

# Analysis of the Poem *A Clock Stopped*—from the Perspective of Disengagement in Cognitive Grammar

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**Abstract:** According to cognitive grammar, language is an integral part of cognition. Thus, as the linguistic expression of a poet's spontaneous thoughts, poetry will naturally reflect the poet's cognitive activity. Emily Dickinson, an original and preeminent poet in American literature, has left us priceless heritage in poetry. And death, as one of her favorite motifs, could definitely not be passed over if one wants to have a good command of Dickinson's poems. The article attempts to analyze the conceptual metaphor in the poem *A clock stopped*—from the perspective of disengagement in Cognitive Grammar, and manages to reveal the theme of the poem during the process. Through the analysis, it can be safely concluded that the theories in Cognitive Grammar can forge a happy marriage with literature criticism.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Grammar, Disengagement, Categorization, Conceptual Metaphor, Death Motif

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Death Motif in Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson, a lady whose life, to a large degree, remains a mystery and even a legend, is one of the most distinguished and distinctive American poets. [13] Because of the scope, breadth and depth of her poetry, Dickinson has a preeminent place in American and even in the world literature. She has left us nearly 1800 poems, which cover quite a wide range of topics: such as love, immortality, death, nature, inner-self, religion, and doubt of God. [11] She is a master of language, deft at expressing very complex ideas with terse expressions and seemingly queer syntactic arrangements of words.

To fully understand Emily Dickinson, one can never bypass the death motif of her poems, which accounts for a large share of her oeuvre. All her life, she's obsessed with the question whether there is eternity and immortality after death. She loves the bulb flowers, because for her, the bulb's budding and bursting into blossom symbolizes the resurrection after death. She has a preference for butterflies, because the butterfly's coming out of the chrysalis embodies new life. [2] And she likes sunset, because following it is a new day with indefinite possibilities. [11] All these reflect her preoccupation with

immortality. But on the other hand, she isn't sure about it, thus whether there will be eternity after death becomes a riddle never cracked. "At times, her poems seem to embrace the possibility, even probability, of immortality and an afterlife. Other poems are more depressed and despairing, while still others suggest the poet's resigned acceptance of uncertainty." [12] It's true that the theme of death is popular in the nineteenth century Victorian America, but "Dickinson's depictions of death are much more complicated and stark than conventional representations; she reverses cultural ideas in order to convey her own more complex attitudes toward death and the afterlife." [12] Going against the Victorian tradition of sentimentalism, which depicts death as gentle angles, "Dickinson's poems often strip death of such reassuring language, highlighting instead its mystery and uncertainty". [12]

She has left us many great poems describing death, such as *Because I could not stop for Death—*, *Behind Me—dips Eternity—*, *I heard a Fly buzz—when I died*, and *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*, to name just a few.

### 1.2. Theoretical Background

According to cognitive grammar, language is an integral part of cognition, which is the function of the brain, which in turn is part of the human body.[9] And by interacting in and

with the world, we figure out the world and the things and events in it. Cognition is the result of human beings' engaging the world, so is the language. By encountering the ever-changing usage events, we build up and expand our language system constantly. Thus language, which is just the tip of iceberg of our thinking [3], can be the convenient tool for us to explore the inner mental world of a person. And poetry, as the spontaneous outpouring of the poets' ideas and thoughts, is natural to reflect the cognitive activity of the poets and their mental activity during the process of creation.

The article is to explore the feasibility to analyze the poetry through the perspective of cognitive grammar and to see if the latter can lend a ready hand in literature criticism.

## 2. The Theoretical Framework

According to cognitive Grammar, meaning is conceptualization which resides in the combination of conceptual content and conceptual construal. Conceptual construal refers to our ability to conceive or portray the same situation in alternate ways. [7] [8] Thus different construal imposed on the conceptual content will naturally give rise to difference in meaning. And Language is embodied, deriving from our physical experience in and interaction with the real world. [7] [8] The human body is central to the way in which knowledge is represented in human mind. [1] The concrete concepts directly originate from bodily experiences, while the abstract concepts are based on the concrete ones. Namely, we mobilize the mental operations inherent in the concrete concepts to figure out those that are less concrete. [6] [7] [8] [9] Human beings are good at categorizing new things with the existent knowledge system (the baseline) in mind, so that many things can be grouped together to facilitate our understanding of the ever-changing world around us.[10] There are always baselines for us to start and to recruit so that we can have a clue of the new things or event which may conform to the baseline or depart from it. In the former case, the thing is simply to categorize it into the baseline, while in the latter, things are a little bit complex: it's an extension from the baseline, being different from it in some respects, therefore some changes need to be made in the baseline. In this way our knowledge system has been being expanded constantly with new experiences. [9]

