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A cognitive approach to life and death in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Robert Frost

INTRODUCTION

In the light of two poetic texts selected from the works of two famous poets: Seamus Heaney and Robert Frost, this paper shows how the conceptual metaphors of life and death which underlie poetic language are the same ones that underlie everyday language.

We will use the approach given by cognitive linguistics created by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and will follow the foundational work on the relationship between everyday and poetic metaphor by Lakoff and Turner (1989) and Gibbs (1994) who write in detail about the devices that poets use to turn ordinary conceptual metaphors into poetic ones, as well as about image metaphors and personification.

We will reach to the conclusion that metaphor awareness can be a key to both fuller reading and interpretation.

The Application of Metaphor in Literature

Human cognition is principally shaped by several poetic or figurative processes. As Gibbs (1994) argues 'metaphor, metonymy, and other tropes are not linguistic distortions of literal mental thought but form basic schemes by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world'. Due to the fact that every mental construct reflects an adaptation of the mind to the world, the language that expresses these constructs demonstrates the continuous process of poetic thinking.

Gibbs (1997) takes as his starting point Lakoff's 'Contemporary Theory' (1993) and presents some empirical results in order to demonstrate that metaphors and various other kinds of tropes are understood effortlessly because experience is conceptualized in the kinds of metaphorical ways that Lakoff (1993) describes.

Both the above mentioned scholars consider that no special cognitive ability is required and that such language is not only found in literary texts. Traditionally viewed as the tool of poets, figurative language is encountered not only in pages of literature but throughout ordinary speech and writing. Although the language of poets is clearly more creative or poetic than that used by most ordinary speakers, both poets and ordinary people make use of the same figurative schemes of thought in saying what they do. Therefore, much of our everyday talk reflects people's ability to think in ways that go beyond the literal.

As Turner holds:

'Language and literature are suffused by the full human world of the everyday. That is their basis. This full human world, the world that comprehends language and literature, exists for us independently of any academic theory. Language and literature and our grasp of this world depend upon a commonplace conceptual apparatus that is textured and powerful. Literature is the highest expression of our commonplace conceptual and linguistic capacities.' (1991:4)

Ordinary and Poetic Language

One of the most important discoveries of work on poetic language by cognitive linguists is the recognition that most poetic language is based on conventional, ordinary conceptual metaphors. In order to demonstrate this point, let us take the following poems by Seamus Heaney and Robert Frost, previously mentioned in the description of the corpus:

Lightenings (i)

Shifting brilliances. Then winter light
In a doorway, and on the stone doorstep
A beggar shivering in silhouette.

So the particular judgement might be set:
Bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into-
Bright puddle where the soul-free cloud-life roams.

And after the commanded journey, what?
Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown.
A gazing out from far away, alone.

And it is not particular at all,
Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time-round.
Unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind.

(Heaney, 1991)

Acquainted with the night

I have been one acquainted with the night
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
O luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night

(Frost, 1928)

We can be fairly certain that these poems are concerned with issues of life and death. But what makes us so confident that they have this underlying interpretation?

Given the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor, we can suggest that our judgement is based on conceptual metaphors that link life and death to a journey. The metaphors are well known to us: LIFE IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS DEPARTURE or DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION.

Metaphors are so commonplace we often fail to notice them. Take the way we ordinarily talk about the concepts of life and death in these phrases:

- He's without direction in life
- I'm at a crossroads in my life
- She'll go places in life
- He's gone
- He's left us
- He's gone to the great beyond

All of these expressions are mundane, and they are metaphoric.

Although life and death are not mentioned at all in the poems, the journey metaphor for life and death guides us in making sense of them. We know when Heaney says: 'There is no next time round' or Frost says: 'But not to call me back or say good-bye', what they mean. We know because we understand death as a departure with no return. Because we conceive of death in this way, they do not need to state all the details. We know them by virtue of knowing the basic conceptual metaphor.

This interpretation is reinforced by additional metaphors that are employed in the texts and that are conventional in our everyday conceptual system, as well. The line by Frost 'I have been one acquainted with the night', evokes A LIFETIME IS A DAY metaphor, where birth is dawn, maturity is noon, old age is twilight, the moment of death is sunset and the state of DEATH IS NIGHT.

