spine" (fifth line) in which "how" is used as a noun after a possessive determiner and even inflected with the plural morpheme "s".

In the following lines from "we love each other very dearly" (CP: 577), the temporal adverb or conjunction "when" is turned to a noun and inflected with the plural morpheme "s":

and even(
we'll adventure the into
most immemorial of **whens**
)before (CP: 577)

In the same way, "why", "not" and "whom" are each used as a noun and inflected with the plural morpheme "s" in the following lines:

"the silent **whys** of such a deathlessness)" (CP:420:L6)

" **nots** are their **whys**" (CP:716:L22)

"a **whom** we make" (CP:716:L5)

The following line cumulates the disordered use of function words:

"through **sames** of **am** through **haves** of give" (CP:520:L2)

The adverb or invariable pronoun "same" shifts to noun category and takes even the plural morpheme *s*. The auxiliaries "be" and "have" are also transformed to nouns and "have" is even inflected with the plural morpheme "s".

One of the most cited poems, "anyone lived in a pretty how town", (CP:515) is illustrative of a number of agrammatic features noted:

Auxiliary "do" used as a noun in "he sang **his didn't** he danced **his did**." (CP:515:L4); auxiliary "be" (isn't) and adjective (or pronoun or adverb) "same" are preceded by the possessive adjective *their* and (consequently) used each as a noun in "they sowed **their isn't** they reaped **their same**" (CP:515:L7).

Function word "any" turned to noun in "anyone's **any** was all to her" (and "someone" and "everyone" turned to nouns and even inflected by plural inflexion "s" in "**someones** married their **everyones**" (CP:515:L17).

The adverb "never" is also turned to noun in "said their **nevers** they slept their dream" (20th line) and to adjective in "a **neverish** subchemistry of" (37th line) with the adjunction of the suffix "-ish". Another adverb turned into adjective is "how" in the first line "anyone lived in a pretty **how** town" where it is used as the determiner of "town".

Another example of the nominalization of function words is found with the defective "may" in the following lines from "SONG" (CP:776):

"but we've **the may**

(for you are in love
and i am)to sing,"

At first, one might think that "may" is a real noun designating the month of May and that the persons involved have that month of May to sing. But, as proved later in the same poem by the lines below, "may" is a defective verb used as a noun. Indeed, in the following lines, "must" is used in the same condition as "may":

"my darling:while
old worlds and young
(big little and all
worlds)merely have
the must to say"
(CP:776)

2. Absence of a necessary grammatical element

When the function words transformed into nouns are not inflected as nouns, and especially when they are preceded with a determiner (a, the or others), this misuse can be considered in certain cases as due to a lack of a necessary linguistic element, which here is probably a noun. A grammatical element can actually be any word necessary for a sentence or part of sentence to be grammatically correct. Here are some examples of omissions of necessary grammatical elements:

In the line "(over **the under** the gift of the earth of the sky" (8th line) from the poem "honour corruption villainy holiness" (CP: 661), a missing grammatical element may be supplied in order to redress the disordered syntactic structure. It might be a noun after the first "the" of the line, which does not, of course, automatically guarantee its semantic correctness. But that 8th line might also be perceived as containing a sort of two-fold structure in that it could mean "(**over the or under the** gift of the earth of the sky". In this case, the necessary grammatical element should be "or". A third possibility might be to consider that the poet was hesitating: after saying "over the", he revises and says "under the". In this last case, dots (...) should be missing to mark hesitation.

In some poems, there is a severe disordered use of definite and indefinite articles "the" and "a". These articles are used in such a way that it is difficult if not impossible to identify the words they determine at all. In the poem "on the Madam's best april the" (CP: 249), there

are examples of this sort. We note how "a" precedes "with" in "like Out of doors he's **a with**" (CP:249:L6) and how "the" precedes the indefinite article "a" in "eyes and making twice **the a** week" (CP:249:L7). In the line "of The what are", we note how "The" precedes the pronoun "what".

