

# Analysis of the Characteristics of E.E. Cummings' Poetic Creation from the Perspective of Foregrounding Theory

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**Abstract:** As a representative of modernist poet, Cummings has a unique style in poetic creation. His bold innovation in poetic language strengthens the visual effect of poetry and broadens the meaning of poetry. Cummings boldly challenges people's traditional perception of poetry, breaking the original limitations in all aspects of language, forming a strong and eccentric personal style. His poetry is often the subject of study for linguists. Based on the foregrounding theory in stylistics, this paper attempts to analyze Cummings's visual poems from graphological deviation, lexical deviation and semantic deviation, as well as the effects that these unconventional linguistic patterns have achieved, thereby excavating the aesthetic value and discovering the basic characteristics of Cummings' poetic creation.

**Keywords:** E.E. Cummings; Foregrounding; Deviation; Characteristics of Poems.

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## 1. Introduction

In stylistic analysis, foregrounding refers to the act of making the language unorthodox, which will create some attractive and fresh effects. Since the foregrounding theory was put forward by Mukarovsky, it has been continuously innovated and developed by various linguistic schools. Now it has become a bridge that connects the literature and linguistics. This theory serves as a systematic guidance of analyzing literary works and helps to dig out the aesthetic effects of the unorthodox language patterns. In the field of literature, analyzing the literary works from a scientific and systematic perspective is important, which can help to avoid the unreliable conclusions made from intuition and provide more concrete linguistic evidences. Owing to this, using foregrounding theory to analyze literary works has now become one of the popular researching focuses.

Among all literary genres, poetry is the most popular target for such analysis because poetic language is the most frequently deviated one. As one of the representatives of modernist poets, E.E. Cummings innovated poetry from different aspects of language, thus creating a great number of special visual poems, which are full of unorthodox deviated language patterns. Therefore, Cummings's poetry now becomes a popular target for studies based on foregrounding theory.

In recent years, an increasing number of researchers focus on interpreting the meanings and themes of Cummings's poems. Scholars have put forward a variety of strategies to figure out what exactly Cummings conveys in his poems. Also, some researches have been carried out to analyze those unorthodox language patterns from the perspective of foregrounding theory. However, few researches are made to categorize these patterns so as to find out the basic characteristics of Cummings's poetic creation. In light of these situations, more detailed research on various unconventional language patterns and their effects become necessary.

This paper attempts to analyze Cummings's poems from the perspective of foregrounding theory. According to foregrounding theory, there are several kinds of language deviation. This paper will analyze his visual poems from three

levels of language, namely graphological, lexical and semantic in order to see what unconventional language patterns of each deviation are involved in his poetry and what effects are achieved by means of these, so that some basic characteristics of his poetic creation can be discovered.

Cummings innovates his poetry from many aspects and contributes a lot to modern English literature. However, the remarks that critics give to his literary creations are not always positive. His bold attempts in poetic creation sometimes receive negative feedback by some scholars who assume that this kind of peculiarity only helps to catch public attention and has little importance to the meaning of his poems. Analyzing his unconventional language patterns and the effects in a scientific way, in some senses, will further the beauty excavation of his language and reveal its the value and effectiveness. What's more, the applying of foregrounding theory in Cummings's visual poems will prove the practicability of the theory itself and in reverse, expand and enrich the understanding of it. This paper also provides a general categorization of the deviated language as well as their effects and thereby attempts to conclude the characteristics of Cummings's poetry. In short, the significance of this paper exists in the fact that it explores the aesthetic value and the characteristics of Cummings's poetry through linguistic deviation in the hope of enriching the existing researches on similar topics.

## 2. Literature References

The term "foregrounding" is originated from Czech linguist Jan Mukarovsky of Prague School. At the very beginning, it was just a prediction, in which scholars thought that making the object "unfamiliar" is the technique of art. Since 1980s, linguists all over the world started to make attempts to support this theory and it is now widely used in stylistic analysis. Today the widely accepted definition of foregrounding is that it is a concept in literary studies concerning making a linguistic utterance (word, clause, phrase, phoneme, etc.) stand out from the surrounding linguistic context, from given literary traditions or from more general world knowledge (Leech & Short, 2007). In other words, foregrounding refers to the disobedience of the norms of language, thus foregrounding the unconventional language

patterns against the background of the norms of ordinary language in order to create particular effects that contributes to the meaning of the works.

