

Use of the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor in Two Sonnets by Victorian Female Poets

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Abstract

This paper has applied the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor theory to the analysis of the source and target domains of metaphors that are used in two English nineteenth century sonnets, both written by contemporaneous female poets. The quantitative and qualitative results of the textual analysis have clearly revealed that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *sonnet 23* centres around the conceptual mapping of the journey of love and life with that of possession. In contrast, Christina Rossetti's sonnet *Remember* tackles the central conceptual mapping of death as a journey in relation to its further experiential connections. In addition, the application of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in identifying the frequencies and densities of metaphors' conceptual domains has resulted in unravelling the thematic structures of both poems. Discovering such a textually attested relationship between the densities of metaphorical conceptual domains and textual thematic structure has neither been fully explored nor identified before in the genre of English female sonnets.

Keywords: theory of conceptual metaphor, use of, sonnets, female poets, thematic structure.

استخدام نظرية الاستعارة المفهومية في اثنتين من السوناتات لشاعرتين فيكتوريتين

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الملخص

عُني هذا البحث بتطبيق الإطار النظري لنظرية الاستعارة المفهومية على تحليل حقل المصدر و الاستهداف للاستعارات المستخدمة في سوناتتين إنجليزييتين من القرن التاسع عشر، كتبنا بقلم شاعرتين كانتا متعاصرتين مع بعضهما . وقد كشفت النتائج الكمية والنوعية للتحليل النصي بوضوح بأن السوناتة 23 لإليزابيث باريت براوننج تتمحور حول رسم المطابقات المفهومية لرحلة الحب والحياة مع تلك الخاصة بمفهوم التملك. وعلى النقيض من ذلك ، تتعامل السوناتة المعنونة بـ "تذکر" لكريستينا روزيتي مع ترسيم التظابقات المفهومية المركزية للموت كرحلة مع ما يتعلق بها من امتدادات حياتية تجريبية إضافية. علاوة إلى ذلك ، فقد أسفر التطبيق التحليلي لنظرية الاستعارة المفهومية عن تشخيص نسب ترددات وكثافة مجالات المفاهيم للاستعارات الشعرية الواردة في كل سوناتة ، علاوة على الكشف عن الهياكل الموضوعية للأغراض الشعرية المعالجة في لكلا القصيدتين. و يمكن اعتبار أن استكشاف و اكتشاف وجود هذه العلاقة المُنتَبة نصياً بين كثافات الميادين المفهومية المجازية من جهة و بين البنية الموضوعية النصية برمتها من جهة أخرى هو انجاز غير مسبوق قدر تعلق الأمر بحقل دراسة نوع السوناتات الأنثوية الإنجليزية. الكلمات المفتاحية : الاستعارة المفهومية، سوناتتين إنجليزييتين، البنية الموضوعية النصية، المفهومية المجازية.

1. Introduction

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (initiated by Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) explains how one idea (such as ‘darkness’ or ‘life’) is conceptually understood in terms of another different idea (such as that of ‘a cover’ or ‘a journey’) in the metaphors:

- (1)
 - a. The night drew its curtains.
 - b. Her life journey came to an end.

In (1.a.), the conceptual domain of ‘night darkness’ as related to human experience is mapped onto that of ‘a cover’, i.e. darkness is a cover, In (1.b.), the cognitive idea of ‘life’ is understood in terms of a journey, with a start and an end (Cruse, 2006: 31). In each one of these two metaphors, the conceptual mappings involve two main roles: the source domain from which the metaphorical expression is drawn (‘a cover’; ‘a journey’) and the target domain that the speaker tries to explain (‘darkness’ and ‘life’, respectively). Typically, conceptual metaphors make use of a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source, not the other way around.

This theory sees metaphor, though actually realized by linguistic expressions, as primarily a matter of thought, hence the term ‘conceptual metaphor’. This is because its mappings are envisaged to draw upon pre-linguistic images related to the common core of organized human experience about time, space, movement, social relations, and other key experiential elements. The observation that different languages regularly employ the same metaphors (such as associating ‘up’ with ‘better’, and ‘roses’ with ‘beauty’) has led the advocates of this theory to hypothesise that the mapping between conceptual domains corresponds to neural mappings in the brain (Feldman and Narayanan (2004). In other words, metaphors may be seen as unconsciously shaping the way all human beings think and act (Thibodeau and Boroditsky , 2011).

Mappings are conceived by CM theorists as purely abstract cognitive constructs, i.e. deep structures (Chomsky, 1965: 141), often orthographically represented in capital letters, or spelled out in continuously hyphenated word strings, with initial capitalizations:

- (2)
 - a. Love_Is_A_Journey.
 - b. Love_Is_A_Unity_(of_Two_Complementary_Parts).
 - c. Love_Is_Madness.
 - d. Love_Is_Magic. (Lakoff, 2004)

In (2), the target domain is that of ‘love’, the source domain mappings are: a journey, bilateral unity, madness, and magic. Textual (i.e. surface structure) examples offered by Lakoff (ibid.) for (2.a.) include:

- (3)
 - a. They are at a crossroads in their relationship.
 - b. This relationship isn't going anywhere.
 - c. They're in a dead-end relationship.
 - d. This marriage is on the rocks.

