

‘The Only News I know’: Emily Dickinson’s Alternative Sets

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Abstract

Poets are well aware of the importance of alternatives in lyric response. Indeed, what is implied in a lyric can be more important than what is stated. Recent psycholinguistic work claims to have established the ‘psychological reality’ of alternative sets, said by semanticists to be relevant to the meaning of focus items like *only* and *even* (Spalek and Zeldes 2017). This paper is a preliminary examination of how Emily Dickinson characteristically employs the focus particle *only* and the emergent alternative sets it prompts to shape the reader’s continuing expectations. In many poems, like “the Only News I know” and “I measure every Grief I meet,” the word *only* participates in a thematization of the dynamics of alternatives. In other poems like “Glee, the great storm is over” the word *only* works locally to enliven the possibilities that she seems overtly to dismiss. Taken together, the examples raise the issue of what counts as meaningful in language. Concepts activated by discourse may or may not be subsequently selected, but this fundamental mode of anticipation, the future now that is Dickinson’s great theme, shapes the form of language itself.

Keywords: focus, alternative sets, cognitive poetics

Emily Dickinson famously said ‘I dwell in possibility, a fairer House than Prose’ (#466),¹ and indeed she is wondrously interested in possibilities of all kinds. One challenge of thinking about possibilities is that they tend to multiply infinitely. If we dwell only in possibility we may miss an opportunity to convert something from the possible to the real. The trick is to narrow the set of possibilities to a manageable size, so that possibilities begin to seem practical, achievable.

This is not Dickinson’s problem alone, but all of ours. It is a natural language problem. In everyday discourse we introduce new information in nearly every exchange. The challenge of new information is that it is new, so interlocutors must be constantly working out referents in order to keep up with the progress of the discourse. **Focus** is the linguistic means of marking new information in a sentence to help interlocutors narrow the scope of their pragmatic searches so they can more easily locate referents in the discourse ground. Stress, intonation, and focus particles like *only* or *even* are just a few of the many ways focus is marked in natural language. According to the most influential theories of focus, the function of focus is to indicate ‘the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions’ (Krifka, 2008: 247; see also Spalek, Gotzner, and Wartenburger, 2014: 68).

How do listeners know what the relevant alternatives are? In the quest to understand how focus works, semanticists, especially Mats Rooth in his 1985 dissertation and later work, have proposed methods for generating the set of relevant alternative items in a truth-conditional framework. Subsequently, psycholinguists have established the psychological reality of these ‘alternative sets’ using lexical priming and a variety of other experimental paradigms. Spalek and Zeldes (2017) provides a useful summary of this work. Some of the findings include:

1. Contrastive intonation creates a representation of an alternative set when no such set is enumerated contextually, and that no such set is primed when intonation contrast is lacking (Braun & Tagliapietra 2010, Gotzner 2014).
2. Spalek, Gotzner, and Wartenburger (2014) extended those results for focus particles in German, especially *nur* and *sogar*, ‘only’ and ‘even’. They used small narrative sentences with correctives, like

There are shirts, trousers, and jackets in the catalogue.

I bet Matthias has bought shirts and trousers.

No, he only bought jackets.

Later they asked subjects to recall the items that Matthias bought. Results showed that particles plus intonation provide a more robust effect than intonation alone, and that specified alternatives are remembered much longer, 30 minutes as opposed to 4 minutes later for 50 items, when marked by focus particles in addition to intonation.

3. In a corpus study, Spalek and Zeldes (2017) found that, in German, focus items preceded by *nur* ‘only’ were followed by sentences that contained over 77% more specified alternatives than focus items that were not overtly marked. This result is consistent with the hypothesis that the formation of alternative sets could be learned in response to everyday discourse, because if listeners learn to expect contextually relevant items to occur after an item is focused, they are likely to be rewarded.

Cognitive poetics studies how the embodied aspects of language are characteristically employed in poetry. Poetic patterns disclose the undertow of embodiment in language. Alternative sets are interesting because they influence and respond to meaning and reference yet are not themselves selected as meaningful. When psycholinguists say that alternative sets are psychologically real, they mean that they ‘exhibit reliably reproducible empirical effects’ (Spalek and Zeldes, 2017: 27). Yet language is not carried out in an isolated space, cordoned off from other brain-body systems. In a spreading activation theory of lexical access, these primed words or meanings should carry some weight in discourse because they are in some sense present. What is the status of these ghostly entities?