Sometimes, the impression of a missing element is just simply apparent but not real. In the following consecutive two lines of the same poem: "and her a I mean me a/Irish,cook but well oh don't" (L10 and L11), the first "a" is surprisingly followed by a pronoun; the second "a" ending a line is followed by a proper noun "Irish" beginning the following line. We might think that a noun is missing after the article. But we are here in a case of an insertion, after the article, of a hesitation parenthetical "i mean" intended to replace the faulty string "her a". It is not "her" but "me". But proceeding in this way, the poet succeeds in giving an impression of a real syntactic disorder. Later in the paper, we show a more effective use of parentheticals to give the impression of severe syntactic disorders.

A faulty impression of a missing element, after an article, is also given through the use of inversion as in the following lines (already mentioned above):

"and even (we'll adventure **the** into
most immemorial of whens) before" (CP: 577)

A grammatical element seems to be missing after the article "the", but "the" must be moved after the following word "into": "we'll adventure **into the** /most immemorial of whens". We will see that this has to do with the violation of the rules governing the sequential organization of the sentence structure and sentence termination.

3. Loss of agreement between person and form of the verb

The loss of agreement is part of the erroneous use of inflections. To achieve this, Cummings imitates the style of non-standard Englishes. In the line "**i likes** a certain party" (L4) of the poem "mr youse needn't be so sry" (CP:245), we note the inappropriate use of the inflection "-s" normally called for the third singular. We note twice the same use of this inflection with the verb "say" in the two lines "she says **i says** to her **i says** Sally/**i says**" (L13 and L14) of the poem "a blue woman with sticking out breasts hanging" (CP:216). In the lines "(as down someone/who's we ungrow)", the same inflection "-s" is used this time for the coined verb "ungrow" used with the first plural personal pronoun "we".

An example of inflection error different from agreement between person and number is found in the poem "am was. are leaves few this, is these a or" (CP:491) in the following lines: "more than two those that and that **noing** our/gone snow gone" (L7 and L8). In L7 exactly, "no" is inflected with "-ing".

4. Violation of the rules governing the sequential organization of the sentence structure and sentence termination.

Violations of the sequential organization of the sentence structure and sentence termination are found in Cummings' poetry. The syntactic disorders of his poetry are sometimes merely a non-respect of word order. The following short poem "sentinel robins two" (CP:746) illustrates this:

"sentinel robins **two**
guard me and you
and little house **this our**
from hate from fear
a which of slim of blue
of here will who
straight up into the where
so safe we are" (CP:746)

The first four lines can be reorganized in the following way:

two sentinel robins
guard me and you
and **this our** little house
from hate from fear

The last line "so safe we are" apparently appears as a simple and normal inversion that can be redressed as "we are so safe".

On the contrary, the three other lines are so disordered that they can't be reorganized in the same way.

The last two lines below of "i like my body when it is with your" (CP: 218), because of the absence of punctuations, commas in this case, seem to be syntactically incorrect

"and possibly i like the thrill
of under me you so quite new"

When reading these lines, we wonder at first what can be "the thrill of under me", until we realize that the poet means "the thrill of you so quite new under me".

The two lines can be reorganized in two ways:

1) and possibly i like the thrill
of you, so quite new, under me

2) and possibly i like the thrill
of you, under me, so quite new,

We can argue that the speaker in this poem considers that the most important thing is God, that after God, it is America and after America, he himself. So after God, after America, there is finally the speaker himself. But what legitimates this interpretation is not syntax but spatial arrangement of the first line in which the three key words "god", "america" and "i" are consecutive. This gives an impression of a ranking from the first to the last. To legitimate this interpretation, it is necessary to consider the first line as a self-sufficient unit. When we do so, we realize later that the second line is syntactically defective; because the verb "love" at the beginning of that line has no subject. We are thus led to the garden path, and we have to go back and find another path. It is only then that we discover that the pronoun "i" at the end of the first line must be its subject for the second line to be syntactically correct. When we focus only on the first line, we find another ambiguity due to the lack of punctuation. The word *god* may appear at first as modifying "america"; and the two lines may be read in the following way: "next, of course, to god america, i love you, land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh." Here, we have a problem: we couldn't identify the entity that comes next to "god america", and which is loved. At this point, we realize that "god" can't be a modifier of "america"; we understand that we have been led once more to a garden path. Then we stop and go back to try another reading of the line. All the ambiguities could have been avoided simply by the use of punctuations. Thus, syntactically, the two lines can be reorganized in the following way by only supplying punctuations and modifying lineation:

