

Collocational Clash in Dylan Thomas's Altarwise Sonnets: A Pragmatic Analysis

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التصادم اللفظي في سونيات ديLAN توماس: تحليل براغماتي
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الملخص

تُعد سوناتات ديLAN توماس، أو "سوناتات الموت"، من أكثر السوناتات تعقيداً ودقّة، وذلك نتيجةً لمزجها بين صور ومواضيع متنوعة من الكتاب المقدس، وعلم النفس الفرويدي، واليوناني، والمصري، والجنسي؛ وقد حظيت هذه السوناتات باهتمام واسع في الدراسات الأدبية، ولكن ليس بالقدر الكافي في الدراسات اللغوية. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل السوناتات من منظور لغوي باستخدام منهجين متكاملين، يتمثل المنهج الأول في التحليل المكوني للتناقضات اللفظية في السوناتات، أي المصطلحات المتناقضة وغير المترابطة التي تُدمج معاً والتي لا تتجاوز عادةً، يهدف هذا المنهج إلى إبراز تعقيد السوناتات، مما يستدعي لاحقاً تحليلاً تداولياً باستخدام نظرية الموائمة لسبيربر وويلسون؛ تقوم هذه النظرية على فكرة أنه في سعي القارئ إلى تحقيق الصلة، ينبغي أن يحصل على أكبر قدر من التأثيرات المعرفية بأقل جهد إدراكي ممكن أو بجهد متوازن، ومع ذلك، فإن هذه الحاجة لا تتحقق أثناء تفسير هذا المحتوى شديد التعقيد، الأمر الذي يستدعي تفسيراً مختلفاً وإعادة النظر في مفهوم الأمثلية. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** تلازم، صدامات، مكونات، تحليل، صلة، أمثلية، معرفة، إدراك.

Abstract

Dylan Thoma's Altarwise sonnets or 'The Death sonnets' are regarded as one of the most intricate and complex sonnets as a result of the mixture of a variety of biblical, Freudian, Greek, Egyptian and sexual images and themes. The sonnets have been tackled extensively in literature studies but not enough in Linguistic. The present study attempts to analyze the sonnets from a linguistic perspective using two approaches that complement one another. The first is through componential analysis of the collocational clashes of the sonnets, that is the contradicted and unrelated terms that are merged together and which do not normally collocate. This approach is meant to assert the complexity of the sonnets which later invites a pragmatic analysis using Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson. The theory is based on the idea that in the search of relevance, readers should gain the greatest amount of cognitive effects with the least or a balanced amount of effort. Yet, such need is not fulfilled during the interpretation

of such highly complex content which invites a different explanation and a reconsideration of the notion of optimality.

Key words: collocational, clashes, componential, analysis, relevance, optimality, cognitive, cognitive.

Introduction:

The Altarwise sonnets by Dylan Thomas, or the death sonnets, (published in 1936) are a sequence of ten sonnets with fourteen lines but with no regular rhyming scheme. The title is taken from the opening of the first sonnet. They are generally regarded as Thomas's most obscure and difficult work. This obscurity lies in the way Dylan Thomas had interwoven images, which are compatible and incompatible, together. Biblical, Christian, Freud, astrological, sexual, and Greek mythological images and metaphors are mixed together in a unique style. Many poets and critics have commented upon Thomas's poetic method. Shapiro (1966) notes the metaphorical "riddles" which are characteristic of Thomas, and which are particularly salient in Altarwise by Owl-light. While Kleinman (1963) calls "Alterwise by Owl-Light" 'The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas', and is confident that through Thomas's confusion there is hope.

From a literary point of view, the sonnets have been extensively and widely analyzed. However, from a linguistic perspective such a claim cannot be made. In this paper, the sonnets will be analyzed pragmatically using Relevance theory by Wilson and Sperber (2002) with the assistance of a componential analysis of the collocational clashes present in the sonnets, in which, an attempt at explanation of the formation of odd collocations is given.

