

Interpretation of Poetry from the Perspective of Conceptual Blending

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1 A wide gap between linguistics and the study of literature

Early in the 20th century, linguistic theories advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson strongly influenced literary critics, and that led to one major stream of criticism: structuralism. Although Jakobson was a linguist, he was interested not only in grammar but also in the function of language in literary texts. Jakobson called for the establishment of an objective and scientific stylistics, thinking that style is an inherent property of a text. Later, however, his scientific approach to literary texts was criticized for a formalism that did not consider the role of readers¹. Ever since structuralism lost the leading position in criticism, there seems to have been little relationship between linguistics and criticism, or in a wider definition, the study of literature². When linguists study literary texts, their interest tends to concentrate on the analysis of the structure of a text, including diction, syntax and coherence. This contrasts with the attitude most literary scholars assume when they study a text. They try to find the “meaning” of a text in its interaction with various social and historical contexts. In other words, linguists try to describe the language of text while literary scholars try to interpret the message of a text. There has been a wide gap between the two disciplines.

¹See Weber (1996: 1).

²After structuralism lost popularity, stylistics, or more precisely, literary linguistics has survived as a discipline, emphasizing more the functional aspect of language than its structure. For example, Roger Fowler based his literary criticism on functional linguistics. See Fowler (1996).

2 Cognitive linguistics and the study of literature

Since the early 80s, cognitive linguists have begun studying metaphors from the perspective not only of language but also of the human conceptual system³. According to their research, metaphors are a way of understanding one concept in terms of another by mapping the structure of a conceptual domain from one to another. For example, when speaking about someone's death, people often use such metaphoric expressions as "he's gone", "he's left us", and "he's passed on". In these conventional expressions, DEATH is conceptualized as DEPARTURE, i.e. DEATH IS DEPARTURE. The domain of DEPARTURE is the source and the domain of DEATH is the target, and the structure of knowledge about the source domain is mapped to the target domain.

Even poets, whose language is thought to be different from everyday language, share this way of conceptualization. Lakoff and Turner (1989) show how the creativity of poets depends on conventional metaphors, that is, the way of conceptualizing basic experiences of daily life.

Because I could not stop for Death ——
He kindly stopped for me ——
The Carriage held but just Ourselves ——
And Immortality.

(Emily Dickinson)

In this poem, Dickinson conceptualizes DEATH as DEPARTURE, and her way of conceptualizing DEATH is the same as the way observed in conventional expressions such as "he's gone" and "he's left us". At the level of fundamental conceptualization, there is no difference between the poet and ordinary people. Therefore, there is no reason for linguists to put the study of literature out of their scope of research.

³Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987, 1993), Lakoff and Turner (1989).

3 Conceptual metaphors as constraints on writing and reading poems

While conventional expressions present a skeletal image of the departure of dead people, Dickinson creates a rich image of the dead traveling with personified DEATH in a carriage. The originality of the poet lies here. Originally, DEATH has no association with a vehicle. However, as a result of mapping the knowledge structure of DEPARTURE to the conceptual domain of DEATH, it is possible for the poet to create this image⁴. Therefore, poets' originality lies in how they can present readers conventionalized conceptual metaphors in new images.

There are several possible combinations of images that are associated with the domains of DEATH and DEPARTURE. Death might not necessarily be personified, and any other vehicle than a carriage could be selected, or no vehicle might be mentioned at all. Poets try to choose a combination of images that has never been used by other poets, or they try to present an old combination of images in more elaborated language. Poets are free to choose images to describe DEATH in terms of DEPARTURE, however, only in the way that does not conflict with the image schema of DEPARTURE⁵. An image schema is a very skeletal, and topological image of spatial relations. DEPARTURE associates with the image schema of an animate or inanimate object separating from a place. Therefore, it is not possible for poets to describe a dying person as coming home in the frame of DEATH IS DEPARTURE. Poets are not only using conceptual metaphors as a basis for creating poems, but also they are constrained by conceptual metaphors.

Now, from the perspective of the reader, it can be said that the interpretation of poetry is also based and constrained in some degree on such conventional metaphors. If readers of the above-cited poem of Dickinson do not have the conceptual metaphor of DEATH IS DEPARTURE, it might be impossible for them to understand the poem. At the same time, it might be impossible to reach a different

⁴Turner says, there are conventionalized conceptual metaphors that people automatically and unconsciously use when understanding concepts, and poets flesh out these conventional metaphors (Turner 1990: 464-465).

