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Personality Reflection:
A Linguistic Study of E.E. Cummings'
'next to of course god America i' and 'nobody loses all the time'

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Introduction

Modern linguistics has opened a way for the use of the concept of communicative competence in literary studies. This angle of literary examination involves objectively describing observed facts and what language does in certain circumstances. Chomsky notion of *competence* applies to the sum total of what the individual native speaker knows about his language and its rules, while the contrasting notion, *performance*, applies to the actuality of the use of language by the individual native speaker, which gives rise to the variety in usage by individuals, with circumstances of mood, temperament, social experience as modifying factors. This kind of study demands a detailed knowledge of the mechanics of the English language so as to be able to describe correctly the functions of the elements of grammar and the relationship of one element to another. Many linguists question the relevance of these linguistic theory to the teaching of language, but Wilkins insists on its relevance, saying that '... it is hard to imagine that language can ever be taught without reference to the available language descriptions (qtd. in Agbedo 166).

Stubbs exhaustively discusses the relevance of linguistic description to language teaching. This, according to him, 'includes the provision of descriptive information and precise ways of talking about aspects of language which are of interest to the educationist, for example '... literary language and discussion of language disordered children (qtd. in Agbedo 167)

Based on this premise, I have chosen to study two poems by E.E. Cummings, whose desire for individuality and freedom, gave him a peculiar identity which is so obviously reflected in his works. Cummings believes in the rights and freedom of the individual. His struggles in his own right helped to underscore the general cry for world recognition of human rights and freedom. In 1922, Cummings encapsulated his experiences in a novel entitled *The Enormous Room*, which was described as the first significant statement of his life-long dedication to individual freedom and his opposition to the

dehumanizing forces he saw in the modern world. His other works include his first volume of poetry *Tulips and Chimneys*. He also published *XLI Poems*. His plays include *Eimi* which is a description of his journey to Russia. He is said to be a love poet in the romantic tradition; he celebrated families, parents, children, fun and old fashioned virtues. He admired youth, spring and all things natural, but he hated automatic patriotism and intellectualism which he believed stiles man's ability to feel deeply. In his quaint nature, he was said to have shunned electricity, hated radio and television and called packaged food 'Battle Creek Seaweed.' It is not surprising, therefore, that he has transferred all these traits to his writings using as many linguistic and typographical, signals to convey his messages. His style is described as eccentric and playful and is demonstrated in an unusual typography, odd spellings and deliberate grammatical tricks. This has attracted this writer to authenticate these claims or disclaim them, hence, a selection of two of his poems for a close study. His titles are philosophical, for example 'nobody loses all the time' and he flouts the word order arrangement in the English language code in his other poem, 'next to of course god America i,' which is also telegraphic. The poet leaves room for manipulation of punctuation marks according to how any reader feels. This study will examine the graphological, phonological, syntactical and semantic signals embodied in these poems and their linguistic significance to the poems.

Graphological Representation

It is this level that portrays E.E. Cummings' personality. The convention of punctuation in capitalization of titles is flagrantly violated. There are neither apt applications of capitalization nor punctuation marks used. He punctuates as a matter of choice and desire and not of convention or compliance to language code system. The poem 'next to of course god America i,' is a poem of 14 lines, with lines 1 to 13 enclosed in inverted commas. Only line 14 has an atom of punctuation and capitalization. Such application of inverted commas parenthesis, apart from occasions of marking off the direct words of the speaker, usually indicates that whatever has been so enclosed should not be taken literally, for example in 'next to of course god America i'

'next to of course god America i

say can you see by the dawn's early mry
 country 'tis of centuries come and go
 and are no more what of it we should worry
 in every language even dead and dumb
 thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gory
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
 why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy
 dead
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter they did not stop to think
 they died instead
 then shall the voice of liberty be mute?
 He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

It pleases Cummings to apply a question mark at the end of the poem and start the next line with a capital 'H' for 'he'; and a full stop after that sentence and again start the next sentence with a capital 'A' for 'and,' and leave out a full stop at the end of that sentence. The poem is actually a demonstration of punctuational inconsistency which has to do with his disapproval of conventionality. He has only considered the use of contraction in *'tis*, line 4 and genitive marker in *dawn's* (3) admitting that it is of ancient origin. This paucity of regular punctuation marks is akin to the speed and rush with which American citizens move to death in defence of their beloved country. The next few lines show evidence of this:

why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy
 dead who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter (lines 9-11)

The same graphological features are present in Cummings' next poem 'nobody loses all the time' - paucity of regular punctuation marks, example, full stops, commas, etc. The effect of this paucity is the lack of guidance in the rendition of such a work. A poem that runs through six stanzas of six lines each has no demarcation of sentences. Not only would there be difficulty of rendition, the indiscriminate application of the punctuation marks by any reader would give different meanings. The only part of the poem where it pleases Cummings to use capital letters is:

Into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could
 sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself which
 (lines 4&5)

His application of capital letters in line 5 is radical. If 'McCann He Was

A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell Itself were meant to be a title, he violates the convention of using capitals for non-content words like the article 'a.' Uncle Sol beginning with capital letters is consistent perhaps because he respects his uncle and so wants to keep to convention and perhaps he now takes the two words Uncle Sol as a proper noun. There are also irregular line lengths. Some stanzas bear long lines like lines 26-31 of stanza 5 as opposed to short lines of stanzas 3 & 4 lines 14-25. While the short lines describe the momentous short ventures Sol undertook which ended in failures, the stanza of long lines describe an unexpected success that turned up on the funeral day of Uncle Sol. For example stanza 3, lines 14-19 are short

my uncle Sol's farm
 failed because the chickens
 ate the vegetables so
 my uncle Sol had a
 chicken farm till the
 skunks ate the chickens when

As opposed to stanza 5 (lines 26-35)

or by drowning himself in the water tank
 but somebody who'd given my uncle Sol a Victor
 Victrola and records while he lived presented to
 him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a scrumptious not to
 mention splendid funeral with
 tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and
 lines 26-35

Syntactic Representation

The title of 'next to of course god america i' is very startling. The preposition 'next to' should have had its object 'god' immediately after it i.e. prep +NP. Rather, a disjunct marker 'of course' which has a grammatical privilege of occurrence either at the beginning of the sentence or at the terminal position, now finds itself separating a preposition from its object. The adjacent positioning of 'god' and 'america' without the verb *to be* makes the title telegraphic and elliptical. However, Cummings by this structural engineering of words has positioned and deified 'america as a god and which must be worshipped. The language of the poem constitutes a direct address to 'america' as if it were a god.

next to of course god america I
 love you land of the pilgrims and so forth oh say can you see by the
 dawn's early my
 lines 1-3.

The personal pronouns: i, you, thy, we, they and possessive adjective 'my' indicate the speaker and the addressee. In some places 'these' and 'they' make references to some 'american' citizens. The third person singular male 'He' which comes after the enclosed poem makes comment about the action of the speaker.

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water
 (line 14).

Full sentences and rhetoric questions abound in this poem without full stops or question marks to demarcate one from the other:

why talk of beauty what could be more beauty
 ful than these heroic dead
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
 (9-11).

Two question marks ought to be inserted in the above lines but Cummings ignores them to show the speed with which the citizens rush to unwarranted death occasioned by their stupid excessive love and automatic display of patriotism which Cummings objects to in:

They did not stop to think they died instead
 (line 12)

To show their patriotism to 'america':

Thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gory
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
 (lines 8-9)

The pattern emerging from the above is

by + {
 gory
 jingo
 gee
 gosh
 gum

The five NPs are syntactically related to the preposition 'by' and are semantically related under the general feature /+excitement/, /+impromptu/. Although 'gory' is extratextually and antonymously

related to the other four NPs, Cummings places them in the same parallel structure and urges a relationship between them. Thus, intratextually, the semantic opposition between the NPs is neutralized. Cummings shows the result of the sudden upsurge of the excitement and eagerness in the NP 'gory' which makes the citizens rush into bloody battle and violence which Cummings sees as senseless.

Phonologically, the four out of the five NPs share the same initial phoneme of velar plosive /g/ in gory /gɔ:ri/, gosh /gɔ:/:, gum /gʌm/, creating a phonological bond between them and the NP that starts with a palato-alveolar /dʒ/ in jingo /dʒɪŋəʊ/. These syntactic, phonological and semantic levels coverage and reinforce each other.

Cummings uses startling collocations, for example;

Why talk of beauty what could be more beauti
ful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
(lines 9-11)

The ironical claim of 'beauty' in loss is very startling. Cummings ironically and satirically sees nothing comparatively more beautiful than heroic death. This is sarcastic because there is no beauty in pain and death especially of those who 'rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter.'

