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***Enigmatic meaning
construction in Paul Celan's
poetry and some evolutionary
and cognitive outlooks***

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Part I

An analysis of nominal
compounds and minimal
expressions in Celan's poetry

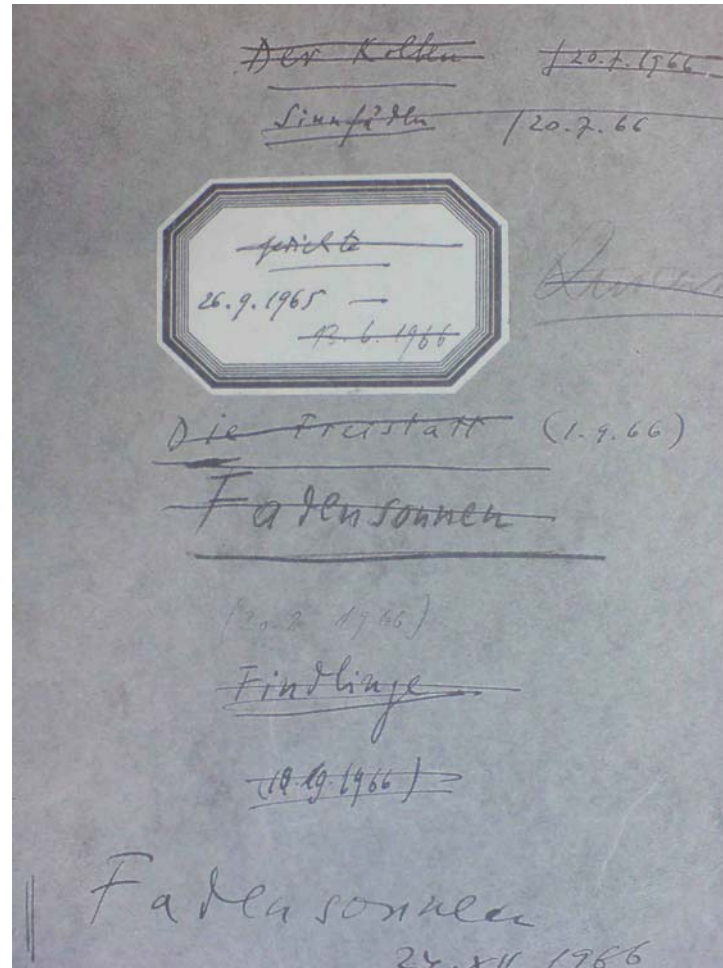
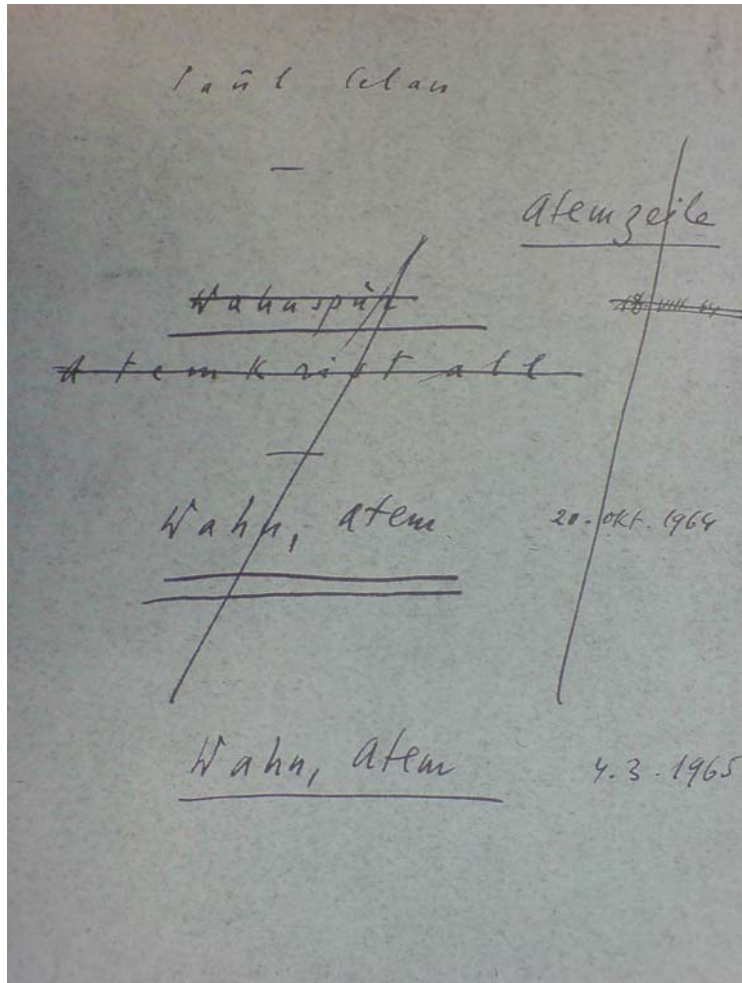


