



Article

# 'oride lesgo eckshun': Spelling foregrounding in the experimental poetry of E. E. Cummings<sup>2</sup>

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**Eva María Gómez-Jiménez**

Universidad de Granada, Spain

## Abstract

Unconventional linguistic features in E. E. Cummings' poetic style have long been a focus of study. Linguists have researched this aspect of this poet's technique mainly in connection to grammar, lexis and morphology; however, few approaches have looked at graphology in depth and even fewer at spelling. The present paper addresses this by analysing the use of lettering in E. E. Cummings' experimental poetry. More concretely, two research questions are posed here: Which foregrounding devices are involved in E. E. Cummings' unconventional use of spelling? And also, which effects are achieved by means of this particular use of lettering? To answer these questions, I first selected a group of 66 experimental poems displaying features of misspelling. After identifying and classifying the devices employed by Cummings for spelling foregrounding, I determined the meaning implications and functions produced through those misspellings. The research on these poems reveals that substitution, transposition, insertion and omission are the four basic patterns that permit such an unconventional use, and that this practice allows Cummings to reproduce linguistic varieties, create plays on words, control the reading process, indicate interruptions and create iconic effects.

## Keywords

Spelling, foregrounding, experimental poetry, E. E. Cummings, linguistic varieties, corpus, stylistics, graphology, orthography

## I Introduction

Unconventional spelling exists in all contexts in which the English language is used, namely first and second language acquisition, advertising, magazines, fanzines, newspapers, chats,

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### Corresponding author:

Eva María Gómez-Jiménez, Departamento de Filologías Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Granada, Campus Universitario de Cartuja s/n. 18071, Granada, Spain.  
Email: emgomez@ugr.es

text messages and brand names, to cite a few.<sup>3</sup> In these settings, the reasons that motivate the non-standard use of English are varied. Whereas in text messages, for instance, the frequent omission of certain letters and the use of punctuation marks and symbols aim at saving as much space and time as possible, in advertising, misspellings often generate amusement so as to attract readers' and spectators' attention to help them to remember slogans and brand names. In literature, manipulation of spelling is generally associated with the representation of linguistic varieties, as demonstrated by previous approaches to discourses such as Anglo-Irish literary fiction (Toolan, 2000) and writers like J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer (Toolan, 1992), Mark Twain (Berthele, 2000; Tamasi, 2001), Alan Duff (Lambert, 2008) or Zora Neale (Barry, 2001).

In the case of E. E. Cummings, spelling has always been recognized as an outstanding literary tool from his very first publications. As pointed out by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1927, 'One will, however, be quite wrong if one supposes this arch eccentric to be intellectually deficient. His absurd typography and spelling are means of producing well-calculated effects' (Dendinger, 1981: 85). The following excerpt by Riding and Graves (1928), in which they compare Cummings' practice to Shakespeare's, demonstrates also how critics reacted (sometimes positively, sometimes not so much) to Cummings' unconventional spelling patterns:

It may be that he [Cummings] has learnt a lesson from the fate that has overtaken Shakespeare's sonnets: in which not only have changes in spelling and pronunciation been used to justify the liberties that have been taken in 'modernizing' the texts; but certain very occasional and obvious printers' errors in the only edition printed in Shakespeare's lifetime have been made the excuse for hundreds of quite unjustifiable emendations. Mr. Cummings and Shakespeare have in common a deadly accuracy, and that accuracy makes poems difficult rather than easy.

(Riding and Graves, 1928: 62–63)

This early recognition became stronger in the sixties when literary linguists started paying attention to the linguistic features in Cummings' poetry. From then on, they have referred to him on many occasions to illustrate the possibilities of unconventional language. Widdowson (1992: 180), for instance, refers to one of Cummings' poems by considering that 'although it [the poem] is not especially illustrious, it is conveniently illustrative of [...] the way in which the inherent possibilities of language are exploited to create new patterns of significance, new perspectives on familiar reality'. Short (1996) also mentions Cummings on many different occasions, and so have most of the leading figures in stylistics up to the present date, as demonstrated by Leech (1969: 47–48; 2008: 188), Simpson (1997: 44–53), McIntyre (2004), Burke (2007), Jeffries and McIntyre (2010: 32, 47, 57) and Widdowson (1975: 14–15, 32; 1992: 180, 214), among others.