"next to, of course, god,
america, i love you, land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh."

By moving the word "America", the structure becomes clearer:

"next to god, of course, i love you america, land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh."

Another example is given by these lines of "ITEM":

L13. "and:she attacks her Lobster without
L14. feet mingle under the
L15. mercy."

At first, we read these lines as if the Lobster were without "feet"; as if the preposition "without" ending L13 and the noun feet beginning the following line L11 constitute a prepositional phrase: "without feet"; as if the poet were using an enjambment. But, if the reader considers that the Lobster is without feet, then the verb "mingle" would not have a subject. Then, it becomes clear enough that the subject of "mingle" is "feet". Here, we face another problem: the preposition "without" seems to stand alone and L13 may seem meaningless unless we interpret L13, L14 and L15 as meaning this: "she attacks her Lobster, avoiding feet to mingle under the mercy". Here, the Lobster seems to have feet if not the feet

of the man and woman involved in the poem. One way to reorganize these lines is to consider that L14 is a parenthetical line; after all, the maniacal use of parentheses, as we will see in the following and last section, is one of the characteristics of Cummings' poetry. So the four lines may be presented as follows:

L13. "and:she attacks her Lobster without

L14. (feet mingle under the)

L15. mercy."

In this way, we can read L13 and L15 without the parenthetical L14. We have the following syntactically correct sentence: and:she attacks her Lobster without mercy. We can also read L14 and L15 without L13. We also have a syntactically correct sentence: feet mingle under the mercy.

5. Use of parenthetical clauses or phrases

One of the most obvious characteristics of Cummings' poetry is his frequent use of parentheses. Parenthetical are obvious in that many of his poems are punctuated with parenthetical symbols. For Burton-Roberts (2006: 179), a parenthetical (P) is "an expression of which it can be argued that, while in some sense hosted by another expression (H), P makes no contribution to the structure of H."

Many parentheticals used by Cummings comply with this definition, in so far as when the parenthetical expression is suppressed, the structure of the expression remaining (the host expression) is not affected. But here, we'll deal with syntactic amalgamations. Dehe (2014: 3) underlines that syntactic amalgamations have been analyzed in terms of parenthesis and that they are constructions which lack a syntactic constituent, and instead have an "interrupting clause" (a concept from Kluck, 2011) in the position of the missing constituent. Two examples of syntactic amalgamation given by Lakoff (1974), who has pioneered this concept, are:

a. "John invited **you'll never guess how many people** to his party." (Lakoff 1974: 321)

b. "John is going to **I think it's Chicago** on Sunday." (George Lakoff, 1974: 324)

In Cummings' poetry, utterances of this kind are found. In the following lines from "god pity me whom(god distinctly has)" (CP: 125),

L2 "[...] sexual feather

L3 of your shall i say body?["..."]

the interrupting expression "shall i say" (L3) interrupts the natural continuity between the determiner "your" and the noun "body" that it determines. The supposed host entity should be "sexual feather of your body". The interrupting expression "shall i say" could be mistakenly considered as an ordinary parenthetical, but actually, this expression should normally be attached syntactically to the noun "body". So actually, the interrupting expression is "shall i say body?" and it should be considered as the real parenthetical clause. If it is suppressed from the host entity, the latter would be grammatically incomplete for the noun to follow the determiner would be missing. It would be crippled of the noun "body", and we shall obtain: "sexual feather/of your". The syntactic amalgamation is due to the fact that part of the component of the host entity ("sexual feather/of your body") is also part of the interrupting expression ("shall i say body?"). The syntactic amalgamation would have been avoided, had the author moved the expression "shall i say" after the noun "body". In this case, we would have obtained:

L2 [...] sexual feather

L3 of your body shall i say?["..."]

