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A Linguistic Analysis of Foregrounding In Selected Poems of E. E. Cummings: An Eclectic Approach

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze the forms and functions of foregrounding in twenty selected poems by the American poet E. E. Cummings (1894 – 1962). It is a hallmark of Cummings' poetry to make extensive use of non-conventional language for the creative construction of meaning. This has prompted an eclectic linguistic approach towards the interpretation of a selection of his poetry. Cummings' foregrounding techniques conform to his desire to introduce new ways of expression in the language. His poetic expression aims at rendering his poems exceedingly deviant but elegant: awkward at first reading with those linguistic violations, but eventually sophisticated as we come to see their underlying architecture. The suspension of dictionary meaning and conventional syntax and resort to a stylistic-cognitive-functional reading of his conceptual construals will not only uncover his messages but also build a holistic understanding of his frame (of thought) throughout the corpus and, by expansion, the scope of his production.

Previous studies have dealt with the language of Cummings, but the present study is a systematic attempt at displaying the interaction of Cummings' vast array of cognitive linguistic, functional grammatical, and stylistic features that formulate his linguistic foregrounding effects, employing an eclectic approach towards an interpretation of his language. The study incorporates the basic concepts in Cognitive Linguistics (such as Conceptual Metaphor Theory, figure/ground relationship, image schemas, force dynamics, trajector/landmark, mapping, mental spaces, conceptual metaphors), Functional Grammar (such as agency/transitivity), and Stylistics (such as foregrounding, texture, and the dominant). This may allow more insight into Cummings' language and a fuller understanding of his messages. It demonstrates the forms and functions of linguistic foregrounding in twenty representative poems and examines how language

expression is extended beyond conventional use to produce attentional effects and how a carefully constructed complex of foregrounding devices and strategies contribute to the themes and meanings of his poems. Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following research question: What does an analysis based on an eclectic cognitive-functional-stylistic approach reveal about foregrounding in the selected poems by E. E. Cummings?

The main findings of the study suggest that Cummings is disposed to deviational rather than non-deviational foregrounding. Within lexical deviation, the poet is disposed to lexical functional shifts and collocational clashes as well as to prototype derivation and compounding. The analysis of syntactic deviation and graphological deviation reveals that Cummings is more disposed to graphological than to syntactic deviation. The analysis of semantic deviation reveals that: first, Cummings' original metaphors are in essence conceptual in nature and could be conventionalized in the language some way or other, in view of the fact that that they satisfy two sources of meaningful conceptual structure in conventional metaphors as identified in Lakoff (1988, p. 121). Second, Cummings is disposed towards numerical hyperboles, for they bear important conceptual contents in terms of evoking mental spaces of infinity and transcendental unity.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Linguistics; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; E. E. Cummings; Foregrounding; Functional Grammar; Image Schema; Stylistics.

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