This widespread interest in Cummings implies an increasing amount of research on the linguistic patterns observable in his poetry. Most of the research undertaken has focused, however, on the grammar (Berutti, 1970; Cureton, 1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1981; Fairley, 1971, 1975; Lord, 1966) and on morphology (Cureton, 1979b, 1985; Fairley, 1975), while graphology and, thus, spelling have been less widely studied. With the exception of Tartakovski's (2009) paper on parentheses, there are no concrete approaches to Cummings' unconventional graphology. Besides, the comprehensive studies that

approach Cummings' style from a more general perspective do not always consider spelling, and if they do, there is relatively little emphasis on it because it is always examined alongside other aspects such as capitalization, punctuation or spacing. Within these general approaches to Cummings' style, Von Abele (1955) was the first to pay more (though not exclusive) attention to lettering, mentioning three specific unconventional spelling devices in Cummings' poetry: word-dismembering (1955: 915), word-combining (1955: 916) and verbal camouflaging (1955: 918). Some years later, Friedman (1960: 75) devoted a few pages to the representation of *newyorkese* in Cummings' poems, and much later, Cureton (1986) joined together unconventional orthography and voice rendering in Cummings' *No Thanks* (1986: 257). More recently, studies like the ones by Webster (1995), Heusser (1997) or Alfandary (2002) have mentioned spelling, but they have done so in connection only to the spatial arrangement of words on the page, leaving misspellings aside. While most of this research has been very helpful in clarifying Cummings' use of certain linguistic patterns, it only really touches upon the subject, failing to explain how Cummings alters spelling in his poems and to what extent this non-standard use of spelling affects such texts. The systematization of this poetic device is also (and consequently) non-existent.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, I address two research questions in this paper: Which foregrounding devices are involved in E. E. Cummings' unconventional use of spelling? And also, which effects are achieved by means of this particular use of lettering? As spelling foregrounding has been traditionally related to dialect representation, the second question aims to check if there are any other uses for misspelling apart from linguistic varieties. In this sense, the present paper contributes to the topic by offering a more systematic description of Cummings' use of spelling and its meaning implications in his more avant-garde poems.

## 2 Method and data

For this research, I have analysed a group of 66 experimental poems by Cummings where unconventional spelling is displayed. To compile this corpus, I used *Complete Poems 1904–1962* (Cummings, 1994), the most recent and complete anthology of Cummings' poetry, as this collection contains no typographical changes from the original manuscripts, which is arguably crucial for a study of visual aspects like this. The poems were selected within this volume according to three criteria: they were to be written in free verse, they were to contain avant-garde linguistic devices to a high degree and they were to include non-standard spelling samples such as *duh [the]*, *eye [I]*, *thAIR [there]*, *Bawstinamereekin [Boston American]* or *eckshun [action]*. In line with these criteria, 66 poems in total were analysed, which represents 8% of the 766 poems in *Complete Poems 1904–1962* (Cummings, 1994).

After selecting the poems, I conducted a detailed stylistic analysis according to the models and principles developed in formative publications like Short (1996), Simpson (1997, 2004), Wales ([1994] 2011) and Leech (2008), where these scholars explain how to perform a stylistic analysis. Using Microsoft Excel, I created a spreadsheet where the selected poems were arranged into different rows, one for each line of every poem; blank lines were also considered as a way to respect the poems' original composition. The

spreadsheet allowed me to conduct a quantitative analysis, in which I accounted for misspelled tokens, the conventional words they replace and the misspelling devices involved in each sample. I therefore paid close attention to spelling foregrounding affecting letters within words, taking into consideration only those whose letters are unconventionally written and those which seem to be correctly written but do not correspond to the context in which they appear. In contrast, the following cases were not considered:

- Those in which a word is divided by a letter, another word, a blank space or a punctuation mark. The line *other lulla wise by UnBroken* (CP 319), where the word *lullaby* is separated by two blank spaces and *wise*, is an example.
- Those in which a word has some missing letters but these are placed somewhere else (before or after) in the poem. The word *mother* is read as *moth* in one of Cummings' poems, for instance, and one needs to go seven lines further to find its corresponding *Er* (CP 322). This happens also to 'o pr' (CP 392), where the final *o* in all the corresponding words is placed to the right at the beginning of the poem, isolated from the rest of the composition.
- Those in which misspelling devices are connected to cases of lexical creation by means of derivational devices, as with the term *UNCOMMONWEALTH* (CP 327).
- Those in which punctuation is employed unconventionally.
- Archaisms, words and expressions not currently used in American English at the time of publication.
- Terms, expressions and sentences in languages other than English, unless these imply spelling foregrounding in themselves. In line with this idea, I did not consider cases like *il treno per/ Roma si-gnori?* (CP 278) (Italian voice), but I included cases like *WE-WE-WE* (CP 791) (French voice), where the spelling of the original *OUI-OUI-OUI* has been altered.