With every expression, we have a large repertoire of background knowledge which underlies our understanding and coping with the world. Such knowledge constitutes a complex domain matrix, which plays a critical role in the process of categorization. Of the ways to categorize the newly-emerging things and events, there is one special kind of categorization: to understand things or events in one cognitive domain from the things or events in another quite different domain. For example, we usually employ the expressions in the domain of space to express concepts in time or abstract feeling. See examples (1) and (2). Or we talk about the abstract things in terms of objects and substance that can be referred to, quantified and identified, as in the examples (3), (4) and (5):

- (1) Christmas is around the corner.
- (2) His spirit is high.
- (3) The fear of insects is driving me crazy. [5]
- (4) It will take a lot of patience to finish this book. [5]
- (5) The ugly side of his personality come out under pressure. [5]

Of these five examples, in (1), "around the corner", originally a phrase expressing spatial position, is used to express the concept of getting closer in time. In (2), the word "high" initially denoting spatial concept, designates one's excitement in the sentence. In (3), "fear", which is abstract, is treated as an object that can serve as an agent to "drive me crazy". In (4), "patience" is modified by "a lot of", thus having the quantity. And in (5), the personality is multifarious, and one aspect—the ugly one—is identified in the sentence.

All the examples show our flexible ability in thinking things in one domain from those in another, which is a common and widespread phenomenon in language use. The phenomenon was given the name conceptual metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson, pointing out that metaphor is our way of thinking. [5]

In the article, the author argues that Human beings' mental abilities in categorization and disengagement ("processing activity that originates in a certain context and is latter carried out independently of that context" [10]) underlie the phenomenon. And one poem by Emily Dickinson *A Clock stopped*— is singled out to be analyzed from the perspective.

## 3. Brief Introduction of the Poem

*A Clock stopped -  
Not the Mantel's-  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing-  
That just now dangled still-  
An awe came on the Trinket  
The Figures hunched, with pain -  
Then quivered out of Decimals-  
Into Degreeless Noon-  
It will not stir for Doctors-  
This Pendulum of snow-  
This Shopman importunes It -  
While cool - concernless No -  
Nods from the Gilded pointers -  
Nods from the Seconds slim -  
Decades of Arrogance between  
The Dial life -  
And Him- [4]*

This is the poem numbered 287 in Thomas H. Johnson's edition of Emily's complete poems. This is a classic Dickinson's poem, with jarring syntactic structures, the abundant use of hyphens, the seemingly odd use of the capitalized words and the coining of new words (concernless). By describing the breakdown of a clock that's out of repair, the poet discusses the inscrutable death that is cold and timeless. David Porter calls the poem "perhaps her most artful metaphorical excursion in the early period". [14] Without

“death” or its cognates appearing at all, the poet uses the extended metaphor employing the concerning knowledge from both the domain of clock and the domain of life, thus vividly depicting the irreversible nature of death. Besides, in the last stanza, the poem employs another metaphor: life is a journey, time spent is understood as the space traversed. In addition, another special way of categorization is employed in the poem: metonymy, which refers to the fact that what an expression refers to is not the thing designated by it, but something related to it. To put it simply, it is a kind of shift in profile (the thing designated by the expression). [9] For instance, “He likes reading Shakespeare.” In the example, The word “Shakespeare” refers to the works of the famous playwright, instead of the playwright himself.

In the poem, the poet plays with the sound of /nəʊ/, with the words “snow” and “no” clearly having the sound, and “noon” and “nods” containing the similar sounds. On the one hand, the four words conspire to imply that there is no return in death. And on the other, they stress the negation implied by death: with death coming, nothing of worldly importance counts anymore. The things we chase when living: fame, fortune, and all the other blind pursuits are all in vain. What’s interesting is what is pointed out by Sharon Leiter: “noon” can be broken down into two components, “the no facing itself”, [11] thus strong negation is repeated again and again in the poem.

In describing death by way of clock, the poets insinuated her longing for immortality after death which is not measured by time, a state of being timeless. Meanwhile, she also expresses her ambivalence about the immortality promised by God.

#### 4. Analysis of the Poem from the Perspective of Disengagement

We understand and categorize the world through our constant interaction in and with the world. Through engaging the world, we form the concepts of the concrete physical objects and substances, discrete or mass. Of course, this kind of categorization is not unique to human beings, many animals need the ability to differentiate what’s edible from what’s not, or what’s dangerous from what’s safe, and so on. What makes human beings stand out from the other animals is our ability to apply the mental operations inherent in understanding physical objects and substances to figuring out or even mastering the concepts which are abstract. In a word we have patterns of thought to categorize the world to make it organized, thus facilitating our understanding of the world

##### 4.1. Analysis of the Metaphors

The whole poem employs one extended metaphor which materializes the abstract concept with physical objects and is systematically structured. Through engaging the world by physical interaction in and with it, we human beings had the concept of time early in history directly through experiencing the exchange of day and night and the alternation of the four

seasons. And since the artificial device—the clock has been invented, we can measure time in an accurate way.

