

Poetic Metaphors: Creativity & Interpretation

Carina Rasse, Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

Introduction

The present project explores the relevance of conceptual knowledge and embodied experiences in structuring and understanding abstract concepts in the context of poetic narratives. On the one hand, it studies whether poets create conceptualizations of their experiences when they produce metaphors. On the other hand, it analyzes whether readers draw, if at all, on similar conceptual metaphors as the poets do when they interpret poetic metaphors.

Material & Methods

The corpus of texts consists of 8 contemporary poems which are analyzed by the researcher for conceptual metaphors and metaphoric themes they comprise. For data collection, the study uses a combination of three research methods:

1. written think-aloud protocols
2. psycholinguistic experiment
3. in-depth online interviews

In study 1, participants are asked to interpret the eight poems. In study 2, participants select from lists of pre-given conceptual metaphors which ones they think best represent the meaning of the poems. In study 3, the authors of the poems are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors, to name their sources of metaphors and to define their purpose of using figurative language.

Results

The think-aloud protocols demonstrate how various concrete terms in the poems served as source domains for participants to think about metaphorical target domains. Additionally, much overlapping could be found between the ways readers wrote about the themes and topics of the presented poems and the most frequently selected conceptual metaphors in the psycholinguistic study. The in-depth interviews reveal that poets mention different forms of sources that underlie their use of metaphors. In their interpretation of specific metaphors, references to common conceptual metaphors, as well as creative extensions of these, were found.

Conclusion

The results of the study offer empirical evidence for the assumption that readers access conceptual metaphors during poetry interpretation. These references to conceptual mappings are frequently very similar to the conceptual mappings that poets mention when they are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors in their works. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the production and comprehension of poetic metaphors is usually shaped by different, dynamically interacting factors. Conceptual mappings are only one of these.

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Wind

by James Arthur

it's true sometimes I cannot
stop myself from spilling
the recycling

unpetalling apple blossoms
raiding a picnic
making off with napkins I'm nothing
until I happen
flipping an umbrella outside-in
throwing its owner
into a fumble
pelting the avenue with sleet or dust

at times downtown
riding over galleries of air
so full of high excitement howling
I borrow an old woman's hat
and fling it into the road

arriving with news of the larkspur
and the bumblebee
at times embracing you so lightly
in ways you don't even think of
as touch

"In the specific case of 'Wind', I wanted to allow joy, even giddiness, to enter the poem. I tried to play off the idea of the wind being mischievous and impulsive, but intangible too [...]. I tried to capture the persona of wind, as I imagine it: careless, graceful, fey. And yet, for all the poem's playfulness, I think there's a dark element to 'Wind' too, because the wind disavows all responsibility for its actions [...]. Perhaps the wind also offers a kind of consolation. I think that in the last lines, the wind is saying that it sees us, faults and all, and is always with us, loving us, tending to us, keeping us company, even if we are unaware of its presence" (Arthur 2018).

"If you are reading Arthur's poem for the first time you don't really get an idea what he wants to tell you with these stanzas. On the second look you will see that he tried to speak in an imagery way to give "wind" as an "abstract" form or natural activity, a personality. In my opinion he is writing in lexical-thematic dimension because he uses the medium "wind" to give an impression of how people can be. Maybe he wanted to show how somebody can act in different situation in life" (Participant 3).

"Wind. The title leaves room for numerous interpretations. Will it be a gentle breeze or a violent storm? It cannot be said, not yet. The poem itself has 4 stanzas, or has it not? The lines seem to begin and end randomly; one cannot recognise a structure, just like the wind itself. Even the punctuation is missing. I suppose this was done deliberately to give the impression that the wind is omnipresent throughout the poem. We get a glimpse as how the wind might view the world [...]. The author emphasises that the wind may be exciting, gentle or even so violent. I believe this choice of words shows what the wind is capable of" (Participant 15).