The emerging pattern is

Heroic + dead	} who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
Happy	

The two adjectives are syntactically related and modify the NP 'dead.' Both are 'semantically associated under the general feature /+achievement/. Phonologically, both share the initial glottal sound /h/. Here the three leaves converge to reinforce each other and also achieve a measure of musicality. In the same vein, the NP 'dead' introduces the relative clause in a non-restrictive form: 'which rushed like lions to the 'roaring slaughter.' Particularly, only those who rushed to a roaring slaughter can be considered as heroic happy dead. Moreover, the NP 'roaring slaughter' appears to break the collocational rule. The NP 'slaughter' should select as its qualifier an adjective with the semantic feature /+pain/ but here it has selected an adjective with feature /+noise/. By this collocational choice,

Cummings wants his reader to have a mental picture of the agonizing noise made by the patriotic citizens as they meet their end in defence of their fatherland. This cinematographic description creates a vivid picture of overzealous patriots as they rush into death because Cummings sees this act as unnecessary, for he asks,

'then shall the voice of liberty be mute? (line 13)

Certainly not, because the last line indicates an unyielding and unwavering determination to continue the drive thus:

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water (line 14)

The pattern that emerges here is

He + { spoke }
 { drank }

The two VPs 'spokes' and 'drank' share the same subject 'He' and also belong to the same paradigm. Both are in the past tense form and phonologically share the same terminal velar plosive /k/ and are both monosyllabic words. The three levels converge and reinforce each other and also produce rhythmic sound and achieve metrical harmony.

Structurally, the other poem, 'nobody loses all the time,' is one string of sentence. Cummings displays a high level of linguistic ability in his employment of recursiveness in sentence structuring, thereby generating sentences and joining one segment to what has gone before. If this artistic maze of linguistic arrangement is traced, readers are left with many sentences strung together into one and divided into stanzas by using adjuncts and conjuncts and other sentence connectors. The sentence starts thus; nobody loses all the time

I had an uncle named
Sol *who* was a born failure and (line 2)
nearly everybody *said be* should have one (line 3)
into vaudeville perhaps *because* my uncle Sol could (line 4)
which may or may not account for the fact that (line 6-7)
and be it needlessly ... line 11
failed *because* line 15
... ate the vegetables *so* my uncle Sol line 16
had a chicken farm *till* the skunks ... line 18
when my uncle Sol ... line 19
But the skunks caught cold and died line 21-22
and so ... line 23

...skunks n a subtle manner
 or by ... (line 26)
 but somebody *who'd* given ... (line 27)
 ... *and* records *while he lived* (line 28)
 ... tall boys ...*and* gloves *and* flowers *and* everything *and* (line 31)
 i remember...
when my uncle ... *because* ... (line 33)
and went down ... line 35
 ... *and* started ... line 36

Certain expressions meant to cover the harshness of situation are employed e.g. An alternative to Sol's failure as thought by people is singing, which is scornfully regarded as 'inexcusable of all luxuries' (lines 8-11) but it is clothed in expression 'with farming' (line 11) as against all other known types of farming where Sol has failed.

my Uncle Sol imitated the
 Skunks in a subtle manner (lines 24-25)

The skunks which caught cold and died are said to be imitated by uncle Sol. That is to say Uncle Sol died too. This euphemistic expression shields the harsh news of uncle Sol's death until his mode of death is specified, i.e. drowning himself ...' (line 26)

Uncle Sol's achievement sets in:

but somebody who'd given my uncle Sol a Victor
 Victrola and records while he lived presented to
 him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a scrumptious not to
 mention splendiferous funeral with
 tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and
 lines 26-31

The pattern that has emerged from the above stanza is:

Scrumptious	}	tall boys
Splendiferous + funeral with +		black gloves
		flowers
		everything

The pre-modifiers 'scrumptious and splendiferous' are paradigmatically and syntagmatically related to the NP 'funeral' and share the general semantic features /+success/.

Philosophically, Cummings has proved that Uncle Sol's funeral was among the best that was ever recorded especially with the show of affluence by the presence of 'tall boys in black gloves and flowers and

'everything.' It shows that it was celebrated with pomp and pageantry even though Sol was regarded as a failure in his life time and so, 'nobody loses all the time.' Intratextually, the opposition asserted by his initial failure at farming and his posthumous success brought about by his funeral is neutralized. The three modifiers used describe Sol's funeral, namely 'auspicious, scrumptious and splendiferous' share the final sound /əs/, create musicality and as well share a phonological bond between them. These words with similar suffixes -ous, also differ in the number of syllables but the phonological similarity has neutralized the syllabic difference. In the same way, the 'auspicious,' 'scrumptious,' 'splendiferous' funeral of Sol has neutralised and indeed has obliterated his earlier failures. A further mark of success recorded by Uncle Sol is in the last stanza

I remember we all cried like the Missouri (line 32)

This hyperbolic expression simply shows a heavy loss sustained by many over the death of a beloved person. At death, many people identified with Sol, which underscores success. The use of the pronoun 'we' (line 32), without referent, shows plurality and must be drawn from the population of those present at Sol's funeral. The superfluous repetition of 'my uncle Sol' 9 times in the poem shows a special attachment to Sol especially at moments of success. The crescendo of volume produced by various tunes of individuals while wailing for Sol, gives an impression of action with the meaning /+ love/ from wailers, such that their tears are comparable to the water of Missouri.