Subsequent to identifying all misspelling devices, these were then classified according to the very basic operations implied in E. E. Cummings' unconventional use of spelling (see 'Spelling foregrounding devices' section, below). This quantitative analysis of misspelling devices led me to determine spelling foregrounding patterns and their frequency of appearance in the selected poems. It was also a first step towards a more qualitative approach in which I examined each misspelled word and its meaning in relation to the poem in which it appears (see 'Creative functions' section).

### 3 Spelling foregrounding devices

The analysis performed here indicates that there are four different devices for spelling foregrounding in the 66 experimental poems selected for this study (see Table 1). As stylistics has not yet provided a model for the analysis of spelling deviation, I turned to other fields of study where scholars have been concerned with spelling variation, such as L2 acquisition, texting or fanzines. In this sense, these works revealed that there is not a consensus on how to refer to the different devices that take place in the alteration of the spelling of words. For this reason, I used the terms that I considered to best reflect the

**Table 1.** Misspelling devices in the experimental poetry of E. E. Cummings.

Misspelling device	Example	Words/tokens	Poems
Substitution	<i>ged</i> [get]	293 words	CP 27, CP 28, CP 82, CP 98, CP 201, CP 235, CP 238, CP 263, CP 273, CP 312, CP 318, CP 319, CP 322, CP 327, CP 332, CP 333, CP 347, CP 362, CP 388, CP 400, CP 426, CP 430, CP 431, CP 455, CP 474, CP 519, CP 547, CP 548, CP 618, CP 635, CP 656, CP 697, CP 700, CP 705, CP 715, CP 740, CP 791, CP 827, CP 835.
Transposition	<i>radarwleschin</i> [Charles Darwin]	8 words	CP 321, CP 334, CP 396, CP 474, CP 726.
Insertion	<i>wheeEEE</i> [whee]	206 words	CP 27, CP 28, CP 76, CP 82, CP 98, CP 195, CP 235, CP 238, CP 263, CP 273, CP 312, CP 318, CP 319, CP 322, CP 327, CP 332, CP 333, CP 335, CP 336, CP 362, CP 384, CP 400, CP 430, CP 431, CP 474, CP 519, CP 547, CP 548, CP 618, CP 635, CP 700, CP 705, CP 710, CP 740, CP 791, CP 827, CP 835.
Omission	<i>Prgress</i> [progress]	313 words	CP 28, CP 98, CP 201, CP 235, CP 238, CP 263, CP 312, CP 318, CP 319, CP 322, CP 327, CP 332, CP 333, CP 335, CP 351, CP 384, CP 392, CP 400, CP 423, CP 426, CP 430, CP 431, CP 448, CP 471, CP 474, CP 488, CP 519, CP 547, CP 548, CP 611, CP 618, CP 635, CP 656, CP 700, CP 705, CP 710, CP 726, CP 791.

nature of the devices involved in the samples analysed. The four different devices for spelling foregrounding that I identified in the poems are the following:

- (a) *Letter substitution*: The use of an incorrect letter in place of another one in a word. This happens, for example, when the journal *Boston American* is referred to as *Bawstinamereekin* (CP 82) or when the personal pronoun *I* is written as *Eye* (CP 362, CP 474, CP 618, CP 705, CP 827).
- (b) *Letter transposition*: The disordering of the letters in a word. *radarw leschin* [Charles Darwin] (CP 334) or *r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r* [grasshopper] (CP 396) illustrate this case. Letter transposition normally affects words, but there are a few instances in which it is a phrase that is affected by this, as with *Rish and Foses* [fish and roses] (CP 321).
- (c) *Letter insertion*: The addition of letters that are not required for a word, as in *wheeEEE* [whee], *ooch* [och] (CP 28), *balllll* [ball] (CP 384) or *drunGk* [drunk] (CP 76).

- (d) *Letter omission*: The absence of letters in a word. *wisti-twisti* [*twisti-twisti*] (CP 201), *prgress* [*progress*] (CP 392) or *Dmocrac* [*Democracy*] (CP 635) are a few examples taken from this category.