I suggest that looking at how poets employ focus markers might disclose what roles alternative sets can play in discourse comprehension, especially on the level of affect. For example, the forward looking characteristic of focus markers documented by Spalek and Zeldes (2017) suggests that listeners might feel the presence of alternative sets as ‘anticipation.’ Emily Dickinson is a good candidate to read because her spare style tends to lade words with more than their usual share of significance. Thus my working question is, does Dickinson's use of the word *only* disclose any usage patterns that reflect a sensitivity to the presence of alternative sets? In other words, might they have been cognitively real to her?

The corpus for this study was the poems as collected and enumerated in R. W. Franklin's 1998 Variorum edition. I selected the exclusive focus marker *only* for examination because it was the form explicitly tested by Spalek and Zeldes (2017).² Dickinson uses the word *only* 121

times in 100 different poems (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). I read all of these poems and selected for discussion several poems that seemed to represent frequent patterns of usage.

Dickinson scholars have long recognized that in her writing she has responded richly to her dictionary, the 1844 edition of Webster's.³

ON-LY, a. [Sax. *ænlic*, one-like.]

1. Single; one alone; as, John was the only man present.
2. This and no other. This is an only child.
3. This above all others. He is the only man for music. – Johnson.

ON-LY, adv.

1. Singly; merely; barely; in one manner or for one purpose alone. I propose my thoughts only as conjecture. – Burnet. And to be loved himself, needs only to be known. – Dryden.
2. This and no other wise. Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. – Gen. vi.
3. Singly; without more; as, only begotten.

Dickinson uses all of these different meanings in her poetry. A frequent way that *only* appears in Dickinson's poetry follows the adjectival definitions 1 and 2 above. In these cases, which we might call Constrained Alternatives, the alternative set for the focused item is enumerated in context. An early poem about her sister-in-law Sue is a good example. It begins

One Sister have I in our house –
 And one, a hedge away.
 There's only one recorded,
 But both belong to me. ([#5](#), 1-4)

Here the alternative set has already been enumerated—one sister in the house and another next door. The fact that 'only one' has been recorded implies strongly that the term 'sister' is not to be taken in a strictly literal way for one of the individuals. I consider this use to be typical for the word in the language at large, not just for Dickinson. The poem continues to alternate between descriptions of the two sisters for another few lines, then dedicates itself to descriptions of Sue, pointing out the fact that Sue has chosen to be in their family, and finally that Dickinson 'chose this single star / From out the wide night's numbers –'. Looking back at the line with *only*, we see that the poem developed the member of the alternative set, the sister who had not been recorded.

So even with this constrained set, Dickinson's *only* gestures to the poem's heart through the alternative set rather than through the named element.

A second set of poems also uses adjectival definitions 1 or 2, but does not constrain the alternative sets so clearly. I refer to these as Thematics of Alternatives because the sense of alternatives dominates the structure of the poems. In [#820](#), Dickinson contrasts the things that she experiences with those things that we suppose other people might experience in the same situation.

The only news I know
 Is Bulletins all Day
 From Immortality.
 The only Shows I see –
 Tomorrow and Today –
 Perchance Eternity –
 The only one I meet
 Is God – The only Street –
 Existence – This traversed
 If other news there be –
 Or admirabler show –
 I'll tell it You –

The poem was written when she was visiting relatives in Boston to have her eyes examined. If it is read as a letter home, the alternative sets can be limited by context to those things normally experienced by someone from out of town visiting the big city. She might go to shows, hear exciting news or gossip, meet new people and go to new places. Indeed, such a letter might be expected by friends and relatives back home, who wish to enjoy all the news themselves. Here the items focused by *only* are certainly that ones to be attended to, in pointed opposition to the alternative sets, which are mundane by comparison.

A similar structure can be seen in [#550](#), 'I measure every Grief / I meet.' Though the word *only* appears just once, the poem is structured through the first six stanzas by an enumeration of different ways people endure the pains they have experienced. The seventh stanza shifts to consider different kinds of grief:

The Grieved – are many –
 I am told –
 There is the various Cause –
 Death – is but one –
 and comes but once –
 And only nails the Eyes – (#550, 33-38)

Here the item we most prominently associate with grief, death, is minimized in its importance so that alternative griefs can be explored. The shift in perspective implied after ‘Death’ is disconcerting and detracts from the poem’s development. True, death only comes once to each dead person and does not ‘nail’ the soul or spirit, but a survivor can experience the deaths of many loved ones, each one adding to the grief already carried. Nonetheless, the poet is determined to examine additional causes of grief, some which may be more adamant than death:

There's Grief of Want – and
 Grief of Cold –
 A sort they call “Despair” –
 There's Banishment from
 native Eyes –
 In sight of Native Air – (39-44)

The poem concludes as the poet marvels that some griefs born by people ‘are like my own –’. The exercise in deliberately imagining alternative kinds of grief and responses to them has enriched the poet’s sympathies for the griefs of others but has also brought her closer to her own. Other poems similarly structured by a Thematics of Alternatives are [#670](#). ‘One crucifixion is recorded only’ and [#11](#), ‘Nobody knows this little rose.’