Research problem:

As Relevance theory by Wilson and Sperber (2002) deals specifically with the estimation of cognitive effect and effort, Alterwise Sonnets with its oddity and highly complex structure can challenge the notion of optimality and lead to the reconsideration of such a notion when it applies to poetry. Yet, such oddity and ambiguity must first be examined and verified and for this reason a componential analysis is made in order to evaluate the intensity of the collocational clashes in the sonnets that can best linguistically describes its oddity.

Research questions:

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. How can the oddity of the sonnets be explained from a pragmatic perspective?
2. How can the notion of optimality from a relevance theoretic perspective apply to the sonnets in particular and poetry in general?
3. How can collocational clashes in the sonnets be analyzed?

Aim of the study:

The aim of this study is to provide a pragmatic analysis from a relevance theoretic point of view and evaluate the applicability of the notion of optimality and cognitive

effect and effort to a type of poetry that is highly complex such as the death sonnets and to similar cases in general.

Theoretical background:

i. Collocations and collocational clash:

Raymaond Firth argues that we can know a word from the company it keeps, this keeping company is called 'collocation'. Collocation is a sequence of words or terms co-occur more than would be expected by chance (Palmer, 1976). Simpson (1997) states that a significant chunk of the meaning of a word is derived from the syntagmatic relationships into which it conventionally enters. In other words, collocation refers to the grammatical combination of lexemes.

In English, there are six types of collocation:

1. Adjective + noun. Such as heavy rain not high rain, sweet dreams not nice dreams, blond hair not blond door.
2. Noun + noun. Such as a school of whales not a flock of whales, a herd of cows not a flock of cows, and a banquet of flowers not a pack of flowers.
3. Verb + noun. Such as do your homework not make your homework, catch a bus not follow a bus, and make a mistake not do a mistake.
4. Adverb + adjective. Such as highly successful, deeply concerned, and seriously damaged.
5. Verb + a prepositional phrase or preposition. Such as run out off money, make up your mind, insist on, accuse of, and different from.
6. Verb + adverb. Such as pull steadily and whisper softly.

In poetry, there is a deviation from the linguistic standard norms and the standard choices of words, this deviation adds the creative touch needed in any artistic work in which the artist or the poet practices what is called the 'poetic license' that allows him/her to deviate from the norm at one or more than one linguistic level. Deviations can be found at the graphological level, the morphological level, the phonological level, pragmatic level, the narrative style, and at the semantic level. One of the types of deviations at the semantic level is referred to as 'Collocation clash' which underpins many of the creative turns of language, traditionally referred to as metaphors, images, and figures of speech (Simpson, 1997).

ii. Componential analysis:

Componential analysis is an approach that describes word meanings as a combination of elementary meaning components called semantic features or semantic components. One influential approach, much criticized but constantly reborn, is to think of the meaning of a word as being a more or less complex structure, built up out of combinations of simpler, or more primitive, units of meaning, a simple example would be the analysis of woman as [ADULT] [HUMAN] [FEMALE]. Such 'componential' or 'atomistic' approaches come in a variety of types, depending on what is claimed regarding the nature of the analysis, the identity and nature of the units,

how they are combined, and what aspects of word meaning are to be explained by them. (D. Geeraerts, 2006)

According to Fall (2007), componential analysis is the most general of the three models. It says that we can describe meanings, meaning relationships (like entailment) and the grammatical behavior of word classes by analyzing word meanings into meaning components. Some of these meaning components correspond to words of the language and some do not. This analysis procedure is called lexical decomposition. For example:

horse [+animate, +quadruped, +equine, +adult, ±female]

mare [+animate, +quadruped, +equine, +adult, +female]

stallion [+animate, +quadruped, +equine, +adult, -female]

As one of the reasons of using such an approach is to analyze word meaning, componential analysis will be used in this paper to explain the oddity of the sonnets, or, in linguistic terms, the collocational clashes.

iii. Relevance theory:

Sperber and Wilson (1986) have proposed a pragmatic framework for the study of cognition based on the idea that human communication relies heavily on inferences and they believe that the text of a message is only a clue that prompts the audience to investigate relevant aspects. To explain the cognitive process that takes place in humans' minds, relevance theorists proposed several notions that combine together to explain how communicators (hearers or readers) reach the intended meaning as well as seek relevance. They proposed that communicators will seek relevance, that is relating to the content, through obtaining cognitive effects that could either be derivation of a contextual implication (conclusions made out of the context and the text), strengthening of an existing assumption, or revision or abandonment of an already existing one. Such a process will be achieved through the treatment of the explicit side (explicature) of the content via reference assignment and disambiguation, followed by a treatment of the implicit side (implicature) via forming a number of possible assumptions about the intended meaning and testing them in relation to the cognitive effect and effort. Yet, the overall procedure is governed by the balance between the cognitive effect and effort with an inclination to increase the effect and lower the effort which signifies that the content is optimally relevant to the communicators (Wilson and Sperber 2002, Wilson and Sperber 2004, Wilson 2016, Allot 2013).

In this study, an attempt at explaining the cognitive process that invites the readers to read and understand the Death Sonnets regardless the fact that they are one of the most complex sonnets in relation to their structure as well as meaning.

Framework of the analysis:

As the sonnets are full collocational clashes, three clashes from each sonnet are selected and analyzed by means of the componential analysis as used in Simpson (1997). The lexemes or the words are categorized according to either the presence (which is symbolized by '+') or the absence (symbolized by '-') of certain categorical

features. Such features, consequently, determine the acceptability or the oddity of their combination with other lexemes or words. Whenever needed, the oddity of the combination or the match is going to be explained. Following the componential analysis, a pragmatic analysis is given but for the entire sonnets as one unit rather than separated ones represented by the use of the cognitive model given in relevance theory by Wilson and Sperber (2002).

Altarwise by owl-light

I

Altarwise by owl-light in the halfway-house The gentleman lay graveward with his furies: Abaddon in the hang-nail cracked from Adam, And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies, 5.

The atlas-eater with a jaw for news, Bit out the mandrake with tomorrow's scream.

Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds, Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg, With bones unbuttoned to the halfway winds, 10.

Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg, scraped at my cradle in a walking word That night of time under the Christward shelter, I am the long world's gentleman, he said, and share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

II

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history; The child that sucketh long is shooting up, the planet-ducted pelican of circles Weans on an artery the gender's strip; 5.

Child of the short spark in a shapeless country Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle; The horizontal cross- bones of Abaddon, You by the cavern over the black stairs, Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam, 10.

And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars; Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent, are but the roots of nettles and of feathers Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement and hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers.

III

First there was the lamb on knocking knees, and three dead seasons on a climbing grave That Adam's wither in a flock of horns, Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve, 5.

Horned down with skull foot and the skull of toes on thunderous pavements in the garden time; Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van, And, Rip Van Winkle from a timeless cradle, 10

Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone; The black ram, shuffling of the year, old winter, alone alive among his mutton fold, we rung our weathering changes on the ladder, Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed.

IV

What is the metre of the dictionary?

The size of genesis? the short spark's gender? Shade without shape? the shape of Pharaoh's echo? (My shape of age nagging the wounded whisper).

Which sixth of wind blew out the burning gentry?

(Questions are hunchbacks to the poker marrow). What of a bamboo man among your acres?

Corset the boneyard for a crooked lad? Button your bodice on a hump of splinters, 10.

My camel's eye will needle through the shroud.

Love's a reflection of the mushroom features, Stills snapped by night in the bread-sided field, once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures, Ark-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood.

V

And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel, From Jesu's sleeve trumped up the king of spots, The sheath decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart; Said the fake gentleman in suit of spades, 5.

Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle, rose my Byzantine Adam in the night; For loss of blood I fell on Ishmael's plain, Under the milky mushrooms slew my hunger, A climbing sea from Asia had me down 10.

And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair; Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa by waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil and sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw.