When the language is not written according to the normal rules of language in order to display creativity and inventiveness of their works, deviation arises. And the deviated language is the foreground while the conventional language is the background. Leech further classifies deviation into eight types: lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, dialectal deviation, deviation of register and deviation of historical period. However, there are some problems with his classification. The inconsistent standard makes these eight deviations overlap to some extent (Liu & Zhu, 2006). For example, in meaning and form, the latter three deviations are actually closely connected with the other five. Therefore, most stylistic studies on literary works were made by exploring the former five deviations and the effects of them.

In text analysis, stylistics plays a significant role because it connects linguistics and literary criticism. Stylistics provides a scientific way to study literary texts. Its scientific nature is reflected by its attempts of analyzing the text from various linguistic levels such as writing, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure, etc. Therefore, if a text is to be studied scientifically, close attention should be paid to how the author expresses meaning and reinforces aesthetic effect through the choice of language (Cui Haiguang, 2007). Particularly, those language with foregrounded features that are stylistically significant and aesthetically valuable are worthwhile to study for achieving the purpose of appreciation (Qin Xiubai, 2002). In terms of foregrounding, linguistic deviation is the major way and frequently used in literary works and thus become a notable research subject for scholars in the field of literature and linguistics.

Poetry is the most typical genre composed of deviated language, which is resulted from poets' pursuit of conciseness and vividness of poetic language. And such imaginative deviation requires breaking the traditional form limitlessly (Que & Miao, 2006). Poetic language focuses on the distortion of the conventional language, thus forming its unique characteristics (Guo & Wen, 2007). As a representative modernist poet, Cummings gives full play to language deviation in his poetry and becomes the most popular research object for language deviation. The deviated language in his poems is not arbitrary practice but full of meanings and functions (Gomez, 2017a). His individualism, worship of newness revealed the aesthetic modernity and embodied the essence of aesthetic modernity (Dong & Wang, 2012). Thus, many of his foregrounding patterns are of great aesthetic value and worth studying. For example, the unconventional capitalization in Cummings poetry has a number of functions like emphasis, creating chaos, iconicity etc. Based on this, other foregrounding devices and their corresponding effects can be examined systematically in the same way (Gomez, 2017a). Apart from analyzing a single pattern of foregrounding and its effects, other scholars made attempts to analyze as more foregrounding patterns as possible in one particular poem of Cummings in the purpose of appreciating the poem in a comprehensive way. Yu Xueyong and Zhang Qiyun reconstructed the patterns of the realization of foregrounding and analyzed Cummings's poem "in Just-" from three deviations and one repetition, discovering that Cummings uses unconventional spacing,

conjunctions and creates new compound words to describe the revelry of kids (2007: 48). While in the poem "Love is more thicker than forget", Cummings foregrounds his language through using unconventional capitalization, omitting some punctuation marks, creating new words and so on (Zhou Yuping, 2014: 76).

In general, scholars have made a lot of efforts in studying the foregrounding theory and how it is been realized, as well as its functions in Cummings's poetry. These studies have laid a good foundation for the application of foregrounding theory to analyze Cummings's impressive visual poetry. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. Firstly, previous studies either focus on a single foregrounded pattern and its effects or analyze just one single poem from a limited number of aspects. Secondly, many scholars tend to choose Cummings's famous and popular poems as research objects. Some of his other poems with the same value are seldom touched upon. The characteristics of his poetic creation is seldom concluded, either. In view of the limitations mentioned above, although some achievements have been made in this field, the research of Cummings's poetry from the perspective of foregrounding theory is far from enough. This paper attempts to fill such gap, providing a categorization of the deviated language as well as their effects and discovering the basic characteristics of Cummings's poetry.

In this paper, graphological, lexical and semantic deviation are explored in Cummings's poetry. The reason why phonological deviation is not included is that, normally, phonological deviation is realized by playing with the patterns of sound and meter of poetry. As a modernist poet, Cummings totally abandons the traditional poetic arrangement, free from the limits of metrical pattern and rhyme scheme, which does not mean to create some particular effects of phonological deviation. For grammatical deviation, it takes up a rather small proportion and contributes less to innovation in form in Cummings's poetry. Therefore, this paper mainly revolves around three types of deviation mentioned above.

