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Ambiguity in Shakespeare's Sonnet 138

Abstract: Shakespeare's sonnet 138 is a poem about a relationship full of deception and lies, which is distinctively mirrored in its language. The poem is characterised by a highly complex, ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory use of linguistic structures. In order to highlight and make understandable the many ambiguities and textual difficulties found in the poem, we try to analyse it with the combined tools of linguistics and literary studies. We show that the poem can be read in two coexisting ways: one presenting a negative and bitter attitude of the speaker towards his relationship, and one in which he perceives mutual deception and lies as beneficial to his relationship. However, neither attitude is stated explicitly in the poem. By combining the methodology of both literary studies and linguistics we analyse in detail the strategies Shakespeare uses to establish both readings. And we thereby show that they are both equally plausible interpretations of the sonnet.

1 Introduction

<blockquote>
When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
4   Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
8   On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O love's best habit is in seeming trust,
12   And age in love loves not to have years told.
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be. (Shakespeare 1978, 119)
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The topic of this sonnet by William Shakespeare is truth and falsity; it is a poem about deception and about deliberately obscuring the truth. Both the speaker (S) and his lady (L) are described as lying. This is made explicit already in the first two lines: "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her

though I know she lies."[1] The way in which he refers to swearing, truth, believing and lying, however, shows that truth and falsity are not to be understood unequivocally: a lie is not simply a lie that can be discarded as such; the truth does not seem to be entirely objective; and it seems possible for the speaker to believe what he knows to be false.

The complexity of the speaker's attitude and utterance makes Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 particularly suitable for an analysis combining literary and linguistic methods and tools of analysis.[2] The poem is of interest to linguists because it makes use of different language-related means of showing and obscuring truth, for example factive and non-factive verbs, verum focus and, predominantly, structural as well as lexical ambiguity. One of the reasons why the poem is of interest to literary scholars is the ambivalent attitude towards love and loving relationships that can be inferred from the speaker's ambiguous utterances; the poem thus contributes to the multiple and contrasting ways in which the issue is addressed in the sonnets as a whole. Furthermore, the paradoxical manner in which the speaker represents his attitude makes the literary scholar, as well as the linguist, consider the status of the utterance. Only by understanding its linguistic properties can we see what the speaker's monologue is all about, just as we need to know about the literary connections in order to understand the way in which language is used. Through combining linguistic and literary methods we thus hope not only to further the interests of both disciplines but also to provide a valid interpretation of the poem.

Some critics have called the sonnet a "tragically embittered poem" (Ricks 1975, 131) and a "play" that is "grim, and ultimately, confining" (Moore 1985, 16), while others have seen it as a situation where "the speaker is in full control of himself throughout, and only pretends to be troubled by the voice of conventional morality so that he can mock it defiantly" (Levin 1978, 28) or have even read it as the expression of an idealism "that can be realized, and comfortably inhabited," with the speaker expressing "something like tenderness and humility" (Snow 1980, 479). As we hope to show, the existence of different and even

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1 Shakespeare's sonnets were first printed in 1609. Sonnet 138 is one of two sonnets (the other being #144) that were already printed in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 (see Shakespeare 1978, 476). There has been some debate about whether the 1599 version is an earlier version that was later on revised by Shakespeare, or whether it was transmitted orally and imperfectly remembered when written down. Our analysis will concern only the 1609 text.

2 The authors of this essay are all part of project A2 *Interpretability in Context* in the collaborative research group SFB 833 at Tübingen University. The aim of this project is to combine linguistic methods and those from literary studies in order to arrive at valid interpretations of difficult poems and to enhance semantic theory by taking into account literary texts as a data source. The authors are grateful to the student assistants in the project.

contradictory interpretations does not mean that the critics (or all of them but one) are wrong or that the poem is just so vague or confused that all sorts of interpretations might apply but that the poem, to a certain extent, strategically triggers conflicting interpretations.

An awareness of a twofold line of argumentation is visible in some interpretations of sonnet 138. Although no interpretation makes it explicit that there is frequently and systematically more than one interpretation of the phrases and sentences within the poem, several point to at least some of the ambiguities present in the poem and to two alternative readings. The speaker is sometimes seen as showing a divided mind (cf. Moore 1985, 16), while other readers of the poem recognise an interplay of seriousness and irony,[3] deception and playfulness,[4] cynicism and "ethically invested clarity."[5]

The following analysis will show the close connection between what is described and how this is described by specifying what the linguistic sources of ambiguity in the poem are. It will point out two opposed but coexisting lines of interpretation: one in which the speaker shows a negative and bitter attitude towards his relationship to the lady, and one in which the speaker's attitude is much more positive and tolerant.