- e. This relationship has been spinning its wheels for years.
- f. Their marriage has really gone off the track.

On the CMT Internet website: 'Conceptual Metaphor Home Page', Lakoff (2004) has accumulated an alphabetical index of (149) names of distinctive metaphors, together with separate indices for their source and target domains.

Because conceptual metaphors can help to understand complex ideas in simple terms, they have been widely used in all sciences. This is why we describe conducted electricity in terms of fluid motion, with a "current" "flowing" against "impedance", and we use the "planetary orbit" model of the atomic nucleus and electrons.

In literature, the theory of conceptual metaphor has offered a deeper understanding to the notion of poetic metaphor by opening new windows into understanding how each poet thinks, and what source domains she or he uses in drawing her or his metaphors. This paper is an attempt to answer the crucial question of what types of conceptual domains are deployed in two contemporaneous Victorian sonnets - both dealing with the themes of love, life, and death – through the application of CMT. In addition, it attempts to explore the relationship between metaphorical mappings and thematic textual structure.

Both in poetry and in all literature, it is important to differentiate between conventional metaphors and a novel ones. Conventional metaphors, such as 'love is a journey/magic/madness' are familiar and easy to process, whereas novel metaphors, such as 'a mind is a kitchen; friendship is wine' are unfamiliar, and require more processing time (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005: 201). In processing these two types of metaphors, the recipients opt to either comparison (likening the target domain with the source domain) or categorization (grouping the same features in the target and source domains involved in sense creation). Novel metaphors "trigger a search for an appropriate comparison", conventional metaphors "involve categorization or sense retrieval rather than sense creation" (Nacey, 2013: 16).

2. Data

Two English sonnets have been selected for data analysis:

1. *Sonnet 23: "Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead"* (written between 1845 and 1846, published in 1850) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Henceforth: T1);
2. *Remember* (Written in 1849, published in 1862) by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) (Henceforth: T2).

The two carefully selected sonnets share the characteristics of being both written within the same decade during the nineteenth century by contemporaneous British poetesses in Petrarchan style; both addressed to their beloveds, tackling the themes of love, life, death, and after-life.

3. Method

The researcher will analyse all the metaphors used in the data within the framework of CMT in order to identify their source domains. Verse lines of each sonnet are numbered, its metaphors are underlined, quoted, and explained in terms

of source and target domains via ordinary statements, such as ‘love is a journey’, where the subject is always the target domain, while the predicate is the source domain. Then, the quantitative and qualitative densities in the conceptual domains in the two sonnets are textually identified and analysed, with an eye on their thematic bearing. Finally. These conceptual domains are juxtaposed with each other to explore the commonalities and differences between them and see what relevant conclusions can be drawn from them.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 T1

Sonnet 23: *"Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead"*, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

1. Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,
2. Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?
3. And would the sun for thee more coldly shine
4. Because of grave-damps falling round my head?
5. I marvelled, my Beloved, when I read
6. Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine—
7. But . . . so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine
8. While my hands tremble ? Then my soul, instead
9. Of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range.
10. Then, love me, Love! look on me—breathe on me!
11. As brighter ladies do not count it strange,
12. For love, to give up acres and degree,
13. I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange
14. My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

4.1.1 Conceptual Metaphors in T1

In verse line 2: ‘Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?’ life is seen as a sort of possession, subject to loss. So is love: the beloved owns the life of his sweetheart. The source domain of possession is concrete, while the target domains of love and life are abstract concepts.

In verse line 4: ‘Because of grave-damps falling round my head?’ the grave is likened to a damp cave, with water drops falling around the head of the dead. It is interesting to see that, unlike the previous metaphor, both of the source domain (a damp cave, seeping drops downwards) and the target domain (a grave) are tangible physical entities.

In verse line 6: ‘I am thine’, again love is described in terms of possession (the sweetheart offers herself as a personal ownership of her beloved).

In verse lines 8 and 9: ‘... Then my soul, instead of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range’, life is explained as a journey whose range on earth is lower than that of life hereafter in Heaven. The structural hierarchy of heaven-above versus earth-down is present here.

In verse line 10: ‘...breathe on me’ sees love as a life giving source, expressed as breath-impacting to the dead-wishing.