Graphological deviation is closely related to graphology, which refers to the study of graphical features of language. Graphology is often compared and analogized to phonology, in which graphology is discussed in the realm of written language, while phonology is in the realm of spoken language. Later on, scholars widened the scope of graphology and joined it with spelling, pronunciation, punctuation and other related graphical sources of language. Today, graphology is widely considered as the hand writing system or the system of typed or composed form of writing, in which we have to pay attention to the rules of punctuation, spacing and capitalization. In this sense, graphological deviation refers to the violation to such rules.

Lexical deviation refers to the deviation in lexicon. In the lexical level, linguistic deviation is represented by neologism, which refers to the invention and inclusion of new words. According to Leech, it refers to not merely a violation of lexical rules, but rather an existing rule of word formation is applied with greater generality than is customary. The usual limitations on the process of forming words are waived. The newly created words are called "nonce-formations" since they are created solely for a particular and unique situation instead of the purpose of enlarging the English vocabulary. Lexical deviation is mainly composed of derivation, compounding and conversion.

Semantic deviation refers to the point where sometimes

apparently meaningless sentences have some particular meaning in some specific contexts. Leech argues that semantic deviation can be meant as ‘non-sense’ or ‘absurdity’ and it is a kind of inspired nonsense with irrational elements. He further states that there are three types of semantic deviation, namely, semantic oddity, honest deception and transference of meaning.

### 3. Deviation in Cummings’s Poetry

#### 3.1. Geographic Deviation

For some readers who are not familiar with Cummings,

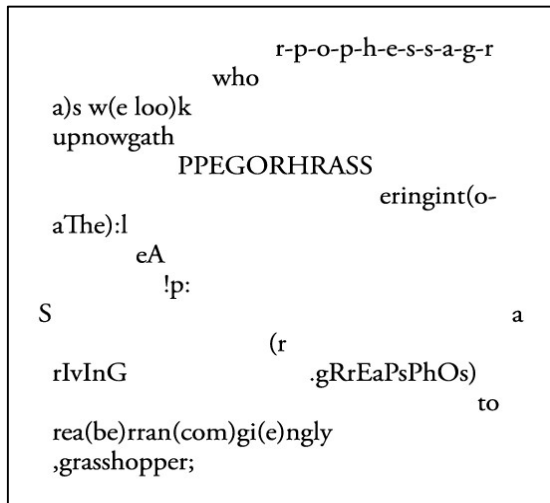


Figure 1. The poem “Grasshopper”

The first outstanding pattern of such deviation is unconventional spacing among words. As these two poems show, the unconventional spacing exists not only between words, but also within a word, as “leaps”, “gathering”, “arriving” in the first poem and “leaf”, “falls”, “loneliness” in the second poems. Such irregular spacing results in a variety of blank spaces, which make the poems look like a picture.

Therefore, the key function is to create a visual picture of an action or an object, for which there is a term called iconicity. Iconicity is an important concept in cognitive linguistics as well as in semiotics. It is the conceived similarity or analogy between the form of a sign and its meaning. The form of the sign discussed in Cummings’s poems is actually the picture form. Such iconicity is called visual iconicity. Within typography, iconicity can be found in specific resources such as parentheses, letter forms and capital letters, to cite a few (Tartakovsky, 2009). Based on this, unconventional spacing, capitalization and punctuation marks actually all help to achieve such visual iconicity.

Spacing contributes to creating visual iconicity in that words and letters are arranged out of order. In the poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”, words and letters jump from here to there, similar to the jumping of the grasshopper. The word “arriving” begins on the far right of the poem with the “a”, while the “r” is near the middle of the poem, and the rest of the word is on the left of the poem. The reader must travel a great distance across the poem, therefore, in order to “arrive”. In this way, a dynamic picture of grasshopper’s jumping is vividly revealed. In the poem “l(a)”, “leaf”, “falls” and “loneliness” are all separated in different lines and there are three blank lines inserted in the poem. Owing to this, the structure of the poem becomes visually vertical with each line containing a small

most of his poems would read like a bunch of codes in computer programs and literally make no sense at the first sight. The major cause of this is the graphological deviation, which makes his poetry particular and innovative. His “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” and “l(a)” are two representative poems that fully adopt this technique. Such deviation is achieved mainly through using three unconventional patterns, namely spacing, capitalization and punctuation marks.