⁵There should be no conflict between the image schematic structure of the source domain and the inherent structure of the target domain as a result of mapping from the source to the target. Lakoff called this the Invariance Principle (Lakoff 1993: 215).

interpretation that has no relationship with the conceptual metaphor. If readers try to understand the poem by summing up all of the lexical meanings of the words, they would be puzzled over death traveling in a carriage. As Graesser and his associates say, comprehension is not a completely bottom-up process, though processing at lexical, syntactic, and other levels is important as well⁶.

Sometimes, there are no obvious clues for metaphors in the language of a poem. See the excerpt from a poem of Frost:

- (1) Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

(Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken")

The excerpt from Frost's poem can be read as a poetic description of his experience of travel. The expressions do not violate selectional restrictions on permitted combinations of lexical items, which often works as a clue for metaphorical reading. For instance, the predicate "sleep" requires something animate in the thematic role of agent. Such a phrase as "the baby sleeps" is accepted as grammatical, while "the stone sleeps" is not acceptable when interpreted literally. If the restriction is violated, it induces readers to interpret text metaphorically. Lakoff (1993) reported that "[s]ince Frost's language often does not overtly signal that the poem is to be taken metaphorically, incompetent English teachers occasionally teach Frost as if he were a nature poet, simply describing scenes⁷."

The expressions of the poem do not violate selectional restrictions. Yet, most readers may interpret the poem metaphorically⁸. One critic says that this

⁶Dijk (1997: 305).

⁷Lakoff (1993: 238).

⁸If a researcher takes an approach to the study of metaphor from writer's (or speaker's) side, it is impossible to identify metaphor when there is no formal deviation in text. It is useful to

poem involves very conventional symbolism⁹ of life as a journey, and she writes:¹⁰

- (1a) The roads are paths of life and stand for choices to be made with reference to the “course” of the traveler’s life; the woods are life itself, and so on. Read this way, each description or comment in the poem refers both to the physical event and to the concepts that it is meant to symbolize.

Why is such a metaphorical reading possible when the sentence has no signal for metaphorical interpretation? Lakoff (1993) explains, the poem is “about travel and encountering crossroads, it evokes a knowledge of journeys. This activates the system of conventional metaphor...in which long-term, purposeful activities are understood as journeys¹¹.” Even though there is no clue for metaphorical reading in the text, conceptual mapping could occur when there is a conventionally close relationship between the domain indicated by the words and any other domain.

In the poem (1), there is only the domain of JOURNEY that is indicated by the words. However, the critic activates the conventional metaphor of LIFE IS JOURNEY, and as shown in (1a), she systematically maps the conceptual structure of JOURNEY to that of LIFE: “road” to “life”, and “choice (of road)” to “choice (of the course of life)”.

The fact that there are some readers who understand the poem as a simple description of a scene suggests that readers could fail to activate conventional metaphors when there are no clues for metaphorical understanding in the language of a poem. However, it does not presuppose that there are no such conventional metaphors at all. Why it is that despite reading the same text, some readers activate conventional metaphors and some do not, is an open question.

It is interesting that the critic cannot explain LIFE without the LIFE IS JOURNEY metaphor, as observed in her expressions in (1a) including “paths of

examine reader’s response as expressed in texts of explication and interpretation.

⁹Although the term “symbolism” is used here, what the critic means is not different from the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY that Lakoff and his associates advocate.

¹⁰Juhasz (1974: 28).

¹¹Lakoff (1993: 238).

life” and “the course of the traveler’s life”¹². Both the poet and the critic use the same conceptual metaphor, the poet in his poem, and the critic in her prose, that is not very different from everyday use of language. This indicates that LIFE IS JOURNEY is a highly conventionalized metaphor.

While sharing the same conceptual metaphor, variety in the levels of specificity in mapping concepts between domains may lead to seemingly different interpretations. Lakoff says, “it [the poem] might also be interpreted as being about careers and career paths, or about some long-term, purposeful activity¹³.” This implies that the text can be understood by mapping concepts from a domain (e.g. JOURNEY) to a more specific, smaller part (e.g. CARRIER) of another domain (e.g. LIFE). Conceptual domains vary in degrees of generality. The reader might choose a domain at any level of generality, however, it should be noted that the conceptual mapping is constrained by an image schema. Therefore, the reader cannot choose a domain that is associated with any purposeless and momentary action because that would lead to a clash of image schema. Interpretation is not a completely arbitrary act of the reader.