These procedures are by no means exclusive: I found words affected by a single misspelling device, but most of them include more than one. For instance, in *unnurstan* [*understand*] an <n> and a <u> substitute a <d> and an <e>, and the final <d> is omitted. It is also important to notice that not all of these procedures are used with the same frequency. From a total of 480 misspelled words, omission, substitution and insertion are present in 313, 293 and 206 words, respectively; in contrast, only eight words display letter transposition, as already detailed in Table 1.

## 4 Creative functions

By controlling the foregrounding devices described before, E. E. Cummings performs different functions, which reinforces the meaning of such poems and produces new additional effects in them. In this way, spelling foregrounding in the samples analysed is used on most occasions as a way to represent linguistic varieties and to create puns. The control of the reading process, the indication of interruptions and the iconic representation of visual and aural elements are other effects, though these appear less frequently (see Table 2).

### 4.1 Representation of linguistic varieties

Linguistic variety is a common, general term used in sociolinguistics to refer to ‘any system of language which distinguishes one group of people or one function from another: whether regional or occupational (dialect); social (sociolect); or situational (register)’ (Wales, [1994] 2011: 433).<sup>4</sup> Parting from the idea that graphology consists (among many other aspects) of the written representation of sounds in a language,<sup>5</sup> it is possible thus to identify writing signals that let us determine the varieties represented in any text. In line with this, the experimental poetry of E. E. Cummings includes 25 poems in which spelling foregrounding serves as a means of representing dialects, sociolects and interlanguages; five of these poems include samples of representing a drunken accent, which has been included under the category of ‘others’.

A dialect is a variety of language dependent upon a geographical area or a social group wishing to distinguish from others by features like gender, age, race or sexual orientation. The analysis that I have performed here reveals that there are 16 poems that represent dialects in Cummings’ experimental poetry. From these, seven correspond to regional dialects, two to racial dialects, and seven to undefined dialects, as these do not display enough features that identify the particular dialect they correspond to. Though *newyorkese* is the most represented variety (CP 235, CP 238, CP 312, CP 333, CP 547), British English (CP 332), varieties in rural areas (CP 656)<sup>6</sup> and Black English (CP 519, CP 618) have also been identified in this research.

*Newyorkese* in Cummings’ poetry was first mentioned by Friedman (1960: 75–77).<sup>7</sup> He explains that the first of the poems reflecting this variety appears in *is 5* (1926), where

**Table 2.** Spelling foregrounding creative functions in the experimental poetry by E. E. Cummings.

Creative function		Poems		
Representation of linguistic varieties	<i>Dialect</i>	Regional	Newyorkese	CP 235, CP 238, CP 312, CP 333, CP 547.
			British	CP 332.
		Rural	CP 656.	
		Racial	Black English	CP 519, CP 618.
		Undefined		CP 98, CP 318, CP 327, CP 400, CP 426, CP 474, CP 697.
	<i>Sociolect</i>	Lower-class accent		CP 700.
	<i>Others</i>	Drunken accent		CP 76, CP 312, CP 388, CP 705, CP 710.
	<i>Interlanguage</i>	Turkish English		CP 82.
		English French		CP 312, CP 319, CP 635, CP 791.
	Word plays	<i>Puns</i>		CP 27, CP 195, CP 235, CP 263, CP 273, CP 322, CP 327, CP 335, CP 336, CP 347, CP 362, CP 474, CP 548, CP 635, CP 715, CP 740, CP 827, CP 835.
<i>Anagrams</i>				CP 334, CP 396, CP 726.
<i>Spoonerisms</i>				CP 321.
Control reading process			CP 28, CP 384, CP 396.	
Interruptions			CP 400.	
Iconicity			CP 201, CP 351, CP 392, CP 423, CP 431, CP 448, CP 455, CP 471, CP 488, CP 548.	

the majority of examples of this type are provided (Friedman, 1960: 77). Some *newyorkese* misspelling examples taken from the analysis include *duh* [*the*], *woild* [*world*], *noive* [*naive*] and *dat* [*that*]. In the poems examined, while some are written in standard plus non-standard spelling (CP 235, CP 238, CP 333), others are simply written in non-standard spelling (CP 312, CP 547). In both cases, spelling foregrounding corresponds to the particular diction of some characters that are represented in Cummings' experimental poetry, whereas standard spelling reproduces the neutral poetic voice that introduces the readers to the singular characters depicted in these poems. This is the case especially in the two poems whose verses are all written using non-standard spelling, whereby this deviation from abiding by the orthographical rules implies a greater difficulty in comprehension for the reader.