Poems that have the word *only* in their final lines highlight a particular function for *only* that is more local than thematic. The word produces a sort of enriched silence, with the alternative sets taking on greater import as the poem dies away. A poem of four stanzas, [#685](#), ‘Glee – The great storm is over –’, describes a shipwreck in which forty people were killed and 4 saved. In the third stanza the topic shifts to the adults telling the story of the shipwreck to the

children. How will they explain to the children what has happened to their lost loved ones? The poem concludes:

Then a silence – suffuse the story –
 And a softness – the Teller's eye –
 And the Children – no further
 question –
 And only the Sea – reply – (#685, 14-18, manuscript lineation)

As the poems comes to silence, the alternative set truly seems to echo like the waves themselves. Who else could be replying? The dead ones ‘Spinning upon the Shoals –’, the survivors, the story Teller, other children, even the church bell that rang and tolled in the second stanza? The sound of the sea becomes an image of the silence of all the people, living and dead, who cannot explain such a disaster.

A second example of Enriched Silence occurs in poem [#730](#), ‘You've seen Balloons set – Hav'nt You?’ It describes released balloons rising up over a crowd like swans, ‘Their Liquid Feet go softly out / Opon a Sea of Blonde –’. But one balloon does not succeed in its escape. It catches in a tree, ‘Tears open her imperial Veins – \ And tumbles in the Sea –’. The poem concludes:

The Crowd – retire with an Oath –
 The Dust in Streets – go down –
 And Clerks in Counting Rooms
 Observe – “‘Twas only a Balloon” – (#730, 22-25)

The effect is very similar to the conclusion of #685. The poet has dramatized the image of the escaping balloons, first by the extravagant metaphors used to describe the balloons, then by having the crowd applaud the display. The fickle crowd curses the last, lost balloon, then the ‘Clerks in Counting Rooms’—an image for the death of imagination if there ever was one—suck the life from the display with their pronouncement that it was ‘only a Balloon.’ Here the alternative set for ‘balloon’ is as large as a reader gives it time to develop. Into the silence the follows the final dash falls the richness of the reader’s response. The balloons had been swans, beautiful, imperial creatures spurning the air until they disappear into the vast sky. Why should the futile struggle of a lone balloon suck them back into the quotidian? With both poems it

appears that the alternative set primed in response to the focus particle *only* contributes to a dynamic richness that echoes after the poem's overt conclusion.

Poem #730 could also be an example of the way *only* contributes to a thematic of possibility widely found in Dickinson's poems. If an alternative set is constrained by context, or if the poet elaborates the focused items rather than their alternative sets, the sense of possibility is likewise constrained. Compared to #685, the conclusion of #730 gestures more toward the wideness of possibility in imaginative response. Poem [#166](#), 'Dust is the only Secret,' might also be seen as an example of enriched silence. Here, though, the silence is not overt because the line is positioned at the beginning of the poem rather than the end. Rather, a shift in topic slows the reader and allows for some echoing of an alternative set. The line is shaped almost like a riddle—surely everyone is aware that there are many more secrets in the world than just one? And I would not have put Dust at the top if I had to narrow them down.

Dust is the only Secret.

Death, the only One

You cannot find out all about

In his "native town." (#166, 1-4)

The poem continues with a second focus construction and continues to elaborate the focused item, Death, throughout, never returning to the topic of dust or its alternatives. Perhaps by parallelism we are to understand that Dust is an image for Death, but my deliberately literal reading objects that Death cannot be a secret if Dust is the only one. What interests me though is the movement from the first line to the next. The possibilities seem very wide for the first line, but narrow immediately in the second, though they are obviously numerous. It is as if the poem changes its mind as to how it wishes to proceed.

Dickinson employs an additional adverbial meaning not listed by Webster's but recorded by the OED as '[Compare German *nur*.] As much as, just [*just* adv. 6c]. Frequently in conditional clauses introduced by *if*' (OED, only, adv., conj., and prep., 7). First recorded in 1782, this use was already frequent by the time Dickinson was writing, as evinced by such examples as T. S. Arthur's vignette, 'If I were only in heaven,' which appeared in *Harper's* in January of 1860. Dickinson's two-stanza poem [#1756](#) makes use of this idiom to contrast a current state of joy with imagined future griefs.