The poet Paul Celan (his family name was Ansel) was born in Czernowitz (Bukowina) in 1920. He went to Paris in 1938 to study medicine but returned to Czernowitz in 1939. He stayed in Rumania until 1947 when he fled to Vienna and 1948 came to Paris to study German Linguistics and Literature. In 1959 he became lecturer of German at the École Normal Supérieure (ENS) in Paris. After 1961 he had to be treated in different psychiatric clinics. He committed suicide in Paris 1971.

Compounds in experimental poetry: analysis of some compounds in poems by Paul Celan (1920-1971)

<i>Titles of collections:</i>	year
Mohn und Gedächtnis (Poppy and remembrance)	(1952)
Von Schwelle zu Schwelle (From threshold to threshold)	(1955)
Sprachgitter (Language grid)	(1959)
Die Niemandrose (The no one's rose)	(1963)
Atemwende (Breath turn)	(1967)
Fadensonnen (Fathom suns)	(1968)
Lichtzwang (Light compulsion)	(1970)
Schneepart (Snow part)	1971)
Zeitgehöft (Time stead; Homestead of time))	(1976)

Variants of names for collections



The number of proposals tested shows how important they were for the author.

The collection at left was finally named: *Atemwende*, (breath-turn) the one at the right: *Fadensonnen* (fathom suns).

Nonce-compounds as minimal utterances in titles of poem books by Paul Celan

- Sprachgitter :SG (language/speech–grid/fence)
- Niemandrose :NR (nobody’s/no one’s rose)
- Atemwende :AW (breath(ing) /
– turn/turnabout/reversal)
- Fadensonnen :FS (thread/fiber/wire/ fathom –suns)
- Lichtzwang :LZ (light
–compulsion/necessity/restraint)
- Schneepart :SP (snow–part (icle))
- Zeitgehöft :ZG (time–group of farm buildings)

Compounds in the Celan corpus referring to language

- Sprachwaage(NR) : language-weighing machine
 - Sprachtürme (AW) : language-towers
 - Sprachnebel (LZ) : language-mist/fog
- and with Wort (word):
- Worthöhlen (LZ) : word-caves
 - Wortwaage (NR) : word-weighing machine
 - Wortspur (AW) : word-track/trace
 - Wordwand (AW) : word-wall
 - Wortsand (NR) : word-sand
 - Wortwege (NP) : word-lanes
 - Wortlitze (SP) : word-braid
 - Wortschatten (SP) : word-shadow

Distribution of heavy/central and restrictive/peripheral constituents

	<i>determinative constituent</i>	<i>determined constituent</i>
Sprachgitter	Sprache (language)	Gitter (grid, fence)
Niemandrose	Niemand(s) (nobody's)	Rose (rose)
Atemwende	Atem (breath)	Wende (turn, reversal)
Fadensonnen	Faden (thread)	Sonne (sun)
Lichtzwang	Licht (light)	Zwang (compulsion)
Schneepart	Schnee (snow)	Part (part)
Zeitgehöft	Zeit (time)	Gehöft (group of farm-buildings)