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3 E.g., Strier (2007, 83): "The final couplet continues both the bitterness and the subtle countermovement to or within it."

4 E.g., Hamer (1974, 78): "love-game"; Vendler (1997, 587): "game-playing." Vendler further comments: "Critical opinion on this sonnet sees it either as a depraved picture of cynical partners or as a sophisticated rendition of the (ultimately comic) way in which all lovers flatter each other. Each reading draws more heavily on one part of the sonnet than on another, the depravity-readers favoring [sic] the octave, the comedy-readers favoring the sestet" (586). The comment shows that critics, as a rule, have focused on parts of the sonnet from which they have derived their interpretation. By contrast, we would like to show that each part of the sonnet contributes to its double meaning.

5 Snow (1980, 473), who discusses a number of ambiguities in the poem but ultimately dismisses the cynical reading; even though he promises a "line-by-line commentary" of the poem (462), he omits commenting on elements which do not support his interpretation, e.g. the clearly negative statement in l. 8, where truth is said to be "suppressed."

2 Linguistic Analysis

2.1 Lexical Ambiguity

The use of lexical ambiguity is the main way of obscuring the truth in this poem. To exemplify this, we will look at some of these lexical ambiguities in more detail. The very first lines contain ambiguous words:

(1) "truth":

a. faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy (OED 1.a.)

b. truthfulness, veracity, sincerity, honesty, uprightness (OED 4.)

(2) to "lie":

a. to tell a lie or lies, to utter falsehood, to speak falsely. (OED $v.^2$ 1.)

b. to be in one's bed for the purpose of sleeping or resting. (OED $v.^1$ I.1.a.); hence to lie with: to have sexual intercourse with (OED $v.^1$ I.1.f.)[6]

In the context of a relationship, truth can refer both to faithfulness and to veracity, which implies that it is not entirely clear which of the two meanings S refers to: does he question the general truthfulness of L, or rather her constancy towards him? This sense of ambiguity is later on emphasised through the verb *lie*: not only can it also refer to both veracity and faithfulness, but it is repeated in the penultimate line of the poem in an ambiguous way. Whereas *lie*, in line 2, primarily refers to the telling of lies, the sense of unfaithfulness also comes in through the implied sense of her lying with somebody else. The connection between the two meanings is enhanced by an unspoken pun on not being upright; she is "unjust" (l. 9) because she lies.

When "lie" is taken to mean 'not telling the truth,' we may still ask what this means and what exactly qualifies a statement to be a typical lie from a linguistic point of view. We can set up a number of characteristic features of a prototypical lie:

(3) a. Firstly, what the speaker says is untrue

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6 Mahood (1965, 108) points out that the ambiguity of *lie* is underscored by the double meaning of "in our faults": "it means both the lovers' adultery and their deception of each other."

(4) a. Secondly, the speaker believes that what he says is false

(5) a. Thirdly, the speaker intends to deceive the hearer (Coleman & Kay 1981, 28–29)

When these characteristics are applied to sonnet 138 we are confronted with several problems:

(3) b. How do we know what is true or false in this poem? As we shall see, the poem makes contradictory assertive statements and is the only source of information we have, so how can we figure out what the facts are? That the reader has to choose what to believe is one source of ambiguity in the poem.

(4) b. The speaker contradicts himself, so does he or doesn't he believe what he says?

(5) b. Who deceives whom in this poem? Is anybody really deceived here?

Thus, even though this is a poem about lying, it is difficult to mark any statement in this sonnet as a lie. This is due to several linguistic mechanisms which make it difficult to decide on this question. They include the embedding of statements under verbs of propositional attitude, some of which introduce presuppositions, as well as withholding important contextual information from the reader that could help him decide how trustworthy the characters in the poem are. Much will also depend on whether we regard the sonnet as a soliloquy (does S lie to himself?) or as addressing someone else, who is to believe what S says.

Linguistic theories of conversation assume that the whole purpose of all discourse is to add meaningful, true statements to the "common ground," which is the set of propositions people believe to be true (Stalnaker 1978, passim).[7] The reason why we look for evidence of what can be accepted as a true statement in the poem is the fact that people operate under this assumption.