With the clock, we can talk about time as if it’s discrete, has boundaries and can be quantified. We have a plethora of background knowledge concerning the clock: the watch-maker, the watch-repairman, its constant ticking of its hands, and the time measured or reflected by it. And in turn the processing operations stemming from our interaction with the clock can be recruited to understand life and death. All the key elements in understanding the clock can find their counterparts in our understanding of life and death. See Table 1 below:

*Table 1. Mappings between system of clock and that of life and death.*

The clock	The life of a person
The watch maker	The creator, God
The regular working	The normal life of healthy person
The malfunction	The illness of a person
The repairman	The doctor
The process of repairing	The process of treating a patient
Shopman	The manipulator
The complete breakdown	Death

From Table 1, it can be seen that we can easily categorize life and death of a person through another domain: the clock, thus gaining a more vivid insight into both domains.

Through describing a clock’s stopping, the first stanza depicts the death of a person, which is irreversible and no one could help. In the third line, metonymy is employed. Geneva, the capital of Switzerland, is used to represent the country as a whole, which is famous for its technique in making the best watches in the world. And in turn the skill is metaphorically referred to the skill of God in creating the human being. The third, fourth and fifth line of the poem extends from the first two lines, just as a clock stops and its maker could not make it work again, so a man dies and even his/her creator—God could not save him/her. “The puppet” in the fourth line evokes the relation of manipulation between the creator and the created: an indication of Dickinson’s irony and doubt about God. And the tone erodes into the last two lines when depicting the suffering before death. The word “Trinket” in the sixth line echoes “puppet” in the third line: something that holds not much value for its creator and can be disposed of in a casual way. The two words together contribute to the meaning of the smallness of human beings in front of the omnipotent God and God’s indifference to their death just as the clock is to its maker. And it’s unlikely to get such an understanding, without the poet and even the readers’ experience with the usage events in their daily lives. It’s just because such common experience combined with similar mental activity evoked by the words that makes such understanding possible.

The first two lines of the second stanza are extended from the last two lines of the first stanza. It seems to be in a service for a dying person. During the service, the dying person feels the “awe” for God, then undergoing some suffering (“with pain”, “quivered”) and returns to where s/he came from. “The Figures” and “Decimals” refer to the number on the dial. With clock ticking constantly, time passes silently. When the clock

measures out time, it also measures out the life of a person. Like Geneva in the first stanza, the two words do not simply point to the numbers on the clock, but signify time and life measured out by them. There is thus a metonymic relation, which once again reflects our ability to process something abstract on the basis of the mental operation deriving from the concrete object or substance.

Thus when the Figures moved painfully and trembled out of the decimals, stillness comes with the hour-hand and minute-hand overlapping, and angle between the two being zero (“degreeless”). Zero is naught, another way of expressing the concept of “no”. It should be pointed out that these four lines describe a process from activity to state: a state of dead silence. In the third and fourth line of the stanza, there is the mixed use of “doctors” and “Pendulum”, the former related to the life of a person, while the latter to that of a clock, thus giving a clue given by the poet that the poem is talking about death instead of just the clock’s breakdown. The last four lines of the stanza deals with the irreversibility of death and the coldness of it: no response to the treatment of doctors, not even to the repeated request from the Shopman who put it into the market. Here, the cognitive domain of sale of the clock comes to the fore. In the market, the quality of goods is evaluated and usually the positive aspects are stressed and the negative ones are underplayed by the seller. Undoubtedly, the seller would not devote much emotion to the things sold. The same is true of a person living in the world, who is sold to the world and whose relationship with the Shopman—God would not be close. So besides stressing the coldness of death, the words “cool” and the coined “concernless” also remind the reader that God shows little concern to the created. Just as in the first stanza, manipulation and indifference of God to men is hinted in this stanza. Once again the poet’s doubt about God is vividly revealed.

In the last stanza, the first two lines depict the movement of the hands of the clock. With the hands moving non-stop (“Nods”), time passes unrelentingly and death comes naturally. Life concludes with passed time and transits to eternity. The last word of the stanza with capitalized Him, the poet directly talks of God, who promises paradise and eternity to human beings. With the word “Arrogance”, the futility of human beings’ blind pursuits is hinted. And in the last two lines, time is understood from the domain of space, and the metaphor is applied that “life is a journey”. We human beings take the journey counted down by time to eternity where time is meaningless.