VI

Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater, He in a book of water tallow-eyed by lava's light split through the oyster vowels and burned sea silence on a wick of words: 5

Pluck, cock, my sea eye, said medusa's scripture, Lop, love, my fork tongue, said the pin-hilled nettle; And love plucked out the stinging siren's eye, old cock from nowhere lopped the minstrel tongue till tallow I blew from the wax's tower 10

The fats of midnight when the salt was singing; Adam, time's joker, on a witch of cardboard Spelt out the seven seas, an evil index, The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the dead weed Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of man wax.

VII

Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice, A Bible- Leaved of all the written woods Strip to this tree: a rocking alphabet, Genesis in the root, the scarecrow word, 5

And one light's language in the book of trees; Doom on deniers at the wind-turned statement.

Time's tune my ladies with the teats of music, the scaled sea-sewers, fix in a naked sponge Who sucks the bell-voiced Adam out of magic, 10.

Time, milk, and magic, from the world beginning.

Time is the tune my ladies lend their heartbreak, from bald pavilions and the house of bread Time tracks the sound of shape on man and cloud, on rose and icicle the ringing handprint.

VIII

This was the crucifixion on the mountain, Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallows grave as tarred with blood as the

bright thorns I wept; The world's my wound, God's Mary in her grief, 5

Bent like three trees and bird-pepped through her shift, with pins for teardrops is the long wound's woman.

This was the sky, Jack Christ, each minstrel angle Drove in the heaven-driven of the nails till the three-colored rainbow from my nipples 10

From pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked world.

I by the tree of thieves, all glory's sawbones Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute, and by this blow clock witness of the sun Suffer the heaven's children through my heartbeat.

IX

From the oracular archives and the parchment, Prophets and fiber kings in oil and letter, The lamped calligrapher, the queen in splints, Buckle to lint and cloth their natron footsteps, 5

Draw on the glove of prints, dead Cairo's henna Pour like a halo on the caps and serpents.

This was the resurrection in the desert, Death from a bandage, rants the mask of scholars Gold on such features, and the linen spirit 10

Weds my long gentleman to dusts and furies; With priests

and pharaoh bed my gentle wound, World in the sand, on the triangle landscape, With stones of odyssey for ash and garland and rivers of the dead around my neck.

X

Let the tale's sailor from a Christian voyage Atlas wise hold halfway off the dummy bay Time's ship-racked gospel on the globe I balance: So, shall winged harbors through the rock birds' eyes 5

Spot the blown word, and on the seas, I image December's thorn screwed in a brow of holly.

Let the first Peter from a rainbow's quay rail Ask the tall fish swept from the bible east, what rhubarb man peeled in

her foam-blue channel 10

Has sown a flying garden round that sea-ghost?

Green as beginning, let the garden diving Soar, with its two bark towers, to that Day When the worm builds with the gold straws of venom My nest of mercies in the rude, red tree. (Riley, 1973).

The analysis:

In this study, the analysis is represented by two approaches, the first one is the componential analysis of the collocational clashes of the sonnets and the second approach is the pragmatic analysis represented by the relevance theoretic approach which is the main aim of the study.

1. Componential analysis, collocational clashes:

Sonnet I

1. Bones unbuttoned: bones can collocate with loosen or break, as bones can be loose or can be broken [+animate]. While the verb unbutton collocates with clothes [-animate].
2. Tomorrow's scream: usually tomorrow [+positive] collocates with words that refer to the hope of a new day. While scream is [- positive, +negative].
3. Walking word: the verb 'walks' [+motion, +animate] can't collocate with 'word' [-motion, -animate].

Sonnet II:

1. Shapeless country: countries [+shape] have defined shapes, can not collocate with 'shapeless'.
2. Rung bone and blade: rung refers to the short bar that form the horizontal support of the step of a ladder [-animate], while bone is [+animate].
3. Hollow agent: things and object can be hollow [-animate, -human], while agent refers to the person who performs duties for another [+animate, +human].