#### 3.1.1. Spacing

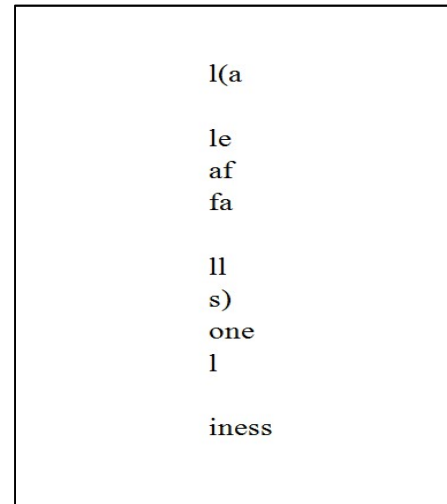


Figure 2. The poem “Leaf”

number of letters, which successfully imitates the falling process.

#### 3.1.2. Capitalization

The second pattern is the unconventional capitalization of words. In traditional poems, there are two types of word capitalization: capitalizing the first letter of a word and capitalizing all the letters of a word. However, in Cummings’s poems, word capitalization is seen everywhere and in a number of special types. By looking at “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”, capitalization can be found in random letter of a word, as “leAp”, “arrIvInG” “gRrEaPsPhOs”. Such unorthodox capitalization increases the difficulty for readers to recognize words and is also what makes them consider Cummings’s poems a bunch of error codes at the first sight. However, it is actually one of the most distinctive features of Cummings’s poetry and a close reading and analysis would prove its practicability.

As is mentioned above, the unusual capitalization of words also helps to create visual iconicity. In “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”, the word “grasshopper” appears four times with different shapes, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”, “PPEGORHRASS”, “gRrEaPsPhOs” and the final “grasshopper”. The four shapes, in some senses, represent the four different appearances of the grasshopper during the jumping. When “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” is turned into “PPEGORHRASS”, the sudden capitalization of all letters in the word leaves an impression similar to the preparation of jumping. The loose “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” gathers its strength to become a “PPEGORHRASS”. “Within visual iconicity, proximity is the most frequent notion represented iconically through unconventional capitalization in the poems under analysis” (Gomez, 2017a: 118). The higher proximity of each letter

actually shows such gathering of every part of the grasshopper's body for the jumping. Similarly, from "PPEGORHRASS" to "gRrEaPsPhOs", Cummings canceled the capitalization of "grass", leaving the rest part of the word capitalized, which creates a picture that shows the powerful grasshopper has just jumped and left the grass.

### 3.1.3. Punctuation Marks

The third unorthodox pattern is the punctuation marks. Punctuation marks in Cummings's poetry are totally deviated, different from traditional punctuation system. Gomez categorizes such unorthodox use of punctuation marks into marks substitution, marks insertion and marks omission (2017b: 196). In the poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" and "l(a)", Cummings did not use any period or comma. In fact, period and comma are seldom used in his poems to signify a pause or an end. Rather, they are replaced by blank space, which can be considered as marks substitution or marks omission. As for marks assertion, parenthesis is the most representative mark that inserts in anywhere of the poem, as "a)s w(e loo)k", "rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly" in the first poem and "l(a)", "(s)" in the second. In addition to parenthesis, Cummings tends to insert many other punctuation marks in his poems, such as hyphen, colon, exclamation mark, semicolon, as "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", "(The):" "le!Ap" and "grasshopper;" in the poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r".

The punctuation marks also produce the effect of visual iconicity. For example, for the word "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", Cummings uses hyphens to connect letters, representing the appearance of the grasshopper before jumping. Grasshopper is a kind of arthropod, and the hyphens vividly reflect such arthropod image of grasshopper. In the middle of the poem, when the grasshopper begins to jump, Cummings inserts an exclamation mark within the word "leap", creating a sudden and intense feeling of the rising action of the grasshopper. In the end of poem, after the jumping of the grasshopper, Cummings uses a semicolon, symbolizing the next cycle of grasshopper's jumping, which is like a never ending, repetitive action. In the poem "l(a)", Cummings uses parenthesis to divide the whole poem into two parts, "a leaf falls" and "loneliness". In doing so, he separates the letter "loneliness". Similar to the unconventional spacing in "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", readers have to read the contents in the parenthesis first and then go back to the first line to spell the word "loneliness". In this way, the leaf's falling up and down with the wind is vividly imitated here, making the whole poem more visually iconic.

