**Introduction**

Our research project combines linguistic and literary expertise in the analysis of poems that are linguistically interesting and contain special interpretive difficulties. One example is Shakespeare’s sonnet 138, which shows an extraordinary awareness of linguistic phenomena, and is basically a poem about truth conditions.

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth
Unlearned in the world’s false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,

Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?

O love’s best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not t’have years told:
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be. (cited after Duncan-Jones 138)

**Lies**

In this sonnet, the speaker depicts his difficult relationship to an unknown lady; both speaker and lady seem to deceive each other – however, the exact nature of their lies is difficult to decipher, is in fact deliberately obscured. According to Coleman & Kay (1981, 28f.) a prototypical lie contains the following elements:

1. What the speaker says is untrue
2. The speaker believes that what he says is false
3. The speaker intends to deceive the hearer

1. In order to determine whether the statements made are true or false, it is necessary to know what exactly is said. For both speaker and lady there is more than one possible lie, and ambiguity makes it difficult to decide what they are actually lying about. 2. Similarly, in order to know whether the speaker believes something to be false, it is necessary to know what exactly he believes. 3. The speaker cannot deceive the lady (she knows that he is old), and through ‘talking’ about the matter in the poem, he makes it impossible to deceive either himself (he knows she lies), or the reader (we get full insight into his mind). The lady is unable to deceive him and the mutuality of their deception makes it dubious whether they actually want to properly deceive each other. The poem mentions several lies, but no-one is deceived.

**Formal means of identifying truth and factivity as the topic of this poem**

Through the use of factive “know” on the one hand, and non-factive verbs like “swear,” “lie” or “think” on the other, the sonnet puts emphasis on the question of what is true or false. By combining “I do believe her” with the factive “I know she lies” the speaker creates an outright contradiction. The statement “I know that p” implies that p is true and that the speaker believes p (Abusch 2002). Therefore, if taken literally, the speaker states simultaneously that he believes p and that he does not believe p. However, “believe” could also be reinterpreted to something like ‘to believe in’ or ‘to trust,’ thus rendering an interpretation such as ‘I still trust her, I have not lost confidence in her, though I know she lies’. This takes away the contradiction; believing her becomes a question of her character: it is possible to believe in her, even if she sometimes tells lies.
Additionally, Shakespeare uses verum focus to further highlight the importance of truth and falsity. Thus, the speaker says “I do believe her” (instead of ‘I believe her’), which parallels “my love swears” (a much stronger assertion than simply ‘my love says’).

**Ambiguity**
The ambiguous use of several keywords leaves it open how the different assertions are to be interpreted. “Love,” “truth,” “lie,” “unjust,” “vainly,” “seeming,” “flatter,” and “habit” can be assigned different meanings. Truth, for example, means both “faithfulness” (OED 1.a) and “truthfulness” (OED 4.). “To lie” can refer either to the telling of lies (OED v.1) or to lying in bed (OED v.1.1.f). “Seeming” can mean “deceptive” (OED vb.n.) or simply “suitable” (OED ppl.a.); equally, “flatter” can refer to insincere praise (OED 3.) or simply to caressing someone (OED 1.b).

**Different assertions**
Although we are confronted with a first-person (and potentially unreliable) speaker, it is necessary to take the speaker’s statements at face value, since they provide the only source of information. What then, does the speaker say, or lie about? “I believe her” can be seen as a lie, since it is contradicted by “I know she lies.” But what the speaker believes is left open and depends on what “made of truth” means. At the same time, the speaker’s strategy of seemingly believing what he knows to be false has the purpose of making him appear younger than he is. The speaker considers this as a lie, when he says in l. 10 “But wherefore say not I that I am old.”

That the lady is lying is made explicit in l. 2 (“she lies”) and l. 7 (“her false-speaking tongue”), but it is not clear what she is lying about. The only statement made directly by the lady is that in line 1 (“she swears”), namely that she is “made of truth” – and it is left open what she is (falsely) swearing about. Through the ambiguous meaning of “truth” and “lie” it is suggested that she is lying about her faithfulness. But apart from the accusation of unfaithfulness (which is only made implicitly), the poem does not tell us what the lady might lie about if she is not unfaithful.

In addition to the speaker’s utterances and what he foists on the lady, we get the impression that there is another, more insightful instance, a kind of authorial, omniscient voice. “She knows” in l. 6 is a statement about the lady’s thoughts – unknown to anyone but herself. Line 8 is a general statement about their relationship; lines 11-12 and 14 are statements about relationships at large. The statements of this authorial commentator present the kind of relationship described either in a positive or in a negative way; this largely depends on the meaning of “seeming” and “flatter,” and also, again, on the double meaning of “lie.”

**Conclusion**
Everything in this poem seems to have two sides, two different meanings, and most of the words involving knowledge and cognition are related to both speaker and lady. “To know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-conditions” (e.g., Heim&Kratzer 2006, 14), but although the poem contains several clear statements, their truth conditions remain ambiguous. The sonnet thus shows Shakespeare’s awareness of the existence of linguistic properties such as factivity and truth-evaluable.

What we experience when reading this poem is like the experience of the speaker in his relationship to the lady. The poem mirrors their deceptive relationship, recreating the speaker’s indecision and his emotional state of suspense. The reader has to choose what is true or false in this poem, while being systematically deprived of semantic clues. Thus, simple truth is not only suppressed with the speaker and the lady, but also we, the readers are denied access to the simple truth of the poem.

**Bibliography**