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[7] Cf. Ricks (1975, 124–125) who even sees the pun on "lie" as "simply the most important pun in the language," since "the telling of the truth is necessary to the social and cultural agreements without which there cannot be a society or culture. [...] and telling the truth is a necessary condition for the existence of a language at all." Additionally, "*lie* has the special potency of immediately paradoxical possibilities, since it strikes at the roots of language and may strike, self-incriminatingly, at itself." Ricks here is apparently concerned with the problem of lying rather than the word *lie.*

Some of the lexical ambiguities comprise meanings that are at odds with each other:

(6) "seeming" (l.11):

    a. external appearance considered as deceptive, or as distinguished from reality; an illusion, a semblance (OED *n.* 2.); cf. apparent to the senses or to the mind, as distinct from what is (OED *adj.* 3.a.)

    b. suitable, beseeming, fitting; according (OED *adj.* 1.)

(7) "flatter" ("flattered" l.14):

    a. to praise or compliment unduly or insincerely (OED 3.) – i.e., to lie

    b. to touch or stroke lightly and caressingly (OED 1.b.) – something that pleases both of them

When the speaker says that "love's best habit is in seeming trust," he again makes a double statement: the trust between lovers can both be illusionary and suitable. This goes along with the ambiguity of "habit": A suitable, beseeming trust may be the best dress or outward appearance (OED 1.a./e.) of love, or its best "settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way" (OED 9.a.). But there is also a cynical reading: the best dress (i.e. disguise) of love consists in appearing (pretending) to be full of trust, or it is the best disposition (i.e. all the other habits of love are worse than seeming to trust). Since both, S and L, are flattered "by lies," (7a) is the preferred reading of "flatter" in this context, although (7b) is not excluded as a possible second meaning. Flattery as an insincere praise expresses a negative attitude of S towards L, as well as a negative self-perception of the speaker, which is sustained by the overall reading of the poem (see below).[8]

Other lexical ambiguities rather refer to opinions and convictions of the speaker and his lady:

(8) "credit" (l.7):

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[8] Strier (2007, 84) points out the manifold use of "flatter" in Shakespeare's sonnets: "[F]lattery, in various nominal and verbal forms, is also something of a 'complex word' in Shakespeare's sonnets. The word is used in contexts of purely negative self-deception, as here and perhaps in sonnet 114 [...]. But the word is also used in the context of providing genuine beauty [sonnet 33]. And, perhaps most hauntingly, the word is used in the evocation of a joy that is brief and delusive, but potent while it lasts [sonnet 87]."

a. to give credit to, put faith in, believe, trust (a statement, person, or thing) (OED 1.)

b. to trust (a person) with goods or money on the faith of future payment; to supply with goods on credit (OED 3.a.)

c. to bring into credit, repute, or estimation; to reflect credit upon, do credit to (OED 5.) – that is, to give someone a good reputation (which does not necessarily mean he deserves it)

(9) "vainly" (l.5):

a. in vain, uselessly, fruitlessly, ineffectually (OED 1.)

b. with personal vanity, conceitedly (OED 3.)

(10) "simply" (l.7):

a. with simplicity (of mind) or sincerity; in an honest or straightforward manner (OED 1.)

b. in simple language, with simplicity of speech, with no attempt at style (OED 3.a.)

c. in a foolish, silly, or stupid manner; without common sense or sagacity (OED 5.)

When the speaker 'credits' his L's "false-speaking tongue," he definitely gives it some value: according to the different meanings of the word, he may either believe it (even though it is false), or he may give L a good reputation even though he knows this is unjustified. Still, *credit* may be used ironically (we may regard this as possible because of its clash with "false-speaking"), in which case another ambiguity arises: does S mean what he says or not? A similar dichotomy can be established for the words *vainly* and *simply*, which could both be used by the speaker to reflect either on the action described or on his own character: he may either be so vain as to think that L believes him to be young, or he may erroneously think so; he may be so simple-minded as to credit her tongue, or he may simply do so.

The words listed so far all have two (or more) distinct meanings, both of which are possible denotations within the poem. One reading usually leads to a more negative view S has on himself and his relation to L, while the other reading is more neutral, if not in favour of L. Lexical ambiguity therefore leads to very

different attitudes the reader can perceive: accordingly, the tone of the poem can either be distrustful and bitter or accepting and contented.

The use of "unjust," however, which is also the only use of this word in Shakespeare's sonnets,[9] is slightly different:

(11) "unjust":

    a. not acting justly or fairly (OED 1.a.)

    b. not upright or free from wrong-doing; faithless, dishonest (OED 2.) – note that the meaning 'faithless' goes in the direction of 'unfaithful,' but "unjust" does not seem to have been used in this way; the common collocation "just and upright" suggests that being unjust implies lying (down)

    c. improper, incorrect (OED 3.)

    d. irregular, inexact, inaccurate (OED 4.)