Proliferation of the type of nonce compound from the titles to the poems

In the collection: ***Atemwende*** (Breath turn) we find:

- *Atemseil* (breath-rope)
- *Atemkristall* (breath-crystal)
- *Steinatem* (stone-breath) (*Atem* as kernel)

In the other collections similar compounds based on *breath* show up:

- *Niemandsrose* : Atembau (breath-fabric)
Atemmünze (breath-coin/cash)
- *Schneepart* : Atemnot (shortage of breath)

The continuous breadth (standing for life/soul) is broken down to limited forms or is lacking (*Atemnot*)

Frequency of nominal roots

Aug, Auge, Augen	148	Stein	48	Himmel	34
Wort	77	Namen	46	Stunde	34
Hand,Hände	67	Schatten	43	Meer	33
Nacht	67	Herz	42	Licht	29
Welt	53	Haar	22	Wasser	26
Zeit	52	Mund	39	Seele	25

The colors indicate different lexical fields: red: human; green: language; turquoise: time; blue: continuous (mass)

Some underlying principles

1. Key words of the author are statistically prominent (high recurrence) and sketch the semantic frame of the poetry in question;
2. Simple binary relational patterns underlie the meaning construction.
3. Inherent dynamic features of the constituents may be used to infer relations/events and actions:
 - part (in *Schneepart*), assembly of farm buildings (*Gehöft*)
 - thread (*Faden*) as opposed to disk (*Scheibe*)
 - antagonistic actions: reversal (*Wende*), compulsion (*Zwang*)
 - negation: nobody (*niemand*)
 - barriers: fence (*Gitter*)



Espenbaum

From: Mohn und Gedächtnis
(1952)

**Espenbaum, dein Laub blickt weiß ins Dunkel.
Meiner Mutter Haar ward nimmer weiß.**

**Löwenzahn, so grün ist die Ukraine.
Meine blonde Mutter kam nicht heim.**

**Regenwolke, säumst du an den Brunnen?
Meine leise Mutter weint für alle.**

**Runder Stern, du schlingst die goldne Schleife.
Meiner Mutter Herz ward wund von Blei.**

**Eichne Tür, wer hob dich aus den Angeln?
Meine sanfte Mutter kann nicht kommen.**

The poem Aspen Tree (translation)

Aspen Tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well do you hover?
My quiet mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.
My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?
My gentle mother cannot return.

(cf.
<http://www.penwith.co.uk/artofeurope/poetry.htm>).

The poem has five strophes and each one begins with a minimal utterance, either a compound or a noun phrase:

- Aspen tree (Eспенbaum)
- Dandelion (Löwenzahn = lion tooth)
- Rain cloud (Regenwolke)
- Round star (Runder Stern)
- Oaken door (Eichne Tür)

The first line is always completed by a sentence, two of them being questions. The second verse of each strophe (stanza) has “my mother” as recurrent topic.

Distribution of major topics

<i>First theme</i>	<i>First elaboration</i>	<i>Thematic coda</i>
Espenbaum (Aspen-tree)	white / dark	hair / white
Löwenzahn (Dandelion)	green (implicit: yellow)	yellow-haired
Regenwolke (Rain cloud)	well / weep	quiet
Runder Stern (Round star)	golden	lead
Eichne Tür (Oaken door)	lifted	soft

Espenbaum: Aus: Mohn und
Gedächtnis (1952)

Reception of the poem „**Todesfuge**“

- Already in Vienna a first collection of poems by Celan had been published. It had the title: **Der Sand aus den Urnen** . It had been printed on cheap paper in a style which did not please the author. After some years Celan allowed the book to be destroyed. He had sold nine books.
- This volume contained already the poem **Todesfuge** which became Celan's most known poem.
- It remained as the author himself totally unknown in this period of Celan's life.