## 4.2. Analysis of Form of the Poem

### 4.2.1. Words with Capital Letters

One peculiar feature of nearly all Dickinson’s poems is the seemingly odd use of the words with their initial letter capitalized. And this poem is not an exception. In this poem, there are sixteen words with their first letter in uppercase which, according to normal grammar, should not be capitalized, except one “Him” which is a routine in English to capitalize the first letter of the singular third person pronoun to represent God. According to Cognitive Grammar, the

difference in form will definitely lead to difference in meaning.[9] So the words with capital letter must have their special contribution compared with their normal form.

For one thing, with the first letter written in uppercase, the words gain prominence, thus much importance should be attached to them. Before reading into the poem, the words with uppercase naturally catch readers’ eyes. For another, the nuances in meaning are hidden behind the special form. The special form emphasizes the fact that the words are stressed and special usage is bestowed.

The fifteen words naturally fall into three groups: words concerning clock (*Clock*, *Trinket*, *Figures*, *Decimals*, *Degreeless*, *Noon*, *Pendulum*, *Gilded*, *Seconds*, and *Dial*), words concerning human life (*Mantel*, *Doctors*, *Shopman*, and *Arrogance*) and the negation “No”. And the words in the first group obviously outnumber those in the second group, which is expected considering that the poem is describing a Clock’s stopping in its literal reading. In the poem, the words of the two groups interweave, which may partly be due to the poet’s consideration to remind the readers of what she really wants to depict.

Of the ten words about the clock, the words *Clock*, *Trinket*, *Pendulum*, *Gilded* and *Seconds* are in the extended metaphor between the clock and human life (*Mantel*, *Doctors* and *Shopman*). *Pendulum* is stressed as an very important part of the Clock, the movement of which signifies the normal working of a clock, hence symbolizing the normal functioning of a person. As mentioned in 4.1, *Trinket* is used to emphasized the insignificance of the life of human beings to God as the clock is to its maker. *Gilded* is the only adjective among the fifteen words, thus a kind of relationship is emphasized instead of the thing itself. To stress the property of the pointers echoes the noun *Arrogance* in the same stanza, just as the pointer of the clock is gilded, not the real gold, *Arrogance* features the futility of human beings’ blind pursuits in life. And what figures in *Seconds* is the importance of the accumulation of very small amount of time in life, which eventually leads to the end of life, which is also a theme in Dickinson’s poems. [11]

The words *Figures*, *Decimals*, *Degreeless*, *Noon*, and *Dial* is in another kind of mapping: metonymy. The numbers (*Figures*, *Decimal*) on the face of the clock are used to refer to time passed and thus life consumed. *Degreeless Noon* is extended from the figures on the clock, the zero degree symbolizes the null after death.

And the only adverb *No* emphasizes the strong negation by death, as is illustrated in 3.

### 4.2.2. The Configuration of the Poem

According to Cognitive Grammar, form is also meaningful. It is worth noting the alignment of the lines, with the first stanza containing seven lines, the second stanza six lines and the last stanza five lines. The seven lines in the first seem to represent the six days in which God created life plus the Sabbath day, and the six lines to imply the six-workday of God’s creating life. This creation scene in the first two stanzas forms a stark contrast with the content of the two: death. And

the number five reminds people of Good Friday when Jesus was crucified and resurrected after crucifixion. Thence, Dickinson's doubt about God and aspiration for immortality are again insinuated from the alignment of the lines in the stanza of the poem.

## 5. Conclusion

We human beings have the great capacity to adjust to the changes of the world. This is in great part due to our flexible mental abilities, one pertinent of which is our ability to disengage the world after engaging it. This ability allows us to apply the processing activity originating in one context to the understanding of those in the other context. This is reflected in our strong ability to categorize things or events according to our own needs. We are usually quite tolerant in categorizing the new things into our existing knowledge system, allowing the categorized units to depart far from the baseline. And one of classic example of which is the metaphorical use of language, which is quite common in language and thought.

And through the analysis of the poem, it's clear that a poet's experience with the usage events help her form some specific connections of particular words. Thus in her poetry composing, she recruits her knowledge about the language of her time and culture to express her understanding of the things and events around her. And in this specific poem, Dickinson recruits her knowledge about the clock to express her understanding of life and death, of God and of eternity. Even though the poem creation is individual (as one reviewer commented), it could not do without the poet's daily encounter with the usage events and the corresponding language use. Just because of her unique experience and daily accumulation, Dickinson has the chance to demonstrate her unique genius to the world.

In the article, the poem *A Clock Stopped*—by Emily Dickinson is analyzed from the perspective of disengagement from cognitive grammar to explore the metaphorical use of clock's breakdown to denote death. Through the detailed analysis of the poem, it can be drawn that cognitive grammar is a handy tool in literature analysis and criticism.

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