Cummings describes different attempts at jobs made by Uncle Sol as

Wit farming
Chicken farm
Skunk farm
Worm farm

The first is a suggestion by people while the next two 'chicken and skunk' have been practised by Sol and the last is assumed since Sol is already in his grave. The pattern that has emerged is

wit	}	+ farm
chicken		
skunk		
worm		

While wit is a mental farming, others are practical, semantically related under the general meaning /+creature/. Although they are associated with failure by some observers, intratextually, the NPs have a bond which is tantamount to the posthumous success of Uncle Sol.

Semantically, in the poem 'next to of course god america i' Cummings subtly chooses certain words to underscore some points, some of which are in praise, others in derision. By the selection of 'pilgrims' in line 2 Cummings traces the origin of the settlement of what is known as America through the 'Pilgrim Father.' This is in praise of his country America and he uses 'centuries come and go' line 4 to remind readers that American settlement is not a thing of today. Many settlers of all sorts of nationalities and languages have settled in America and according to Cummings, he coins a word by amalgamating two NPs 'deaf' and 'dumb' to describe all sorts of imaginable immigrants such that the word 'deafandumb' (line 6) becomes striking though symbolic. The use of the conjunction glues the two words, indicating there is no difference between immigrants and those indigenous to America. This accommodative tendency of America has turned her to a microcosm of the world and people now naturalise as citizens. For this, the citizens reverse America by giving her an equal status with 'god' (line 1) and so must be worshipped accordingly.

Cummings brings in the casual exclamatory expressions of surprise, excitement, eagerness to do something by the use of the words 'jingo, gee, gosh, gory, lines 7-8. By 'gum,' he uses humour and at the same time uses God to show the genuineness of what is being stated.

He chooses 'slaughter' line 11 to show unwarranted loss of lives by those regarded as heroes. For him, that is excessive show of patriotism. Instead of honouring such people as many countries do. Cummings sees their deaths as 'slaughter.' In the same vein their deaths do not mute the voice of 'liberty' line 13. He has chosen liberty to show that people are still clamouring for freedom in many facets of life be it political, social, or literary.

The speaker is said to drink a glass of water, line 14. Why water as opposed to wine? A speaker handling a serious issue requires water to wet his throat against dryness. Wine calls for conviviality and celebration which is not the setting in this poem.

In the second poem, 'nobody loses all the time,' Cummings'

selection of words involves the use of bombastic high-sounding words which he terms 'highfalootin phrase' line 9 and has no apology for its use. This word is a corruption of the idiom 'highfalutin'(g). Such bombastic words have between 10 and 12 letters and contain between 2 and 5 syllables e.g. *inexcusable* (line 5) contains 11 letters with 5 syllables; *highfalootin* (line 9) 12 letters, 4 syllables; *vauderville* pronounced vɔ:dəvɪl (line 5) contains 10 letters with 2 syllables. Others are:

auspicious (line 29) contains 11 letters with 3 syllables
scrumpitious (line 30) contains 11 letters with 2 syllables
splendiferous (line 30) contains 13 letters with 4 syllables.

Because of his love for bombastic words, he uses prefixes and suffixes to generate such word as:

in- in *inexcusable*
-able in *inexcusable*
-ious in *auspicious*
-ious in *scrumpitious*
-ous in *splendiferous*.

He has also veered into a word with francophone origin i.e. *Vaudeville* (line 5) pronounced /vɔ:dəvɪl/ or vɔ:ˈdævɪl/ in American pronunciation. The effect of the use of the *highfalutin* words and phrases is to bamboozle people and redeem the battered image of Sol while he was alive, just as the success of his funeral bamboozled the sympathisers and obliterated the earlier impression of Sol as a failure when he was alive. The euphemistic expression:

(and down went
 my Uncle
 Sol
 and started a worm farm) lines 35-38

shields the reader from the actuality of Sol's body going into the grave and ready to be eaten by worms.

Conclusion

This paper has actually looked into Cummings' linguistic style, comprising of graphology, phonology, syntactic and semantic representation, trying to describe what the native speaker does with words and to what effect they are used. It is interesting to further note that Cummings has reflected his personality and philosophy of life

from what he has done. This style of presentation cuts across his poems, thereby giving his works a special identity. We can see a glaring actualization of Chomsky's theory of performance in this word and I believe this exposé will ginger other linguists to further plough through Cummings poems, to authenticate and orchestrate these findings.

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