Sonnet III:

1. Climbing grave: climb is an action that can be performed by a human or an animal [+motion, +animate], while grave is neither [-motion, -animate].
2. Thunderous pavements: as thunder is a weather phenomenon [+natural, +sound, +loud] it can't collocate with pavement [-natural, -sound, -loud].
3. Wrinkled undertakers van: wrinkled is usually a feature of an aged human face [+human], which can't be used to describe objects like vans which is [-human, +vehicle].

Sonnet IV:

1. Wounded whisper: wound collocate with what can be wounded [+flesh, +pain, -sound, -speech], while whisper is [+sound, +human, +speech].
2. Crooked lad: things can be crooked not humans, so it is [-animate, -straight], while lad is [+human, +male, +animate].
3. My camel's eye: in this case, it is expected to find 'my eye' not 'my camel's eye'. However, 'camel eye' is a metaphor that refer to a very narrow opening, [+abstract, -human], while my is [+human, -abstract].

Sonnet V:

1. A climbing sea: climb as a verb is [+movement, +animate, +physical effort], but the sea can't climb or move in the sense of climbing [-movement, -animate, -physical effort].

2. Black-tongued: tongue is described as red or pink, but rarely as black as no inner flesh of a human being can be black, thus the tongue is [+red, +pink].
3. Waste sea: in order to waste something, it must be owned [+ human agent, +ownership, +intentional] while seas are [-human agent, -ownership, -intentional], as 'sea' cannot be owned and cannot have intention.

Sonnet VI:

1. Book of water: book is [+solid, -liquid], while water [- solid, +liquid].
2. Burned sea silence: sea silence can be said to refer to the quietness of the sea, however, seas can't be burned. The act of burning requires an object that is [+concrete, +flammable, + dry, or, + fuel], while silence is [- flammable, -dry].
3. Stinging siren's eye: the act of stinging implies the presence of a needle, needle of a bee, an insect, a thorn that can cause harm [+sharp, +needle, +animate, +harm], eye is [-needle, -sharp, -harm].

Sonnet VII:

1. Rocking alphabet: rock imply moving backward and forward of an object [+motion, + concrete, -abstract] while alphabet is [-motion, -concrete, + abstract].
2. Book of trees: book is [+ words, +written, - animate], while tree is [-written, +animate]
3. Ringing handprint: ringing is an action by a ring [+motion, + sound, +audible], while the handprint is [-sound, -audible].

Sonnet VIII:

1. Crucifixion of the mountain: crucifixion is a capital punishment in which the victim is nailed to a beam, thus, it is an act of killing that requires a victim [+killing, +victim, +human], while the mountain is [-killing, -victim, -human].
2. Time's nerve: time is an [+abstract, +concept], while nerve is [- concept, +concrete, +physical].
3. Mountain minute: mountain is [+concrete, -concept], while minute is [-concrete, +concept].

Sonnet IX:

1. Oracular archives: oracles were very much influential at ancient times, especially in Greek mythology, sought for prophecies and wise advices. However, as they speak as a result of the impulse of the moment, they had no archives. As archives are documents for facts, besides the historical gap in the etymology between the two. Thus, oracular is [+prophecy, +immediate, -factual, +ancient], while archives are [-prophecy, -immediate, +factual, -ancient].
2. Linen spirit: linen is a type of fabric, thus, it is [+concrete, +visible, -human], while spirit is [-concrete, -visible, +human].
3. Weds my long gentleman to dusts and furies: any wedding requires a man and a woman, thus, dusts are [-human, -animate] and furies (in Greek mythology, they are three terrible female spirits with snaky hair who punish the doers of unavenged

crimes) are [-human, +spirit, +punishment], while wed is [+human, -punishment, +celebration].

Sonnet X:

1. Flying garden: the act of flying is performed by a [+animate, +wings, +movement], while the garden is [+animate, -wings, -movement].
2. Straws of venom: straws are dried stalks of grain, used especially as fodder or as material for thatching, packing, or weaving, thus, they are [+edible, -poisonous], while venom is [-edible, +poisonous].
3. Nest of mercies: nest is made of straws, it is [+concrete, -concept], while mercy is [-concrete, +concept].