4 Poetry interpretation as a network of conceptual domains

The two-domain mapping model could be too limited to explain a wide range of cognitive operations including not only metaphorical understanding but also understanding of metonymies, personification, and inference. All of these phenomena are important factors for poetry interpretation.

Turner and his associate integrate the earlier model of the two-domain conceptual mapping into a new many-space network model. They argue that conceptual mapping is not limited to a one-way mapping from the source domain to the target. According to them, there could be many input mental spaces (domains), from where the components are imported into another space for blending to create an emergent structure. The emergent structure in the blended space could also be an input for yet another conceptual blending, or it could be projected back

¹²These can be regarded as the cases of conceptual blending that is explained later.

¹³ibid.

upon the original input spaces. Therefore, conceptual mapping could be two-way, and a theoretically unlimited number of domains could form a network through mapping. The projection of components from a space to another is constrained by schematic structure in generic space.

As cited before, the critic of Frost's poem seemed to have no words to explain her interpretation other than "paths of life" and "the course of the traveler's life". Because the domain of LIFE has originally no association with JOURNEY, LIFE has no such components as "path" and "course". Based on the conceptual blending model, JOURNEY and LIFE are input spaces and components "path", "course", "traveler" and "life" are projected from each input space to the blended space where emergent forms of "paths of life" and "the course of the traveler's life" are found. The projection is constrained by an image schema in the generic space so that the sequential order of time should match that of space; the future is ahead and the past is behind.

Turner says that a sophisticated reading of Shakespeare can also result from conceptual blending. For instance, Turner cites a passage from Shakespeare's King John:¹⁴

So foul a sky clears not without a storm.
Pour down thy weather.

So says King John to the messenger who is going to deliver bad news. If based on the two-domain mapping model, the passage could be understood as bad news in terms of rainfall. However, Turner says, conceptual blending allows a more sophisticated reading of the passage. Considering the fact that King John is losing power, in this passage can be seen a tension between King John's lack of control (over the weather) and his exercise of control (over the messenger). Such a tension might be interpreted as symbolizing King John's unstable status as a king.

Such tension arises only from conceptual blending. King John gives the

¹⁴Turner (1996: 64-67).

messenger an order that is impossible to carry out: “Pour down thy weather” Then, the knowledge on the syntactic level, that is, the verb in the imperative, is projected to the blended space, while the knowledge structure on weather is projected to the same space, making the conflict apparent. The conflict is further mapped to the domain of the King’s status, which results in a sophisticated reading of the passage. If conceptual mapping is limited to a one-time operation from the source to the target, then, the sophisticated reading of the text could not be achieved.

The interpretation of poetry could also involve the conceptual mapping over many domains.

(2) Birdless, the bush yet shakes
With a bird’s alighting. Fate
Is transmitting flight
That rootwards flows,
Each unstilled spray
Tense like a dense arrival of targeted arrows.

(Charles Tomlinson, “Encounter”)

Below is the excerpt from a critic’s interpretation of the poem¹⁵.

(2a) In ‘Encounter’ Tomlinson is trying to arrive at a knowledge of the inner nature of the bird by contrasting its movement with the stillness of the bush.... The essential qualities of the bird — the flight and movement — abruptly oppose the rootedness of the bush. The energy of the bird’s flight is transmitted down the very roots of the bush like ‘targeted arrows’. The contrariety in the relationship between bird and bush confirms the identity of each.

¹⁵Schlesinger (1982: 51-52).

The poem makes use of a lot of words representing physical movement: shake, alight, transmit, flight, flow, unstill and arrival, though the words the critic extracts from the poem to her text are bird, flight, bush, root-, and targeted arrows¹⁶. Her attention is mostly paid to bird and bush. The critic finds “the essential qualities of the bird [is] flight and movement” that contrast with “the stillness of the bush.” This indicates that the critic understands the bird in the domain of MOVEMENT and the bush in the domain of STILLNESS. Because BIRD and BUSH are imported to the blended space, the conflict between MOVEMENT and STILLNESS becomes explicit.