A different adjective could have told us what exactly the lady has done, but this is carefully avoided. The result is that, in contrast to the lexical ambiguities mentioned so far, in this case we are not provided with clearly defined alternative meanings but rather with a scalar denotation of the adjective. The reader can pick a preferred meaning from a range of denotations that do not exclude each other but rather stand for various shades of incorrect behaviour. S is deliberately vague about L's misdemeanour, which allows him to represent his own attitude ambiguously.

The use of ambiguous terms in this poem leads to several overall alternatives: do S and L deceive each other with their behaviour or do they play a knowing but nevertheless tender game with their statements? Is this a poem about sexual fidelity or about veracity and truthfulness (in a relationship)?

In addition to lexical ambiguity, we find instances of ambiguity on a structural level. The first line starts with the word *when*, which might be used in two different ways:

(12) "when"

    a. episodic ('in this moment')

    b. habitual ('whenever')

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9 The use of "unjust" in Shakespeare's plays is here left unconsidered (it does appear, e.g., in *The Comedy of Errors* (1.1), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (4.2 and 4.4), *Much Ado About Nothing* (5.1), and other plays.

Different interpretations of *when* give us different impressions of the speaker and the situation. If *when* is episodic, we expect the description of an individual experience; accordingly, "When my love swears" might possibly refer to L's emotional state at a particular moment in a conversation that has begun earlier; we are in the middle of S reporting that conversation, i.e. meet with a narrow point of view (which seems to exclude much previously arranged deception). If *when* is habitual, we expect a more general and distant description, possibly evaluative and self-reflexive. But it is impossible to decide in favour of one of these interpretations, and both make perfect sense in this sonnet.

Another case of structural ambiguity results from the use of *that* in l. 3, which, again, can be read in different ways:

(13) a. I believe her in order that she might get the impression that I am young

b. I believe her this when she swears the following: she might think me an untutored youth

c. I believe her when she lies in order that she is able to think me an untutored youth[10]

The first interpretation seems the most plausible one (because of "might," which hints at a future action, and because the first line already gives a complement for "believe"), but the other possibilities also linger. One of the reasons for this is that "believe" expresses thought and mental conviction but not necessarily speech. But if the speaker does not utter his belief, L cannot draw any inferences from it. Alternatively, this stresses a relationship between S and L, in which S responds to the utterance by L (who "swears") not by words but by thoughts, which nevertheless have an (imagined) effect.[11]

Two more cases of structural ambiguity can be found in line 12 with "loves not" (14) and "to have years told" (15):

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10 Cf. Snow (1980, 470): "'That she might thinke me' can express an intent on the part of the speaker either to deceive his mistress or to grant her wish, cooperate in her own self-deceptions. The latter possibility is made more plausible by the syntactical ambiguity which allows 'That' to modify either 'I do believe her' or 'she lyes.'" Snow does not take into account reading (b).

11 Cf. Sonnet 44, in which, as Booth (Shakespeare 1978, 206) points out, the lines "But, ah, thought kills me that I am not thought/ To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone" (Shakespeare 1978, 40: ll.9–10) can mean "that I am not thought, which can leap" and "that I am not believed to leap." This underlines the proximity of "think" and "believe." The opposition of "think" and "know" in Sonnets 137, 138 and elsewhere is pointed out by Cruttwell (1953, 566–567).

(14) a. does not like it to have its years told

b. likes it when its years are not told

(15) a. to have its years mentioned or enumerated

b. to possess so many years (which are mentioned)

In these two cases the variants have very similar meanings, but they contribute to presenting us with alternative attitudes: S either likes the state of affairs or he does not.

2.2 Presupposition

Another strategy to confuse the readers chosen in the poem is the use of presuppositional items. For example, the use of "swear" in line 1 makes the statement much stronger than if simply "say" had been used. We suggest that this is due to a presuppositional meaning of the word "swear" along the lines of (16):

(16) [[swear]] = $\lambda w.\lambda p.\lambda x$: the truth of p in w is under debate. x says in w that p