Source: <http://www.hagalil.com/archiv/2000/11/celan.htm>

Todesfuge

- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland
dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne
er pfeift seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz
- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt
man nicht eng
- Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen
Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng
- Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus
Deutschland
- dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

<http://www.lyrikline.org/index.php?id=162&author=pc00&show=Poems&poemId=66&cHash=a020741185>



Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
 we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
 drink it and drink it
 we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there
 A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
 he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
 he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter he whistles his dogs up
 he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in the earth
 he commands us strike up for the dance

Translation of the two
 first strophes

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at night
 we drink in the mornings at noon we drink it at nightfall
 drink it and drink it
 A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
 he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
 Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie
 there

- Two strophes; cf. <http://www.penwith.co.uk/artofeurope/poetry.htm>.

Todesfuge (fugue of death) 1952

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
we drink it at noon in the morning
we drink it at night
drink it and drink it

Weißer Milch

Sprachgitter (language grid) 1959

Augenrund zwischen den Stäben.

Eye-round

Flimmertier Lid

rudert nach oben,
gibt einen Blick frei.

Cilium-animal

Analysis of the compounds

In the new poems (after Celan's move to Paris), the compounds are nonce compounds and in general enigmatic:

- “Todesfuge” (Todestango) refers to a piece of music (Fuge/Tango/ ...) and associates it with death. Historically one may reconstruct a coexistence (or precedence) in time of music playing and killing in the concentration camp; but in general the semantic relation remains ambiguous (Topic/context/...).
- “Eye-round” is like a nonce transformation of “round eye” with an inversion of word order, which increases the strangeness.
- “Cilium-animal” could be a real animal, but the immediately following “Lid” (lid) shows that the compound describes metaphorically a body part following the schema: *body parts are animals*.

In general very basic types of association like binding processes are used to give meaning to the compounds.

Structural repetitions and parallelisms in the poem „Todesfuge“

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
 wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
 wir trinken und trinken

In blue repeated temporal specifications: Frühe, abends, mittags, morgens, nachts (N=5)

In red repetition of the verb: trinken (5x + ellipse)

Repetition of sentences:

wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng (2x)

Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
 der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete (2x)

ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete (2x)

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
 dein aschenes Haar Sulamith (2x)

Gadamer's hermeneutic view on Celan's poetic strategy (as a kind of control)

- “The blocklike speech, in which the individual words which stimulate impressions are situated next to each other, does not mean that words cannot be conjoined in the unity of an intention of meaning. But the accomplishment of this is a challenge left to the reader. It is by no means the case that the poet arbitrarily conceals or obscures the unity of meaning, This is precisely how the poet seeks to reveal something. Through the blocklike assemblage the poet releases the multidimensionality of the associations of meaning which is suppressed by the practical unity of intention in logically controlled and one-dimensional everyday speech.”
- Translation in: Gadamer, 1997: Who am I and Who are you?, p. 167

Part IIa

Minimal syntax/language in Celan's poetry

Minimal languages

- Simple or even minimal languages are a widespread but not well-defined phenomenon. Roughly speaking, the early stages of language acquisition, e.g. at the one- or two-word level, the foreign language competence of beginners, the pidgins and jargons used for special situations (e.g. bilingual encounters), the language of mentally handicapped persons and aphasics are only specimens out of a large field of reduced language usage.
- Beyond the human species (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), the linguistic skills of primates and the reconstructed language of *Homo neanderthaliensis* or even *Homo erectus* are possible candidates. David Gil (2006) suggested a hypothetical language, called IMA (Isolating-monocategorical-Associative):

- The syntax and semantics of such a language are minimal, insofar as the words are simple, i.e. they cannot be functionally decomposed, a differentiation of clear-cut word-classes such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc., does not exist and semantic compositionality basically follows a law of association, i.e. a concept A is linked / bound to a concept B.
- He argued that Indonesian is a language which has many features of an IMA-language, although it is functionally equivalent to other languages. This means that the complexities of syntax are possibly only a typological choice which does not fundamentally concern the nature of human language, but is rather due to historical contingencies. The nature of human language can therefore already be recognized in a *minimal language*.