In verse lines 13-14: ‘I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange my near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee’, the poetess offers to give up and relinquish the temptation of dying for the purpose of winning heavenly happiness in exchange with living with her beloved on earth. This metaphor presents the idea of love as a deal; an exchange. The lexical verb ‘yield’ used here also invokes the idea that love involves surrendering; i.e. love is a war to be won by the beloved.

To sum up, T1 makes use of at least nine conceptual metaphors with the following image schemata:

- (4)
- a. Life is possession.
 - b. Love is possession.
 - c. A grave is a damp cave.
 - d. Love is possession.
 - e. Life is a journey.
 - f. Heavenly life is higher than earthly life.
 - g. Love is a life-giving source.
 - h. Love is a deal; an exchange.
 - i. Love is surrender.

The sonnet's reiterated equation of both love and life with the domain of possession highlights their thematic centrality in this sonnet. Also, imparting to love a life-giving agency helps to diffuse both in one entity, with the conclusion that love is life and life is love.

4.2 T2

Remember (Written in 1849, published in 1862)

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

1. Remember me when I am gone away,
2. Gone far away into the silent land;
3. When you can no more hold me by the hand,
4. Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
5. Remember me when no more day by day
6. You tell me of our future that you planned:
7. Only remember me; you understand
8. It will be late to counsel then or pray.
9. Yet if you should forget me for a while
10. And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
11. For if the darkness and corruption leave
12. A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
13. Better by far you should forget and smile
14. Than that you should remember and be sad.

4.2.1 Conceptual Metaphors in T2

In first verse line of T2: ‘Remember me when I am gone away’, death is described in terms of a far-way journey. The second verse line elaborates on this same conceptual metaphor by declaring that the destination of this same journey is

into 'the silent land'. In the third and fourth verse line, again the idea of death as a journey is further developed by presenting its consequences to the poetess and her beloved alike: 'you can no more hold me by the hand' and 'Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay'. Both of the two images stress the idea of death as a journey of loss brought about by separation which thwarts the concerns of daily future planning, counselling, or prayer for togetherness as explained in verse lines 5, 6, and 8: 'Remember me when no more day by day you tell me of our future that you planned' and 'It will be late to counsel then or pray'. In other words, death brings about mutual sharing and caring to a stop. This shows how one conceptual metaphor (death is a journey) can be extended by incorporating into it further relevant rich aspects of human experiences associated with it.

In the eleventh verse line, the lexical items 'darkness' and 'corruption' represent a continuation of the images of death as a journey, this time into the realm of darkness and decay. Remembrances of both of these sorrowful concepts can mark a visible sign upon the memory of the poetess thoughts when she was alive, which may engender grief in her beloved. The novel image of remembrances as engravings is obvious here.

To summarise, T2 spells out at least the following eight conceptual metaphors:

- (5)
 - a. Death is a journey.
 - b. Death is a faraway journey.
 - c. Death is a journey into a silent land.
 - d. Death is a journey of separation.
 - e. Death is a journey that brings about loss.
 - f. Death stops mutual sharing and caring.
 - g. Death is a journey into darkness and decay.
 - h. Remembrances of the dead beloved ones are engravings.

A glance at the target domains of all the conceptual metaphors above readily reveals how all of them revolve around the key idea of death as an everlasting journey of separation that brings about the permanent loss of the loved ones, and their memories, though they deserve to be happily remembered rather than grieved upon.

4.3 Comparative Analysis

The results of analysing the realizations of types of conceptual metaphors in the two studied sonnets show that both of them are rich in drawing image representations. The bulk of these images (seven out of nine mappings, at 77.8%) in T1 draws upon the idea of equating the journey of love and life with that of possession; whereas in T2, most of the imagery (seven out of eight mappings, at 87.5%) revolves around the idea of death as a journey, plus its further relevant experiential colouration.

It is quite remarkable to see how the application of CMT in the identification of the frequencies and densities of metaphors conceptual domains can well lead to unravelling the thematic structures of both poems, to the effect that the

analyser can legitimately end up with the conclusion that T1 is about love and life, whereas T2 revolves around the theme of death as a journey of separation and loss.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, such a relationship between the densities of metaphorical conceptual domains and textual thematic structure has not been fully explored nor identified before in English female sonnets.

5. Conclusion

This research has applied the framework of CMT to the analysis of the conceptual domains of metaphors used in two English nineteenth century sonnets, both written by female poets. The quantitative and qualitative results of analysis have revealed that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *sonnet 23* centres around the conceptual mapping of the journey of love and life with that of possession. In contrast, Christina Rossetti's sonnet *Remember* tackles the central conceptual mapping of death as a journey and its further experiential connections. In addition, the application of CMT in the identification of the frequencies and densities of metaphors' conceptual domains has resulted in unravelling the thematic structures of both poems. Such a textually attested relationship between the densities of metaphorical conceptual domains and textual thematic structure has neither been fully explored nor identified prior to the study in the genre of English female sonnets.

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