Together with *newyorkese*, other regional varieties identified are British English and varieties in rural areas. On the one hand, British English is represented in 'Lord John Unalive(having a fortune of fifteen grand' (CP 332), a satire of a British tycoon where misspellings reproduce the opening of vowel sounds – *maost* [*most*] and *faolks* [*folks*] –, the omission of /r/ – *rally* [*rarely*] – and the doubling of consonants – *demandd*

[*demand*] –. On the other hand, I have identified a variety from rural areas in ‘after screamgroa’ (CP 656), a poem where a neutral poetic voice depicts a farmer sharpening a scythe. Spelling foregrounding is manifested here in the farmer expressing his satisfaction – *pu-d-dih-gud* [*pretty good*] – at finishing his work, which partially represents the particular speech of this character.

Black English (CP 519, CP 618) is the only racial variety identified in the poems analysed. A good example of this representation is depicted in ‘one sipslouch’ (CP 519), where the main poetic voice describes a musical scene in which a black guitarist has the leading role. Though sometimes this guitarist’s speech is indicated by the use of parentheses – (*pleez make me glad*) [*please, make me glad*], (*now heer we kum dearie*) [*now here we come dearie*] –, this is not usually the case. Consequently, the reader has to infer this reproduction by means of three main features in black English:<sup>8</sup> the substitution of fricative for occlusive consonants – *wid* [*with*], *dis* [*this*], *id* [*id*], *dat* [*that*] –, the omission of final consonants and syllables – *wurl* [*world*], *wick* [*wicked*] – and the substitution of the diphthong /aɪ/ for /a/ – *am* [*I am*].

By contrast to the high number of poems in which dialects have been represented through misspellings, the representation of sociolects matches a lower-class accent (CP 700), which has been detected only once. The poem ‘as joe Gould says’ (CP 700) includes spelling foregrounding that represents the particular accent of an uneducated woman, as she herself clearly says: *o/ / if i/ ‘d/ OH/ n/ lygawntueco/ / llege* [*oh, if I’d only gone to a college*].

Together with dialects and sociolects, cases of interlanguage have been classified into Turkish English (CP 82) and English French (CP 312, CP 319, CP 635, CP 791). Interlanguage consists of linguistic variations that are indebted to the non-native status of speakers of any language.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, features of the mother tongue are maintained when speaking a foreign language. Though interlanguage is less frequently represented in literature than dialects, I have identified five poems in which E. E. Cummings represents this kind of variation by means of misspelling devices. From all samples of interlanguages identified, the most frequent case is the one corresponding to characters pronouncing French words and expressions with an American accent, which appears in four different poems. Some examples of this category include *Mairsee* [*Mercy*] (CP 312), *hoe tell days are/ teased* [*Hotel Des Artistes*] (CP 319) and *WE-WE-WE* [*OUI-OUI-OUI*] (CP 791). A second interlanguage category corresponds to Turkish English, that is, English spoken with a Turkish accent. This happens with the poem ‘5’ (CP 82), where a Turkish character refers to the newspaper *Boston American* as *Bawstinamereekin*, thus we witness how his speech is influenced by his Turkish origin.

Finally, I have grouped together all cases in which drunkenness is represented through misspellings. As drunken accent is not a linguistic variety *per se* but implies an alternation of speech, I have used the label ‘others’ to refer to these cases. In these samples, the poems always include standard spelling for the neutral poetic voice plus non-standard spelling that corresponds to the characters depicted. The clearest example in this category is ‘the/nimble/heat’ (CP 76), which consists of a street scene where the main poetic voice, in a first person narration, tells of how he walks through the street and finds a prostitute he has met some time before. The prostitute, who is presented firstly as dead, ends up opening her eyes and explaining to the main character the reason



for her malaise: *i'm/ / so/ drunG/ / k,dear* (CP 76). The additional <G> in *drunGk* clearly displays the cause.

## 4.2 Plays on words

A play on words consists of a witty use of words that are phonetically similar with the aim of producing amusement, humour and other effects. Either a single word suggests two or more meanings or two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound may suggest different meanings. According to the poems analysed, the experimental poetry of E. E. Cummings includes 22 poems displaying wordplays through misspelling, 18 corresponding to puns, three to anagrams and one to spoonerisms.

