A Word Is Dead by Emily Dickinson

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

 Considering the title the reader may be curious to find out the reason why a word “is dead”.

 The layout shows the poem belongs to a collection since the first line corresponds to the title of the text thus underlines the concept once again. One more aspect to notice is that even if the poem simply consists of 6 lines, it is arranged into two tercets and therefore the reader might be interested in finding out the function of each.

 What the poetess says is that some people think that once a word is pronounced, it dies. The second tercet expresses the speaking voice’s point of view which is exactly the opposite of the common people’s.

 The first striking element of the text is a sound effect which is chosen on purpose: the first two lines of the first tercet exploit a rhyming couplet ( “ Dead” rhymes with “Said”) which creates a break in the reading pace reinforced by the comma. The devices help to put the third line into evidence; in a few words the reader is now crupelled to focus her/his attention on the third line. The function of which is to express the point of view of common people. In addition there is a difference even in line length that adds to what was said before and once again seems to isolate the first line from the previous line. This seems to pave the way what the speaking voice is going to do in the second part of the poem.

 Indeed the poetess seems also to create a different atmosphere in the second tercet as if she wanted to assert her point of view ( “I say”) more vigorously. The intelligent reader can notice that the kay position of the subject pronoun I contributes to give strength and vigour to the speaking voice’s point of view. Furthermore there is a cesura in the middle of the first line of the second tercet that highlighters the poetess ‘ idea since the following run-on line ( enjambment) sets the opinion that words have a life of their own at the centre of the text.

 Beside the sound device discussed so far the reader can hear the density of the sounds “D” and “S” in the poem. The repetition of sound “D” is meant to put the lexical item “WORD” at the centre of the investigation. Unless you are myopic you will realize the word “WORD” is capitalized and therefore you will surely understand that “WORD” together with “I say” become the two more relevant words of the text. Considering now the semantic fields of the poem the reader easily understand they have always something to do with the process of communication.

 The field is made up by “WORD”,”SAID”,”LIVE” and it explains the message of the poem: if words do not have a life, if they don’t live there couldn’t be any communication, not even the one of the poem itself. The poetess even asks for silence in the text – since silence is a pre-requisite to mutual understanding- in that the sound “S” is repeated eight times in the economy of the poem as if the poetess were asking for silence to deliver her message. To put the message into a better focus the text also relies on the semantic field of time (“When”,”Just”,”Begins”,”Live”,”That”,”Day”) and this aspect made the intelligent reader understand that words, especially written ones, likes the one of poetry, have a life of their own, as poet and poetess perfectly know. Their words last in time and always create new meanings whenever a reader reads them.

 In short , the poem is about the vitality of words and communication.