Nominal compounds and minimal noun phrases as minimal language

- If we take a compound as a kind of utterance per se, outside of its possibly complex syntactic and textual context, its constituents are often simplex morphemes and thus morphologically isolated. Although these morphemes may belong to specific syntactic classes of the language in question, this feature has only a reduced significance for the construction of the meaning of the compound. Thus the head of the compound decides on the syntactic class of the whole compound (nominal, verbal, adjectival compound), but the satellites can stem from very different syntactic classes. The most important feature, which will be our major concern here, is the quasi-associational construction of the meaning of the compound out of the meanings of its constituents. The necessary condition for such a construction is the ability to bind two concepts together. This capacity may be neurologically specified in the theory of *temporal binding* which I shall sketch briefly.

Part IIb

Associative composition in a cognitive perspective

Temporal binding as the basic compositional principle

- The binding process is one of temporal *synchronization* of neural assemblies, which form wholes (gestalts) from parts and one of *desynchronization* which distinguishes figure and ground. Cf. Engel (2004)
- This type of analysis concerns primarily the composition in perception, attentiveness and memory, but one may conjecture a parallel process for words (at least those related to perceptual information) and their composition in syntactic constructions.
- Temporal binding of neurons could be the equivalent of an object-concept.

The basic idea of temporal binding

Parts or features of a visual whole are linked by the synchronic firing of a set of neurons (an assembly) during a short time interval.

In the picture of a woman with a cat the parts and features of the cat and those of the woman are bound together by the internal synchrony of the assemblies and they may be distinguished by the asynchrony of these assemblies.

In ambiguous pictures, e.g. a double face with a candle or a simple face with a candle in front of it, the brain can bind different areas of the picture and differentiate between foreground and background. The binding may be recognized by the synchronic firing rates.

Memory can fix certain bindings top down and thus stabilize these associations. Cf.: Engel, Fries und Singer, 2001: 707

Conditions on binding (synchrony)

1. Simplicity (stability) of the constituents. This is given with embodied entities or those selected as priming in the context.
2. Gestalt-criteria. The constituents must allow for a “Gestalt” i.e. a “good” combined figure.
3. Binding is facilitated if dynamic configurations exist to which the two constituents may be fitted; this is the case if a quasi-verbal concept is present or may be inferred.
4. The priming of certain concepts or semantic fields is achieved via frequency effects, i.e. the context of a poem, a poem collection or the poetic oeuvre of the author can achieve such a priming.
5. As a result a language world of the author is created in his poetry.

Some conclusions

- Minimal utterance structure is something underlying not only the grammar of every speech-event, showing up in conversation, in answering questions, in understanding disrupted speech, etc. It also constitutes a cognitive plateau, on which many semiotic processes stand in linguistic, gestured and visual communication. The complexities of lexical knowledge and the intricate difficulties of syntax are like supplementary layers which often hide the basic structures (as the associative cortex hides the brain stem). In innovative poetic communication this basic plateau shows up very clearly.
- There are several pathways one may chose to elaborate this plateau:

1. Augment and make the message more complex by using a more elaborated lexicon. Introduce neologisms or nonce compounds and an oxymoron or other prima facie contradictory materials.
2. Deconstruct ritualized complicated patterns and build up new, yet unusual linguistic patterns. This technique makes the construction of meaning less determined and leaves more choices of interpretation to the audience. It is clear that in order to guarantee some kind of communication between writer and audience, the new systems must contain lawful (predictable) patterns which can be learned quickly by an experienced audience.
3. Personal experience which may be at least partially shared with the reader (such as the holocaust experienced by Celan and reflected by his audience). It may constitute a frame of reference for the poem and thus restrict possible interpretations,
4. The poet can add so called poetic super-patterns, such as parallelisms, repetitions and their rhythm (in traditional poetry rime and meter). Cf. Jakobson's poetics.

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