Puns are a form of word play that hold multiple meanings of a word or phonetically similar words. As this study deals with non-standard spelling, all samples identified here correspond to the second group. In this sense, puns produced through misspellings are classifiable into two big groups: those built around the phonetic similarities between *eyes* and *I* (CP 263, CP 273, CP 362, CP 715, CP 740, CP 827, CP 835) and those built around the phonetic similarities of any other pair of words (CP 27, CP 195, CP 235, CP 273, CP 322, CP 327, CP 335, CP 336, CP 347, CP 474, CP 548, CP 635). Within the former group, the word *eye* is used by Cummings as a misspelling for *I*, thus referring to personality, singularity, an individual or the personal pronoun. A representative example of this category is present in '16 heures' (CP 273), where the poetic voice praises the personality and singularity of communist protesters on the streets of Paris: *16 heures/ l'Etoile/ / the communists have fine Eyes [...]* (CP 273).

Similarly, there are many other misspelled words in these poems that suggest an ironic/humorous approach to the topics under consideration. This happens, for instance, when Cummings attacks the superficiality of the cinema industry through the description of a Hollywood director giving orders to his team (CP 474). The poem, organized into two different layers with the insertion of two parentheses, isolates the expression *The Mind's Ah,Soul* from the rest of the poem that remains within the brackets. This expression consists of a word play that hides the word *Asshole*, an insult to the director referred to in the poem. Other examples like this include *fellow sit isn'ts* for *fellow citizens* (CP 548) and *oweld song/ohld song* for *old song* (CP 336), the latter as a means to simulate the archaisms proper to traditional poetry.

Anagrams consist of the transposition of letters and morphemes in a word or expression with the aim of creating a ludic effect (Coulmas, [1996] 1999: 17). Traditionally speaking, anagrams were conceived as a way to hide mysteries. Examples of artists using this kind of wordplay are Nabokov and Verlaine, who masked themselves under the anagrammatic pseudonyms *Vivian Darkbloom* and *Pauvre Lélian*. In the case of the experimental poems by Cummings, misspellings producing anagrams (CP 334, CP 396, CP 726) are also connected to the idea of covering up some information. This is the case for the word *grasshopper* (CP 396), which is uncovered in the last line of a poem after having appeared as *r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r*, *PPEGORHRASS* and *gRrEaPsPhOs* in the preceding lines. In this way, the complicated reading of the poem is reflected in the particular disposition of the letters of this word which, together with the high fragmentation of the composition and the use of blank spaces, makes the reader remain unaware of the real

content until arriving at the last line of the poem. The names of Charles Darwin, Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein also appear hidden under *radarw leschin* (CP 334) and *ardensteil-henarub-izabeth* (CP 726). While the former was revealed by Cummings himself in a letter to his editor, Norman Friedman (Webster, 2014), the latter is defined by Kidder (1979: 208) as ‘a wonderful word combining Elizabeth Arden’s beauty treatments with hens, henna, rubs, and perhaps curiously the New York spelling of “style”’.

Spoonerisms are a form of word play very similar to anagrams, with the only difference being that in the first case, only a few letters transpose their position by mistake or with a comic intention. In this sense, the expression *Rish and Foses* (CP 321), which stands for *Fish and Roses*, is the only case that I have identified in E. E. Cummings’ experimental poetry.

### 4.3 Other functions

Though generally speaking all forms of spelling foregrounding may affect the reading of the poems, the analysis taken here reveals three concrete cases (CP 28, CP 384, CP 396) in which it is much more evident the way misspellings seem to alter the reading process. The most evident sample is the aforementioned poem ‘r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r’ (CP 396), where Cummings jumbles the letters from the word *grasshopper* throughout the poem, foregrounding the text itself and thus forcing the readers to pay greater attention to unconventional grapheme sequences in the lines. Misspelling here serves to not only hide the nature of the insect until the last line, but also to force readers to switch from linear to non-linear reading, thus making us follow a movement that is similar to that of the grasshopper. Expressions like *ooch* (CP 28), *wheeEEE* and *balllllll* (CP 384) are also samples of this category, where the additional letters are likely to force us to read the corresponding words with a more prolonged duration than we normally would.

Together with this minor function, I have identified one poem (CP 400) where misspellings represent interruptions. In the aforementioned poem, there are some missed final letters in words such as *unders* [*understand*], *posi* [*possibly*] and *sil* [*silly*]. Unconventional spelling here points towards the overlapping between the two speakers in the conversation reproduced in this poem. In this way, the chaotic fragmentation of this conversation does not allow communication to run smoothly, causing a communicative problem that is not resolved until the last line in this composition, where one of the speakers gets to explain himself after the interrupted conversation: *but what i mean is Nobody Understands Her RERLY [REALLY]*.