In Heaney's poem, the 'winter light' evokes the metaphors LIFE IS LIGHT and A LIFETIME IS A YEAR. In this conception of the life cycle, springtime is youth, summer is maturity, autumn is old age and DEATH IS WINTER. This metaphor is coherent with one elaboration of the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor, where people are viewed as plants with respect to the life cycle. The stages of the plants in their yearly cycle correspond to the stages of life. We can understand that a plant burgeons in spring, matures in summer, starts withering in autumn, and finally declines in winter. As to people, someone 'in full bloom' is mature and someone 'withering away' is approaching death.

These conventional metaphors that are part of our everyday conceptual system, guide and direct us to the idea that the poems are about life and death.

We feel this is a natural interpretation because the metaphors that link the concept of journey, night, light or winter, to the concepts of life and death are so natural.

Poetic Reworking of Ordinary Metaphors

George Lakoff, Mark Turner, and Ray Gibbs have pointed out that poets regularly employ several devices to create novel unconventional language and 'images' from the conventional materials of everyday language and thought. These include extending, elaboration, questioning and combining.

Extending

In **extending**, a conventional conceptual metaphor associated with certain conventionalized linguistic expression, is expressed by new linguistic means, introducing a new conceptual element in the source domain.

We can see an example of this in Robert Frost's lines: 'I have outwalked the furthest city light', 'I have looked down the saddest city lane.'

The example employs the conventional metaphor DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION and expresses it in a novel way. What is novel here is that the journey is evoked by walking along a city lane and leaving behind the furthest city light, towards a final destination. The poet crossing the line from light to darkness, from life to death.

Frost extends the metaphor by adding this unconventional aspect to it, which on the other hand, is conceptually based on an 'unused' element of the source.

Elaboration

Elaboration is different from extension, in that it elaborates on an existing element of the source in an unusual way. Instead of adding a new element to the source domain, it captures an existing one in a new, unconventional way. A good example of this is provided by the title of Heaney's poem: '*Lightenings*'

This title activates in our mind the metaphor LIFE IS A BURDEN, which is coherent with the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor in which impediments to travel correspond to difficulties in life. If one further conceives of life as one constant, relentless difficulty, then it is possible to think of the whole of life as a burden. From this view, the condition of being alive is metaphorically the condition of being burdened. Therefore, death could be the relief or the 'lightening' of this burden, which the title suggests in an unusual way.

Questioning

In the poetic device of **questioning**, poets can call into question the very appropriateness of our common everyday metaphors. To see an example of this we consider the following lines:

And after the commanded journey, what?
Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown
A gazing out from far away, alone

In this tercet, Heaney is rejecting an aspect of the life-as-a-journey metaphor, so dominant in our religious environment and so taken for granted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, where it is instantly understood that God is a guide through this journey, that there are alternative paths of good and evil through life and our behaviour will be judged by Him at the moment of death. The poem then reads out this question and statement about the absence of an afterlife: 'And after the commanded journey, what?' 'Nothing magnificent, nothing unknown'. Thus, the mechanism of questioning the validity of accepted metaphors, may be part of the creed of an artist.

Combining

Combining is perhaps the most powerful mechanism to go beyond our everyday conceptual system (but still using the materials of everyday conventional thought).

Let's take three lines from Frost's poem:

I have been one acquainted with the night
I have walked out in rain--- and back in rain
I have outwalked the furthest city light

These lines combine these everyday conceptual metaphors:

- A LIFETIME IS A DAY
- DEATH IS NIGHT
- LIFE IS LIGHT
- DEATH IS DARKNESS
- LIFE IS HEAT
- DEATH IS COLDNESS
- LIFE IS A JOURNEY
- DEATH IS A JOURNEY TO A FINAL DESTINATION
- STATES ARE LOCATIONS

The process of combining can activate and thus be based on, several everyday metaphors at the same time, which play an essential role in interpreting or understanding the poem.

Personification

Personification is a metaphorical device that is commonly used in literature and of course, also occurs in everyday conventional language. This aspect of poetic language has been studied extensively from a cognitive linguistic view by Lakoff and Turner (1989).

One of the abstract concepts that is very frequently used in literature is death. In the poems by Heaney and Frost, we find death personified by virtue of the basic metaphors DEATH IS DEPARTURE and DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION.