All the above collocational clashes signify the obscurity of Thomas's interwoven metaphors and images. Such metaphors and images can be viewed as a match between the biblical, Christian, sexual, Freudian and Greek mythological connotations. 'Walking dead, my camel's eye, crucifixion of the mountain, flying garden, and nest of mercies' can be understood as carrying biblical and Christian connotations. 'Bones unattached, rung bone and blade, and linen spirit' are viewed as having Freudian connotations. While 'hollow agent, oracular archives, siren's stinging eye and straws of venom' can have Greek mythological connotations. Besides, sexual metaphors and images, they can be observed in 'tomorrow's scream, climbing grave, book of water, and burned sea silence'. Componential analysis

2. Pragmatic Analysis, Relevance theoretic analysis:

As the complexity of the sonnets' structure is now asserted through the componential analysis that signifies the collocational clashes, the main goal of the pragmatic analysis is to explain the reason why readers are willing to read and try to understand (interpret) a structure that is highly complex. Cognitive effort is needed for two goals. The first is in the treatment of explicators and the second one is the treatment of implicature and seeking relevance. In the treatment of the explicators a high amount of cognitive effort is required in the disambiguation process and the enrichment of vague terms as a result of the combination of all the biblical, sexual, Freudian, Greek and ancient Egyptian images. The collocational clashes cause a great confusion, and this confusion will hinder the attempt of obtaining cognitive effects and altering the cognitive environment. In such a case, probably, no abandonment, revision or strengthening of former assumptions happen nor formation of new ones. Thus, we argue that the content is far from being optimally relevant as the only way in which it could be is when the readers obtain high cognitive effects with the least amount of effort or in less better circumstances a balanced effort and effect. Thus, why would readers around the world are willing to exert such a great amount of cognitive effort for interpreting such a complex and odd content and for no significant amount of effect and what effects in such a case are obtained?

One possible explanation in relevance theoretic terms would be the challenge itself and the excitement of dissecting a complex and complicated art work. In such a

case, the excitement as well as the success of dissecting the sonnets are the cognitive effects that may alter the cognitive environment of the readers through increasing their confidence in themselves. Another possible explanation is the intended confusion, the confusion that can shake the cognitive environment and invite the readers to reconsider their reality which signifies the poet success in transmitting his inner chaos, which summarizes the implied meaning or the implicature, and make readers relate to it. Yet, in both cases the content is far from being optimally relevant as the cognitive effort is too high as compared to the cognitive effect. For this reason, we argue that in cases of poetry in general and the highly complicated one in particular, the notion of optimality is suspended as the well the needed balance between the cognitive effect and effort and that such a type of art and creative work cannot be treated as the normal and casual type of communication is treated in relevance theoretic terms.

Conclusion:

Any poetic work must be established on the ground of meaningful creativity. Such a creativity is understood as foregrounding or deviation from the standard linguistic norm in the choices of words. In Dylan Thomas's Altarwise sonnets, such deviations are found the most at the word and behind the word levels. Thus, we find the themes of life, death, birth, childhood, loss of innocence, hypocrisy which are represented by the complex images are interwoven in a way that puzzles the readers leaving them in an exhausting search of meaning and relevance. However, at the linguistic level such a structure could be dissected through the componential analysis which signifies the highly creative style of the poet. Yet, no art or creative work can have an audience if no one can relate to it. But, taking into consideration that the Death Sonnets are very much famous, tells us that a lot have relate to it. This relevance can be explained in Relevance theory but by giving a new argument and a new approach that challenges the main notion in the theory, that is the notion of optimality. Thus, the main conclusion in this study is that the notion of optimality is suspended when a highly complex art work is at hand and that no readers are willing to exert a high amount of cognitive effort with no great cognitive effort. The match of incompatible words is referred to as a collocational clash, and in such clashes lies the creativity, obscurity, and uniqueness of the work. For this reason, most interpretations of Thomas's work were directed to explaining the main idea, so does the present study and so will those who are always interested in poetry and artistic work.

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