Thus "swear" is a relation between individuals and propositions that is only defined if the content of the proposition is under debate. The presupposition implicitly establishes the very ambiguity and uncertainty that the act of swearing is meant to eliminate. In that case, the relation holds if the individual asserts the proposition – I only swear when the truth of my statements is likely to be challenged. Thus, the credibility of the lady's statement is undermined, even though it is not explicitly stated that the truth of her statements might be contested. What is more, when the act of swearing occurs in Shakespeare's sonnets (and often, too, when it occurs in his plays) it is usually linked to deception and means 'swearing falsely.'[12]

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12 See, for example, Sonnet 132 "Then will I swear beauty herself is black" (l. 13); Sonnet 136 "If thy soul check thee that I come so near, / Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy will" (ll. 1–2); Sonnet 150 "O from what pow'r hast thou this pow'rful might, [...] To make me give the lie to my true sight, / And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?" (ll. 1, 3–4); Sonnet 152 "In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn, / But thou art twice forsworn to me love swearing, / In act thy bed-vow broke and new faith torn, [...] For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye, / To swear against the truth so foul a lie" (ll. 1–3, 13–14; all from Shakespeare 1978, 115–116, 128, 131); and with regard to his plays, e.g., *Troilus and Cressida*, "They say all lovers swear more performance than they are able" (Shakespeare 2006, 3.2.81–82); and *Twelfth Night*, "We men may say more,

2.3 Verum focus

The third device used in this poem concerns verum focus (Höhle 1992, *passim*). In line 2, the speaker states: "I *do* believe her," which focuses on the polarity of the sentence: "though I know she lies." The use of verum focus presupposes that the set of alternatives triggered by the focus is available in the context of the utterance. Hence line 2 presupposes that the context makes available the set of possibilities:

(17) C = {that I believe her, that I do not believe her}

Accordingly, the first two lines of the poem are only appropriate in a context in which it is under debate: firstly, whether the lady is made of truth, and secondly, whether the speaker believes the lady.

2.4 Factive verbs

Another difficulty we find in this sonnet is that of factive verbs, more precisely of the verb "know" in line 2. Factive verbs (e.g. *regret, realize, know*) trigger the presupposition that their complement is true, whereas non-factive verbs (e.g. *imagine, dream, believe*) do not.

(18) He knows that he bought the car.
     → presupposition: he bought the car.
     → assertion: he believes that he bought the car

(19) He imagines that he bought the car.
     → no presupposition that "he bought the car"

If *know* is negated and used with the first person, then the presupposition fails, because the sentence denies the presupposition of the complement (cf. Levinson 2003, 186). Kiparsky & Kiparsky (1970, 148) describe this situation as a "semantic anomaly."

(20) Sally doesn't know that Peter bought the car.
     → presupposition: Peter bought the car

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swear more, but [...] we prove / Much in our vows, but little in our love" (Shakespeare 2004, 2.4.112–14).

(21) I don't know that Peter bought the car.
→ presupposition: Peter bought the car
→ assertion: I don't believe that Peter bought the car
⇒ contradiction

Know does not only have a factive implication but also a belief implication (see Abusch 2002, 1):

(22) "I know" implies "I believe"
S knows that *p* → implies: *p* is true, S believes *p*

Taken literally, this leads to a contradiction in line 2 ('I believe her' vs. 'I believe she lies,' 'I don't believe her'). The speaker is aware of the contradiction between the two statements, as he turns it into a paradox when linking them by "though" ("I do believe [...] though I know"). Even though the logical contradiction will never quite disappear, it is possible to make sense of this statement, by reinterpreting "believe" to mean either (23) or (24).

(23) 'I trust her (something like 'I believe in her'), I have not lost confidence in her,' or

(24) 'I pretend to believe her'

This, however, results in an underdeterminacy as to what exactly the speaker means by "I believe her." The reading in (23) fits a positive view on the relationship described, whereas the reading in (24) has the opposite effect: the relationship is not viewed as being based on trust but on pretence and lies.

2.5 Redundancy

The symmetric relation in line 13 – "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me" – creates the redundancy of the statement. The relation R "x lies with y" is symmetric, that is, y lies with x, if and only if x lies with y:

(25) The relation R=[λx.λy. x lies with y] is symmetric R is symmetric iff for all a,b: R(a,b) iff R(b,a)

The first conjunct asserts that the speaker lies with the lady, which implies that she lies with him. The second conjunct, that the lady lies with the speaker, is

therefore redundant. This redundancy not only has a stylistic effect but also implies to two possible interpretations, i.e., it leads to yet another ambiguity: either the relation is not really symmetric (despite appearances, S and L do not do exactly the same thing), or there is a focus on mutuality and equality, and it is therefore important that they both behave in the same way towards each other. Furthermore, whereas the second conjunct is superfluous in the sexual sense of "lie with," it is by no means redundant when "lie with" means telling lies; this possible meaning is thus brought up in the very act of stressing the mutuality of S and L.[13]