The final minor function consists of visual iconicity, which is produced when misspellings indicate an analogy between letters and words and their corresponding meaning. According to the 10 poems (CP 201, CP 351, CP 392, CP 423, CP 431, CP 448, CP 455, CP 471, CP 488, CP 548) in which this effect has been observed, this kind of iconic effect can be classified into those cases in which there is a clear, direct visual similarity, and those in which there is not such a close connection. Within the former group (CP 392, CP 351), misspellings affecting the letter <o> help with identifying a baseball (CP 392) and a moon (CP 351) in this letter. Within the second group (CP 201, CP 423, CP 431, CP 448, CP 455, CP 471, CP 488, CP 548), Webster (2001) has shown how some

of Cummings' foregrounding devices present in these poems are connected to the idea of movement. He has referred to these devices as 'non-magic iconism', as it is the reader who creates the iconic effect through mental operations instead of creating a direct link between the meaning and the icon:

Cummings' visual poetry usually stresses the need for the reader to create movement and life. For example, Cummings' famous iconic description of Buffalo Bill's marksmanship, "break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat", imitates both the rapidity of William Cody's gunfire and the speech pattern of an American reporting the event, but it does not seek to create a magic connection between icon and content (nature), or to call forth the absent and transform it in some way.

(Webster, 2001: 108)

Though Webster (2001) highlights a process of spacing (and not spelling) deviation, he foregrounds the existing connection between iconicity and movement in Cummings' poetry. In the case of misspellings, these suggest both discovery (CP 201, CP 423, CP 431, CP 448, CP 455, CP 471, CP 488) and concealment (CP 431, CP 448, CP 548) through the progressive addition and suppression of letters. Some cases in this category include the flood of sunshine (CP 423) in *mmamakmakemakesWwOwoRworLworld*, the persistency of cough (CP 488) in *ccocoucoughcoughcoughi//ing* or the disappearance of birds in the sky (CP 448) in the expression *are/ ar/ a*.

## 5 Conclusion

In this article I have analysed 66 experimental poems by E. E. Cummings in which non-standard spelling is used. My analysis has revealed that, in these poems, misspellings are an efficient tool for Cummings, as they reinforce the content of the texts and produce particular effects. These effects or creative functions are conveyed through four main devices for spelling foregrounding: letter insertion, substitution, omission and transposition. I have also suggested that all these devices result more frequently in the representation of linguistic varieties and plays on words, but also in the control of the reading process, the indication of interruptions and the representation of iconicity. Whereas some previous notions exist regarding misspellings (Cureton, 1986; Friedman, 1960; Von Abele, 1955), my contribution to this field is the establishment of four different unconventional patterns in Cummings' poetry and of five poetic effects that derive from those devices, both inferred in a systematic way.

Cummings' use of unconventional spelling has also indicated that there are some connections between certain devices and some creative functions. More concretely, letter substitution is especially connected to the representation of linguistic varieties, while letter transposition is more closely related to plays on words and control of the reading process. The connection is by no means absolute, as any device may produce any effect, but the poems suggest a closer link in the aforementioned cases.

Contrary to what some critics claimed in the past, it can be seen from the poems analysed that spelling foregrounding devices in Cummings' experimental poetry do not correspond to an arbitrary practice. As suggested by Baum (1962: xv), 'he [Cummings] is

an exciting poet who rouses critics to violent disagreement'. Within this framework, Blackmur (1931) states that

The typographical peculiarities of his verse have caught and irritated public attention. [...] [These features] will have a possible critical importance to the textual scholarship of the future; but extensive consideration of these peculiarities today has very little importance, carries almost no reference to the *meaning* of the poems.

What is more, this critic considers that these devices 'are dangerous only because since their uses cannot readily be defined, they often obscure rather than clarify the exact meaning'. However, the analysis of misspelling in the poems selected drives towards a totally alternative perspective to approach Cummings' stylistic features. Firstly, the difficulty sometimes implied in Cummings' spelling style may turn into enjoyment if readers are provided with additional information and tools that may help in their reading. If this is the case, the critical importance of these features becomes highlighted (and, in fact, has been since the 1970s): the more we know about Cummings' style, the more we will appreciate reading his poems. This is demonstrated in previous stylistic approaches to Cummings' production, and this is what I have tried to do here, where the analysis of misspelling devices indicates further significance behind unconventionality. It is not just that misspelling is connected to the meaning of the poems, but also that it serves creative functions that can enrich the reading process. Secondly, this research demonstrates that unconventional devices in Cummings' poetry are neither dangerous nor obscure, but they can be defined through a close stylistic approach to the samples. In line with this, all misspelling devices have been identified and classified; in addition, creative functions implied by these devices have been ascertained by analysing all the poems that include this practice. It is the frequency of appearance and the expressive value of these functions that has determined their classification, so as to facilitate the understanding of the poems and the devices involved.