In 'Lightenings' both death and departure are evoked by 'a beggar shivering in silhouette'. The person the beggar is waiting for on 'the stone doorstep', corresponds metaphorically to the person leading a life. Passing through the doorway corresponds to dying. The agent who shows in, helps depart, 'the beggar', is a personification of death. Similarly Frost's 'watchman on his beat' also plays the established role of assisting the traveller to his final destination. Where they differ is in the nature of the journey itself or the character of the destination. The role of these personifications is to escort or summon one to death.

Personification permits us to use knowledge about ourselves to comprehend other aspects of the world such as death. According to Lakoff and Turner this happens because we comprehend external events as actions. This has to do with the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS generic-level metaphor.

This entails an important consequence; namely, that we view events as produced by an active, willful agent. That is, since actions have such an agent, we will view events in the same way. The result will be the personification of events, such as death, conceived as something that occurs independently from human beings, and thus, it can be seen as an agent.

Image Metaphors

Poetry abounds in image-based metaphors that are rich in imagistic detail. These conceptual metaphors do not employ image-schemas but rich images. They work in just the same way as all other metaphoric mappings, by mapping the structure of one domain onto the structure of another. But here the domains are mental images. Image structure includes both part-whole structure and attribute structure. In images, part-whole relations are relations such as those between a roof and a house. For example, we have Heaney's poem saying:

And it is not particular at all,
Just old truth dawning: there is no next-time round.
Unroofed scope. Knowledge freshening wind.

There is an image metaphor at work in these lines, which helps to activate the LIFE IS BONDAGE; DEATH IS DELIVERANCE metaphor. Our conventional image of a house with a roof is superimposed on our conventional image of the soul in the body. Life can be conceived of in terms of bodily bondage. The soul of the person leading the life is metaphorically a bound prisoner. Being embodied is the physical device that binds the soul. Thus life can be said to imprison the soul in the body, and the body can be said to be 'a house', a prison trapping the soul. The roof of the house represents the bonds that tie the soul to the body. Being left with no roof is metaphorically the event of death, of being released from imprisonment.

Attribute structure includes such things as color, intensity of light and physical shape. It is the existence of such structure within our conceptual images that permits one image to be mapped onto another because of their common structure.

For example, when Frost says:

And further still at an unearthly height,

O luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

There is a superimposition of the image of a clock onto the image of the moon in the sky, by virtue of their common shape.

This image metaphor has very much to do with our understanding of life and death which is bound up with our understanding of time. This is because death is inevitable and because the mere passage of time can be seen as bringing about inevitable events. Hence, in the case of inevitable events, time can be seen as playing a causal role.

One of our major cultural models of life is that each of us is allotted a certain fixed time on earth. Our allotted time will eventually be used up, and we will die. When we say 'our time will come' we mean that the passage of time will inevitably bring the event to happen. This case is an instance of the very general EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor, which imputes agency to something causally connected to the event, that is, it personifies time as an actor playing a causal role in the occurrence of death. Of course, it is the superimposition of images which activates this general metaphor.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of metaphorical language in the studied corpus, demonstrates the existence of conceptual metaphor in the field of poetry. Moreover, this paper sustains that poetic thought is rooted in the human cognitive experience.

Having analysed different theories of metaphor: Substitution, Comparison and Interaction Theories; Pragmatic Approach: Grice's Theory, Searle's Theory and Sperber's and Wilson's Relevance Theory and Cognitive Approach: Prototype and Categorisation, Experiential Hypothesis, Image Schemas and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we can conclude that the cognitive dimension of metaphor is undeniable.

Metaphor is not a matter of literal falsehood or a violation of the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), but it resides in thought and not merely in words.

On the other hand, this research gives evidence that poetic metaphor, deals with central and indispensable aspects of our conceptual systems. Through the masterful use of metaphoric processes on which our conceptual systems are based, poets address our most important issues, as life and death, and help us illuminate them through the extension, composition, and criticism of the basic metaphoric tools through which we comprehend reality.

Finally, we would like to say that this paper provides support to Turner's words:

'Literature lives within language and language within everyday life. The study of literature must live within the study of language, and the study of language within the study of the everyday mind. When embedded in this way, the study of literature is automatically connected to whatever is basic to human beings.' (1991: 4)

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