Redundant, symmetric expressions similar to this example abound in love poetry. One of the earliest examples is the Middle High German love poem „Du bist min, ich bin din": Friedrich Ohly (1995) lists an abundance of love poems – both secular and religious – that make use of this phrase. While not symmetric as "I lie with her and she with me," it expresses a similar idea: that of a reciprocal, equal relationship, where each partner is loved and valued to exactly a similar extent. Interestingly, Ohly's list already includes poems involving deception, infidelity and other problematic relationships, such as a married woman's declaration of love towards her lover, not her husband (thus making her unfaithful character explicit; see Ohly 1995, 158); and also that of a lover openly acknowledging to his beloved that he loves her not for her fidelity but for the pleasure she gives him (see Ohly 1995, 150–151).

In the Renaissance, we can find this expression, for example, in the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney and George Herbert. Sidney, in "My true love hath my heart and I have his," begins with:

> My true love hath my hart, and I have his,
> By just exchange, one for the other giv'ne.
> I holde his deare, and myne he cannot misse:
> There never was a bargaine better driv'ne. (Sidney 1962, 75: ll. 1–4)

He emphasises the equality of this exchange or "bargaine" throughout the poem. George Herbert in "Clasping of Hands" (Herbert 2011, 540), assumes a similarly

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13 Even though the sexual sense of "lie with" is predominant, the expression can also refer to lying; an example is to be found in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene or The Silent Woman* (Jonson 2001, 2.2.65–69), where Truewit talks about Morose's prospective wife: "If learned, there was never such a parrot; all your patrimony will be too little for the guests that must be invited to hear her speak Latin and Greek: and you must lie with her in those languages too, if you will please her." See also Shakespeare's *Othello (*Shakespeare 1997, 4.1.32–34), where both meanings are present: "Iago He did – / Othello What? what? / Iago Lie / Othello With her? / Iago With her, on her, what you will."

possessive, mutual relationship between speaker and God ("Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine," l. 1); however, he ends his poem with "O be mine still! still make me thine! / or rather make no Thine and Mine!" (ll. 19–20), already hinting at the problems such a relationship might cause. Significantly, Shakespeare's use of an expression of mutuality is *not* related to possession – speaker and beloved do not belong to each other; they simply enjoy each other.[14] Thus Shakespeare, by evoking the symmetrical, redundant pattern familiar from love poetry, has his speaker both share and cynically parody the happy mutuality it implies. Since the lovers' deceptions and pretences are mutual, their game is not necessarily to the disadvantage of either of them. In addition, their pretences, since they are transparent, do not really serve to deceive or hurt the other but to sustain and keep alive their relationship.[15]

2.6 Interim Summary

The connections between content and language established so far have also in parts been pointed out by other critics, albeit often in a less systematic way.[16] For the interpretation of this sonnet, it is essential to note that the use of lexical and structural ambiguity adds another layer of difficulty to interpreting what is said. Not only can the reader not tell what is the truth and what is a lie, but once we accept a statement, we can also not be sure what exactly is meant by it. This is not what would be expected of a cooperative speaker in ordinary conversation. But the question is: who is the addressee, anyway? If the speaker talks to himself, the transmission of information is probably not the primary objective; rather, the

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14 Vendler (1997, 586) remarks that "the speaker and the woman were on different 'sides': '*On both sides* thus is simple truth suppressed.' But in the couplet, though we see first the *I* and the *she* representing the two sides, they are given a single mutual verb, *lie,* and by the next line they have fused (for the first time in the poem) into a *we* with common *(our)* faults." See also Watson (1988, 46).

15 Combellack (1971, n.p.) sees it as a "social game of pretence the lovers play with each other [that] promotes the happiness of both."