## 3.2. Lexical Deviation

Lexical deviation is closely related to morphology, which studies the word-formation. In morphology, there are three major types of word-formation-derivation, compounding and inflection, as well as five minor types of word-formation-coinage, back-formation, clipping, blending and acronym (Hu Zhuanglin, 2017: 58). Unlike other deviations, when it comes to lexical deviation, it does not mean the disobedience to the regular lexical formation. It is, however, refers to neologism in most cases, which means making up new words that do not exist. Therefore, morphology does not provide a basic pattern to be deviated, rather, it acts as guidance to create new words and phrases. Lexical deviation includes derivation, compounding and conversion.

### 3.2.1. Derivation

Derivation refers to the morphological process of attaching an affix to the existing lexeme. In English, strictly speaking,

there are two types of affixes, namely prefix and suffix. Therefore, for derivation, it often means to add an affix to the beginning or the end of the word. For example, from "possible" to "impossible", from "construct" to "construction". Based on this, creating new words for lexical deviation can be similarly attaching an affix to an existing word. In "love is more thicker than forget", Cummings attaches "-un" to the existing word "be", thus forming a new word "unbe", which is prefixation in morphology. However, Cummings does not create new words by always obeying the rules of deviation. In the poem "pity this busy monster, manunkind", he creates the word "manunkind" by inserting the affix "-un" in the middle of the word "mankind", instead of beginning or end. In the poem "if i should sleep with a lady called death", he created the word "kissingly", and in "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", he invents "rearrangingly". For nouns, verbs and adjectives, any one of category can be transformed into one of the other two via derivation. However, an adverb can only be derived from an adjective, not from a noun or a verb (Hu Zhuanglin, 2017:58). The words "kissingly" and "rearrangingly" are all used as adverbs but composed by a gerund plus "-ly", and the gerund here cannot be used as an adjective.

The function of newly created words must be their vividness and appropriateness. Such vividness and appropriateness can further contribute to reinforcing the meaning of the poems. In the poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r", the derivational word "rearrangingly" is used to modify the verb "become". The vividness and appropriateness are reflected in two aspects. One is that Cummings successfully reflects the high frequency of grasshopper's changing in shape, thus making the poem more dynamic; the other being that it shows such changing is like the arrangement of word letters in this poem, which makes the four shapes of grasshopper more visually iconic than using other words to describe it.

### 3.2.2. Compounding

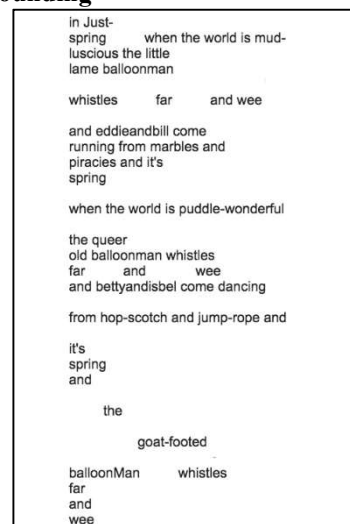


Figure 3. The poem "In Just-"

Similar to derivation, compounding also yields new lexeme, but compounding refers to attaching a lexeme to another lexeme instead of an affix to a lexeme. In the poem "in Just-", Cummings creates a number of words in this way, "balloonman", "mud-luscious", "puddle-wonderful", "hop-sotch", "jump-rope". The process of compounding is less complicated than derivation. However, the meaning of compound words is complex. In terms of meaning and

grammar, there are three types of compound word, attributive compounds, coordinate compounds and subordinative compounds. The word “balloonman” is of the first type, in which the “balloon” is used to modify the “man”, while the rest of words like “mud-luscious” belong to coordinate compound whose meaning is simply the composition of the semantic components of the sub-lexemes.

In the poem “in Just-”, Cummings invents a number of new words, motivating readers to picture the scene of children’s playing after raining in their mind (Yu & Zhang, 2007: 47). In this poem, the compounding words “mud-luscious”, “puddle-wonderful” are used as adjectives to vividly describe the world after rain. Even though there is mud and puddle, the world is still positively luscious and wonderful for it is time for kids to have great fun. The other two compound words “hop-scotch”, “jump-rope” refers to the games that children are playing. “hop” and “jump” refers to the actions and “scotch” and “rope” are the items for game. The words created in such way are so vivid that readers’ imagination is stimulated and children’s vitality and happiness are reflected.

