Poetic Metaphors: Creativity & Interpretation

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Introduction

Psycholinguistic research has shown that conceptual metaphors influence how people produce and understand language (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1989; Gibbs 1994, 2017; Kövecses 2015). So far, investigations have mostly paid attention to non-poetic metaphor production and comprehension. This focus stems from the original discovery of Conceptual Metaphor Theory that much of everyday, non-poetic language is metaphorical. The present study aims to expand this focus and explores, on the one hand, whether poets create conceptualizations of their experiences when they produce metaphors. On the other hand, it studies whether people access conceptual metaphors during poetry interpretation.

Corpus

The corpus used for the empirical investigations are fragments of poetry written by the following English-speaking poets: Jason D. Peterson ("How we got here"), Rae Armantrout ("The Difficulty"), Frank Beck ("The Copper Husk Allegory"), Shirley Lim ("Night Vision"), James Arthur ("Wind") and Robert Pinsky ("The Hearts").

The selection of stimuli for the three tasks was based on four criteria: 1) all poets are contemporary writers and could thus be interviewed; 2) non-canonical poems were chosen so that participants would not be familiar with these materials; 3) the selected poetic fragments depicted different metaphorical themes which could all be understood in their immediate context; 4) the materials chosen involve metaphorical themes and topics that are common and include a mapping that could be traced back to an established or slightly modified conceptual metaphor present in the Master Metaphor List (Lakoff, Espenson, & Schwartz, 1991).

Methods & Data Analysis

For data collection, the project used a combination of three research methods:

1. questionnaires and online interviews
2. relatedness-ratings and conceptual-metaphor-selection task
3. written think-aloud protocols

Study 1 was designed to offer rich information on the meanings and functions of metaphors from the poets' perspectives. In addition, it explored how poets reflect upon the meaning of specific metaphors in their works.

Study 2 examined readers' implicit and explicit awareness of conceptual metaphors in poetic narratives.

Study 3 aimed to identify all possible conceptual structures of metaphors that readers referred to in their interpretations of the poems. Additionally, it examined how readers responded emotionally to the poems and whether they speculated about the authors' intentions in crafting their narratives.

Discussion of Findings

The responses collected in the three studies will be discussed for psycholinguistic theories of figurative language production and comprehension in literary narratives. The preliminary findings offer empirical evidence for the assumption that readers access conceptual metaphors during poetry interpretation. These references to conceptual mappings are frequently similar to the conceptual mappings that poets mention indirectly 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.

Below is one example from my empirical investigations into the study of metaphors in poetry. It shows one poem that I used in my dissertation - James Arthur's poem "Wind" - and displays an excerpt from the interview in which I asked Arthur to talk about the meanings of his poem. Furthermore, I included two of the readers' interpretations of "Wind". The narrative data shows that the readers' and the poet's responses overlap to a great extent. Yet, readers as well as poets often bring an individual sensibility, mood, and frame of reference to the poem, with the result that each person arrives at a largely personal understanding of the narrative and its metaphors. Finally, the graph summarized the metaphorical themes, that readers referred to, in their interpretations of the poem.

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
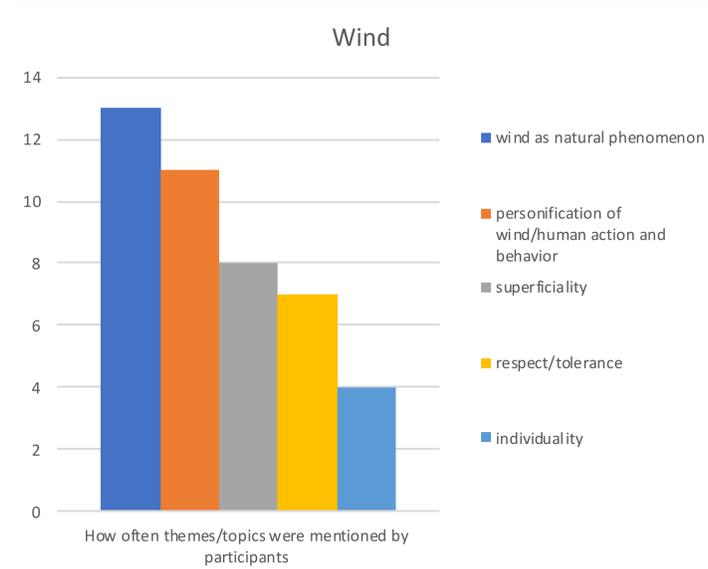pelting the avenue with sleet or dust

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

Readers' perspectives

"The poem is talking about wind and the many ways it appears and interferes with our lives in mostly negative ways. However wind also has a redeeming property in which it can be gentle as well, not just a negative force. I cannot quite identify what wind is supposed to represent but I'm pretty sure he's not just talking about wind. I don't feel much from this poem, but maybe it's talking about how even people you feel negatively about at first are good and have redeeming qualities on the inside, and that makes me happy intent maybe author had an experience with a person and wanted to let others know to be more open minded" (Participant 6).

"The poem presents the beauty of humanity; much like the wind, we do things that can be harmful and mostly unintentionally messy, we are flawed, but in the end we also do things to help and care. We are not all bad. The poem evokes a feeling of flawed beauty. The wind is many things and it can do things we don't necessarily like, but it can also be gentle and caring. The author was probably just trying to capture his experience with wind in a love/hate kind of way" (Participant 19).

Wind — How often themes/topics were mentioned by participants

- wind as natural phenomenon
- personification of wind/human action and behavior
- superficiality
- respect/tolerance
- individuality

Poet's perspective

"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).

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