16 Bunselmeyer (1974, 106–108), e.g., remarks that "[t]he repetition of words tends to strip them of 'objective' reality, particularly when in each use they mean something different," and "the duplicity inherent in words captures the duplicity of life's false appearances." Combellack (1971, n.p.) states that "the game of pretence is described with such play on words that the poem becomes a game too." And Vendler (1997, 585–586) points out that many of the poem's statements are spoken in reported speech, thus adding another level of indirectness: "The one thing they both *don't* do in the actual present is *say*, the simple verb of the suppressed questions, the verb that almost burns a hole in the sonnet in the two lacerating implied statements of the silent *simple truth*: *she is unjust, I am old*."

speaker wishes to become certain of his own attitude.[17] One way to explain this is to assume that nothing is meant to be added to our common ground, since we are not dealing with ordinary assertion (cf. Bauer & Beck 2014). This is possible if the poem is to be understood as a "game" in which the speaker's and his beloved's relationship is explored, and not as a text where the transmission of information is the primary objective. This agrees with the fact that it is possible to read the poem in such a way that after S's opening statement about L's oath there is no further reference to an actual utterance. S speaks about thinking and believing, and about *not* saying something. This silence leads to the action of lying with each other in l.13.

3 Resulting Interpretations

The analysis of all these devices results in our coming to different interpretations of what the characters say and how they behave. Let's have a look at the protagonists of the sonnet and what they say.

3.1 The Speaker's Assertions and Lies

We should note that, although the poem is presented from the perspective of a first-person (and therefore potentially unreliable) speaker, we have to take his statements for granted, because the only (immediate) context we can refer to is the poem. Therefore, what the speaker says constitutes, so to speak, the 'truth' of this sonnet. On the other hand, Sonnet 138 is not only read and interpreted as an isolated text but also embedded in the larger context of Shakespeare's other sonnets. The complete sonnet sequence gives us the impression that the lady is indeed a deceptive person, but also that the speaker knows of and sometimes maybe even accepts her deceptiveness. Possible assertions by the speaker (in this particular sonnet) are:

(26) a. 'I believe her (that she is made of truth)'

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17 Cf. Schalkwyk's (1998, 267) observation that the "presence, and intrinsic power, of an audience to shape the poet's own voice and stance should not be overlooked in a discussion of whether Sonnet 138 achieves a tone of repose, smugness, or grim seriousness."

This is supported by line 2 ("I do believe her though I know she lies"), sense *c* of "credit" (to improve someone's reputation), sense *b* of "lie" ('to lie with' in a sexual sense), sense *a* of "unjust" (simply not acting justly), and sense *a* of "truth" ('fidelity'). Or,

(26) b. 'I believe her so that she will think I am young'

This is supported by line 3 ("That she might think me some untutored youth,"), lines 5–6 ("vainly thinking that she thinks me young, / Although she knows my days are past the best"), sense *b* of "vainly" (conceitedly) and l. 10 ("wherefore say not I that I am old?").

    Throughout the sonnet, the speaker seems to be very much concerned with his age and with appearing young. He assumes the role of a naïve young man: his 'simple' thoughts and his trust in the lady's character are meant to make him seem naïve, and appearing naïve (that is, mentally young) is supposed to make the speaker seem physically young (and attractive). One question therefore is: what is the speaker's main concern? Is it really his trust or distrust in the lady, or is he more worried about concealing his age?

3.2 The Lady's Assertions and Lies

Even though this is a soliloquy and the speaker is the only person we hear, he tells us what the lady has said, from which we get the impression that she is just as ambiguous as he is. We cannot be sure what she means when she "swears" that she is "made of truth." Possible meanings of L's assertion are:

(27) a. 'I am made of truth, because I don't tell lies'

This is supported by line 1 ("I swear"), sense *b* of "truth" (just truthfulness) and senses *a*, *c* and *d* of "unjust" (unfair, incorrect or inaccurate). Or:

(27) b. 'I am made of truth, because I am sexually faithful'

This is supported by sense *a* of "truth" ('fidelity'), sense *b* of "lie" ('lie with someone') and sense *b* of "unjust" ('dishonest').

    The second possibility seems more plausible, partly because we know from other sonnets, if we assume the sequence to form a coherent context, that L cheats on S. But since this possibility is not made explicit, it cannot be exposed as a lie, and this allows the speaker to continue to deceive himself, if he wants to.

Another reason why the second option is more plausible is a negative one: if line 1 is *not* a statement about the lady's constancy, then we do not really know what she could be lying about. If she lies about her view on the speaker's age, then this is not stated in the poem.