The proposed perspective that I have shown in this paper leads also to the consideration of further graphological elements. If spelling has proved to be stylistically significant, it is logical to think that punctuation marks, capitalization, spacing and other visual aspects will also be useful devices for Cummings to reinforce meaning and perform additional functions. With the potential of unconventional spelling being considerable (and not just restricted to dialect representation), my research has aimed to develop the understanding of spelling foregrounding in the experimental poems of E. E. Cummings and to have established a starting point for future studies on this topic.

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## Notes

1. The expression ‘oride lesgo eckshun’ [‘all right, let’s go, action’], taken from E. E. Cummings’ poem ‘The Mind Is’ (CP 474), represents the words of a Hollywood film director asking the actors and the technical team to start filming a scene.
2. This paper is based on parts of my Ph.D. thesis, *Procedimientos grafológicos en el discurso poético experimental de E. E. Cummings* (Gómez-Jiménez, 2013). The research carried out there consisted of a stylistic approach to unconventional patterns in spelling, punctuation, typography and layout in the experimental poetry by E. E. Cummings. The research project was supervised by Dr. Marta Falces Sierra and defended in 2013 at the University of Granada (Spain). See the References list for details.
3. The concept ‘spelling’ as used in this paper refers exclusively to lettering. This formulation avoids, thus, including under ‘spelling’ any reference to other writing issues that have traditionally been considered within, as in the case of capitalization, punctuation marks or symbols. This terminological choice is based on the classification used by Levenston (1992) for the analysis of graphical aspects of texts, and it is used here because it makes it possible to organize the study of graphological aspects in a clear and methodical way.
4. This approach to linguistic variation, which is the one I have followed in this study, departs from the perspective displayed by Halliday et al. (1964: 75–110) in *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching* and later developed by Halliday in *Language as Social Semiotics* ([1978] 1992). Following a social approach to language, these authors propose a distinction between language according to users (dialects) and language according to use (register), which is the basic scheme accepted and followed within stylistics and many other subfields of linguistics. To obtain further information on this topic, see the aforementioned books by Halliday et al. (1964) and Halliday ([1978] 1992), as well as Holmes (1992), who follow the conventional scheme established by the formers. Further stylistic approaches to linguistic variation and its textual representation are present in many seminal works in stylistics, namely those of Leech (1969) and Short (1996: 80–105) who develop this aspect more in depth.
5. There is a serious debate on the status of graphology as related to phonology. While some scholars have claimed that graphology is an analogous mode to phonology, others have preferred to promote the idea that the former possesses its own structures, that do not correspond to that of the latter, as in the case of Halliday et al. (1964: 50–51). This second viewpoint, which is the one reflected in this research, recognizes that the aim of graphology is to represent what is spoken in a written medium, but it offers the possibility to consider this level in an independent way, with its own rules and structures. Some very influential work in this branch are Vachek (1973), Sampson (1985) and Coulmas ([1989] 1991, [1996] 1999). Within stylistics, see also Baron (2001) on the role of punctuation in speech and writing.
6. To obtain more information about rural dialects, see Halliday ([1978] 1992: 33–35), where the author develops some varieties depending on the rural or urban origin of speakers.
7. Other scholars contributing to the better understanding of newyorkese in Cummings poetry are Chott (1997) and Kennedy ([1980] 1994: 391). The paper by Chott (1997) is particularly interesting, for he offers a detailed analysis and a transliteration of ‘oil tel duh woil doi sez’ [‘I’ll tell the world, I says’] (CP 312).
8. These Black English features have been taken from Davies (2005: 66–71).
9. See Selinker (1969, 1972), whose contribution to the concept of ‘interlanguage’ is considered the point of departure for further studies on this topic, like Tarone (1979, 2006, 2009) and Tarone and Liu (1995).

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## Author biography

Eva María Gómez Jiménez is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Granada (Spain). Her research interests include discourse analysis, general linguistics and stylistics, with a focus on the study of graphological elements. She defended her thesis on E. E. Cummings' experimental poetry in 2013 at the University of Granada, after spending time for research purposes at the University of Birmingham and University College Roosevelt (Utrecht University). Since then, she has disseminated the results of her research while collaborating with the English department at the University of Granada in teaching English Linguistics and English for Specific Purposes.