If all the griefs I am to have
 Would only come today,
 I am so happy I believe
 They'd laugh and run away. (#1756, 1-4)

This use of *only* does not have the same kind of exclusive focus as the simpler examples tested by the psycholinguists. That is, instead of meaning ‘this quality and no other,’ *only* combines with the modal *would* in the protasis to form what Huddleston and Pullam call a ‘remote conditional’ (751). In this context it means something like ‘not this quality but some other’ — the focused item seems unlikely or impossible. Here, ‘griefs’ is not the focused item, but their coming ‘today’ that is wished for. Nevertheless, the second stanza elects to substitute ‘joys’ for ‘griefs’ into the formula, an antonym and thus a closely associated term.

If all the joys I am to have
 Would only come today,
 They could not be so big as this
 That happens to me now. (5-8)

The wish is equally unlikely to occur, but it elicits an apodosis of a different quality. The contrast between grief and happiness in the first stanza yields a lively image of the griefs being changed by joy. The contrast in the second stanza is one of size, not so evocative for Dickinson and prompting a more abstract image and contemplative tone. It is not clear from the semantics nor the psycholinguistic research if alternative sets play a role in interpreting “if only” clauses, but the word *only* seems important here as a mark of the grand alternative—it would be great if this thing would happen! So often when *only* is involved, we see the poet moving away from vague or wide possibilities and toward more specific alternatives whose contrast forms or informs the thought structure of the poem.

As one final example out of many possible poems illustrating the way *only* repeatedly appears to form or enlarge a theme of alternatives for Dickinson, consider the late poem [#1585](#), ‘I groped for him before I knew.’

I groped for him
 before I knew

With solemn
 nameless need
 All other bounty
 sudden chaff
 For this fore -
 shadowed Food
 Which others
 taste and
 spurn and
 sneer -
 Though I within
 suppose
 That consecrated
 it could be
 The only Food that grows (#1585, manuscript lineation)

Essentially a riddle poem, it develops the alternatives of foodstuffs as metaphor for that which satisfies her 'solemn nameless need,' though only the vague terms 'bounty' and 'food' are used. Others spurn this food because it tastes bad, but the poet chooses to focus on the effect of the food rather than other qualities. The food that grows is the alternative she selects, implying with *only* that other foods, perhaps those that 'others' prefer, do not grow and are thus poor or ineffective. *Only* occurs in the final line, and again the enriched silence is felt as the reading comes to an end. It cannot escape unnoticed that the word 'grows' and the lack of a period underscore an echo effect after the final line. Whoever or whatever the poet blindly groped for, the 'him' of the first line, has been selected from all other possibilities, finally understood as the answer to what had been a shapeless desire. As much as we are enticed by Dickinson's claim to 'dwell in possibility,' the story of *only* in her poetry shows possibilities repeatedly resolving to alternatives, often to a single selection.

It may be that examining just the word *only* in any poet's oeuvre would lead us to think of the poet as resolving alternatives, for that is of course the core semantics of the exclusive focus particle. I have attempted, however, to draw on poems in which the meaning of *only*

contributes to a theme of the poem, something that is not a necessary requirement for all poetic uses of the word. Poems of Constrained Alternatives or Thematic Alternatives illustrate the psychological reality of alternative sets in the weight that they lend to the construction of the poem. The poems of Enriched Silence draw more directly on the alternate sets—the unmentioned alternatives enliven the play of ideas and emotions in response to the local construction. It is hard not to see relevant alternatives as playing a particularly important role in Dickinson’s poetics. This conclusion is consistent with the psycholinguistic claim for the psychological reality of alternative sets in constructions with the focus particle *only*, and begins to give us a sense of what kinds of effects items can have that are primed for activation yet are not specifically selected as meaningful in a sentence.

Notes

¹ All Dickinson poems are numbered following Franklin’s *Variorum*. The texts were taken from the Emily Dickinson Archive; links to poem texts are embedded in the poem number when it is first introduced. If manuscript lineation is used, it is noted parenthetically. All ED material at the Archive is governed by a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) (available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/legalcode>).

² See König 1991, page 33 for an explanation of ‘exclusive’ vs. ‘inclusive’ focus particles.

³ Information about Webster’s and the quotation from it are taken from the Emily Dickinson Lexicon.

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