### 3.2.3. Conversion

Conversion is a special type of derivation, sometimes called zero derivation, in which the shift of word class takes place without affixation. For example, the verb “lead” can be directly used as a noun “lead”. In Cummings’s “love is more thicker than forget”, he uses “always” and “never” in the lines “love is less always than to win/ less never than alive”. The words “always” and “never” are all adverb in English. However, here Cummings shifts the word class and uses them as adjectives in comparative structure, which can be considered as creating new words in accordance with the rules of conversion.

The conversion word “always” and “never” in the poem “love is more thicker than forget” are used as adjectives, as “love is less always than to win/ less never than alive” in order to describe the unpredictable, indescribable, glamorous love (Xu & Yang, 2005: 7). In this poem, “always” and “never” are simple and colloquial words. The lines “love is less always to win/ less never than alive” mean that love is not like a game that always has a winning side, instead it is much more complicated and filled with contradictions in this world. Cummings successfully uses simple words to vividly express this intricate idea.

Lexical deviation breaks the limit of choosing words only from mainstream language and overcome the difficulty of finding an appropriate word in some senses. Writers can use their imaginative and creative mind to invent some new words and phrases that are more suitable for their works. What’s more, another feature of the newly created words is that they are more colloquial than flaring since the masterpieces are supposed to be read and judged, memorized and put to use in oral or written text by readers, contemporary writers and critics from a historical perspective (Li & Shi, 2015:32).

## 3.3. Semantic Deviation

Semantic deviation is another important foregrounding type. Though considered as ‘non-sense’ or ‘absurdity’, such deviation plays a significant role in expressing writer’s real intention in a seemingly unorthodox way. As is quoted above, Leech classifies it into three types, namely semantic oddity, transference of meaning and honest deception. This section will be divided into three parts, with each part analyzing each type of semantic deviation from different poems.

### 3.3.1. Semantic Oddity

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because it's
Spring
thingS
dare to do people
(& not
the other way
round)because it
's A
pril
Lives lead their own
persons(in
stead
of everybodyelse's)but
what's wholly
marvellous my
Darling
is that you &
i are more than you
& i(be
ca
us
e It's we)

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Figure 4. The poem “Because it’s”

Semantic oddity refers to the bizarreness of expression. Leech first classifies it into five types: pleonasm, periphrasis, tautology, oxymoron and paradox. He further generalized these five types into two categories: semantic redundancy and semantic absurdity. Cummings’s “because it’s” reflects such semantic oddity. The poem expresses poet’s love for spring and the people who are connected together. Semantic absurdity lies in the expression “Things dare to do people” and “Lives lead their own people”. Some may claim the possibility that he is playing graphological deviation so that it should be interpreted normally as “people dare to do things” and “people lead their own lives” just like the poem “L(a)”. However, Cummings denied this possibility by stating “not the other way round” in the parenthesis. Another evidence of semantic oddity exists in the expression “you & i are more than you & i, because It’s we”, which can be considered as semantic redundancy in that Cummings repeated the structure “you & i”.

The function of such semantic oddity, is to make the poem more profound in meaning. In the poem “because it’s”, the passiveness of human beings is vividly shown by using passive voice structure. People become the patients of things that they should have control of. Cummings plays words here in an absurd way in order to show the individuality of human being. Everybody has their own lives and fates and people are forced to face their own destiny. But even so, in spring, when people are together, “you & i” are more than two separated individuals “you” and “I”, because “it’s we”. By such semantic oddity, Cummings strengthens the power of unity and connection between lovers, or even among all human beings in a broad sense.

### 3.3.2. Transference of Meaning

According to Leech, in poetry, transference of meaning, or metaphor in its widest sense, is the process whereby literal absurdity leads the mind to comprehension on a figurative plane. Cummings uses them frequently in his poems. In the poem “Since feeling is first”, there are four lines which read “we are for eachother: then/ laugh, leaning back in my arms/ for life’s not a paragraph/ And death i think is no parenthesis” Cummings uses metaphor in a clever way to compare life and death to the constraints of a writing formality and punctuation.

Such transference of meaning also helps to create profound meaning in the poem. In fact, in the poem “Since feeling is



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