3.3 The 'Narrator'

In addition to the speaker and the lady, we at times seem to notice a third instance, a kind of narrator evaluating the scene with a bird's-eye view. The following instances hint at such an observer:

(28) a. l.5: "vainly" evaluates the speaker's actions; he reaches a level of self-awareness that is not quite compatible with his alleged simplicity

b. l.6: "she knows" shows an insight the speaker cannot have (he cannot really know what the lady knows)

c. l.8: this is a statement *about* their relationship, providing the insight typical of an 'omniscient narrator'

d. ll.11–12: these lines look like a proverb, presenting their content as a general truth applicable to all men

e. l.14: "we," too, could be generic and the statement thus general and proverbial

f. ll.5 and 13: "thus" and "therefore" imply logical conclusions – the speaker, being caught in this web of lies and deception, seems hardly capable of this

One should note that some statements, by their proverbial nature, serve as a justification of S and L's behaviour: they seem to reflect not only the speaker's opinion but a less contestable objective truth.[18] Thus, the speaker seems to play several roles: that of a participant in the relationship and of a reflexive 'narrator,' as well as that of a naïve 'youth' who is easily tricked and of a sly old man who tricks others but is not easily deceived.[19]

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18 See Vendler (1997, 586): "[P]roverbs 'let one off the hook,' so to speak, saying 'Twas ever thus.' Both 'proverbs' refer to the speaker rather than to the woman, and are a solution to his bad faith in the octave."

19 Helgerson (1970, n.p.) argues that the speaker distinguishes two moments: "the present moment of cynical objectivity in which he knows she lies and the moment in which, wishing to

3.4 Possible Paraphrases

We have tried to construe two paraphrases, showing the two general directions in which interpretations could go. The first presents the relationship between speaker and lady rather in terms of a mutual agreement giving mutual comfort. The second shows their relationship in a much more negative light.

Possibility A
When my love swears that she is upright and pure of heart,
I do believe in her, although I know she lies,
So that she may regard me as a youngster,
Unaware of the world's silly games.
Thus I am a little vain in thinking that she thinks I am young,
Although she knows that my days are past the best,
Simply I give credit to her untruthful statements:
On both sides thus is insignificant truth suppressed.
But why does she not say that she did wrong?
And why do I not say that I am old?
Love's best custom is in proper faith,
And age in love doesn't want attention drawn to age.
Therefore we lie together,
And we, with all our faults, are comforted by that.

Possibility B
When my love swears that she never deceives me,
I pretend to believe her, although I know she lies,
So that she will think that I am a naive youngster,
Unpractised in customary deceptions.
So in my vanity (or uselessly) I may think that she thinks I am young,
Although she knows that my days are past the best,
Like a simpleton I believe her lies:
On both sides thus is honest truth suppressed.
But why does she not admit that she is dishonest?
And why do I not admit that I am old?
Love's prettiest façade is in apparent trust,
And age in love loves to conceal age.
Therefore I lie to her, and she lies to me,
And in our faults we are adulated by lies.

appear innocent, he *does* believe her." Thus, he assumes two roles: towards the readers of the sonnet, the role of a knowing cynic, towards the lady, the role of an innocent youth. The speaker goes on without conviction and unable to separate the two moments, which becomes manifest in l. 13, where they merge through the pun on "lie" (cf. Helgerson 1970, n.p.).

4 Conclusions

The analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 has shown us several things. It has given us insight into Shakespeare's use of language. The sonnet shows Shakespeare's awareness of how meaning is composed, of course not as a modern linguist but as a sensitive writer with strong intuitions about language. The poem creates an experience for the reader full of uncertainty about the meaning of the poem, which mirrors the speaker's experience of uncertainty described in the poem. This is achieved by linguistic means: although the poem contains clear statements, their truth conditions remain ambiguous through the devices employed.

Striking linguistic features of the poem include the interplay between presupposition and ambiguity, the contradiction in lines 1–2 which creates a fundamental uncertainty, and the symmetric relation in lines 13–14. The ambiguity of the overall interpretation of the text is reflected in these techniques. The positive interpretation is about mutual agreement and harmony in spite of the speaker's and his lady's shortcomings; they deceive each other only to improve their own and each other's lives. The cynical and negative interpretation is about the mere appearance of "symmetry" and harmony; there is no true love but just the pretence of it, which in fact serves to pamper one's egotism.

We have found that the poem is made in such a way that it is *not* possible to give one straightforward interpretation, and that on the basis of purposely unresolved local ambiguities (e.g. "truth," "lie"), it establishes an image of the speaker's attitude that can be construed in two very different ways. This ambivalence corresponds to the ambiguity of the text as a whole[20] which admits two different interpretations: a cynical, hurtful, negative interpretation and a positive interpretation about an 'old' couple familiar and to some extent comfortable with the other's flattering deceptions.

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20 The strategy of combining a number of local ambiguities so as to create alternative readings of the poetic text as a whole can also be found, for example, in Emily Dickinson; see Bauer et al. (2010).

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