The poem also makes use of a simile, “like a dense arrival of targeted arrows”. The critic says, “[t]he energy of the bird’s flight is transmitted down the very roots of the bush like ‘targeted arrows’ ”. Here, she finds the connection between the downward transmission of the shaking of bush and the movement of arrows by mapping of an image schema of unidirectional movement. However, the conflict between the bird’s movement and the stillness of bush, that has become explicit in the blended space, is projected back to the input spaces to confirm the relationship between bird and bush: the agent and the patient in energy transmission.

It is interesting that the unusual word in the poem, “rootwards” is understood by the critic both in the domain of STILLNESS of bush (the rootedness of the bush) and in the domain of DIRECTION that is related to MOVEMENT (down the very roots of the bush). The critic’s interpretation of the word reflects the conflict in the blended space.

5 Concluding remark

Turner is ambitiously working to put the study of literature in an interdisciplinary frame of linguistics and cognitive science. He argues that the basic comprehension of literary texts or stories does not require of readers any special talent or ability. He thinks that the comprehension of literary texts and recognition of events happening in the environment are based on the same human ability

¹⁶It could be speculated that the words of physical movement made the critic activate the domain of MOVEMENT.

to organize conceptual systems by categorizing agent, act and object, and the mapping of knowledge structures between conceptual domains. For example, he asks why it is possible for a man to recognize such an event as “Mary throws a stone” as expressed in the sentence. At the level of perception, the three elements that are “Mary”, “the act of throwing” and “stone” can not be articulated, and all elements can be felt as a whole. However, at the same time one recognizes abstract category structure and by mapping the elements to the categories, such as agent, event and object, one recognizes the physical event. Turner calls such spatial events basic “stories”, and, in this sense, he thinks that recognizing events as “stories” is not different from understanding literary stories. Elements of another physical event, such as “Bill flips a coin” could also be categorized in the same way. Turner thinks grammar arises from the repeated experience of mapping elements to category structure. Therefore, the human ability of conceptual mapping over domains, (in this case, between the domain of physical event and the domain of abstract category structure) is the foundation of the human ability of language use. The meaning is not simply in the language but arising from the connection of conceptual domains and distributed over the network of domains.

It should be noted, however, that Turner’s model is new and has not been tested for its usefulness in the actual analysis of language. The analysis of poetry explication in comparison with original poems would offer the model a good field of possible application. Poetic expressions are not strictly constrained by grammar. They can have flexible syntax, ambiguous use of words, juxtaposition and ellipsis. These characteristics of poems allow readers more room to interpret than any other kind of text. Thus, the process of interpretation may be best observed in how readers interpret poetry. As Graesser and his associates say, “the meaning representations in the human mind are quite elaborate because they are anchored in a rich body of experiences and background world knowledge¹⁷.” The analysis of poetry and its explication might be useful in collecting patterns of conceptual mappings and in understanding how meaning is distributed over a network of domains.

¹⁷Dijk (1997: 292).

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要 約

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文学研究と言語学は、ことばを研究の対象にしながらも、それぞれのことばに対する関心の在りようや研究方法は大幅に異なっている。言語学の分野においては、ことばの形式を主に取り扱い、ややもすれば意味を研究対象から排除しようとする傾向があった。しかし、近年、言語学の新しいパラダイムとなってきた認知言語学は、ことばを単に記号表示のレベルでとらえるのではなく、人間の認知能力と概念体系のレベルからとらえなおそうとしている。認知言語学ではメタファーを語を別の語で置き換えることではなく、概念領域間における体系的な知識の写像であると考え。このような観点から詩とその解釈を考察すると、詩の創造的な言語表現に用いられるメタファーの多くも、また、日常言語表現で意識せずに用いられるメタファーと同様に人間の概念理解のレベルにおいて共通の基盤を持つことがわかる。本稿では概念体系としてのメタファー研究に先鞭をつけた Lakoff and Johnson (1980) から、最近、Turner が提唱している概念領域の複雑なネットワークモデルへの展開を概観し、後者のモデルで取り扱われている、概念の「ブレンディング」が詩の解釈においても重要な役割を果たしていることを考察し、詩の解釈を文学、言語学の区分を超えて認知的観点から研究する必要性を論じた。