The reason for Cummings' preferring syntactic amalgamation over more grammatically correct form is clear. The intention is to make harder the understanding of his verses by deviating from syntactic norm or by giving the impression of ungrammaticality. Adding a parenthetical between a determiner and the noun it determines gives the impression of a serious syntactic problem.

A similar analysis can be given for the following examples of syntactic amalgamations. The interrupting clauses are highlighted in bold:

a)

L7 "at the present writing one still finds

L8 delighted fingers knitting for the **is it** Poles?"

b)

"next to that patch of darkness there's a **what**
is it oh yes chair but not Cassiopeia's"

c)

"with some delicious image the **a little strolling** lips and eyes inwardly crisping"

d)
 "i note how
 fatally toward
 twilight the **a little tilted** streets spill lazily
 multitudes out of final
 towers"

In all these cases, an article (definite or indefinite) is separated from the noun it determines by an interrupting expression. In a), "the" is separated from "poles" by the expression "is it". In b), the article "a" is separated from the noun "chair" by the expression "what is it oh yes". In c), the article "the" is separated from the noun "lips" by the expression "a little strolling". In d), the article "the" is separated from the noun "streets" by the expression "a little tilted". In all these cases, the noun from which the article is separated needs to be constitutively attached to the separating expression for the latter to be grammatically complete. The separation of an article from the noun creates a syntactic dislocation, aggravated in c) and d) by the fact that two articles appear to be consecutive: "the a". The purpose of the author is to create this effect of ungrammaticality.

Conclusion

This paper has showed that Cummings' poetry displays some features of syntactic disorders, found mainly in agrammatism and paragrammatism. The features of syntactic disorders are numerous, and we have just focused our research on syntactic disorders like the misuse of function words, the absence of a necessary grammatical element, the loss of agreement between person and form of the verb, the violation of the rules governing the sequential organization of the sentence structure and sentence termination and the use of parenthetical clauses or phrases. Other features of syntactic disorders, not investigated here, can be researched in the poems. These features, which include other agrammatic and paragrammatic disorders as well as syntactic disorders found in mental illness as glossolalia (a pseudo-language created by the mental patient himself), glossomania (a pseudo-language like glossolalia, but with no communicative purpose) and words salad (juxtapositions of words without no intention to communicate), need to be evidenced in Cummings' by a further research.

The evidence of syntactic features in Cummings' poetry that we gave is meant to show that it is possible to find a similarity between the disordered language involuntarily produced by people suffering from aphasia or mental illness and the linguistic deviations voluntarily produced by fiction writers. The positive outcome of our research is encouraging and calls for further investigations not only for the presence of other syntactic disorders, but also for semantic, morphological, phonological, lexical and pragmatic disorders.

The paper has also showed the strategy used by Cummings, in some cases, to produce his syntactic deviations. To identify a strategy producing a syntactic deviation means that the correct syntactic form can be restored. Consequently, if the correct syntactic form can be restored, then it follows that the defective form can finally be understood. Assuming that all the transgressions committed by Cummings are done on purpose on the basis of well defined strategies, which can be considered as an individual code, then, any of his disordered productions, yet to be understood, may be explainable or at least interpretable.

The interest in studying the similarity between language disorders and literary deviations is that such a similarity can open a good perspective in understanding the disordered and incomprehensible speech of the diseased. The argument is this: if it is possible for the reader or discourse analyst to identify the meaning of severely deviant language such as some lines from Cummings' poems, then, it might be also possible to make sense of severely disordered speech of diseased people. This is for the time being a hypothesis, which should be considered as the starting point of a different study.

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