

Metaphorical Language Use in Modern English Poetry and Its Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract: Metaphor is seen as the essential resource of poetic language in making the abstract tangible through concrete imagery and packing complex thoughts and ideas into concise image-based structures. The present paper aims at analyzing metaphorical language in contemporary English poetry and its pedagogic significance in secondary and higher education. Based on the conceptual metaphor theory and associated studies in cognitive linguistics and stylistics, this paper will provide an overview of how modern poets employ conventional conceptual metaphors, develop new metaphors by combining them in different ways, and challenge them in order to create new meaning. An overview of empirical research in the area of how learners perceive and comprehend metaphors in poetry will also be provided. According to the review of literature, whereas metaphor comprehension is rather challenging for many second and even native language speakers, proper instruction, discourse analysis, and cognitive processing can lead to significant progress in metaphor comprehension and enjoyment of poetry.

Key words: metaphor, modern english poetry, conceptual metaphor theory, cognitive linguistics, Stylistics, language pedagogy, literature teaching

Introduction

Metaphor has long been understood to be fundamental to poetry because in *The Poetics*, Aristotle pointed out that the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor, as without it nothing is achieved by learning, and it is also something that is naturally a part of talent (Heath, 2017). In modern poetry written in the English language, metaphor serves roles that go far beyond simply offering a decorative comparison; metaphor organizes the emotional structure of a poem, condenses an argument into an image, and often challenges the reader to piece together a whole concept based on a few choice words (Carston, 2018).

This central role results in a pedagogical dilemma. Metaphor, being a form of language which requires readers to map meaning from two different domains of knowledge rather than decoding a straightforward assertion, often poses one of the toughest elements of a poem to comprehend, especially to those learners whose first language is something other than English. Studies have consistently reported that despite the need for poetry in the English classroom, the fear of interpretation of metaphorical and other figurative languages poses hesitation among teachers from using poetry in the classroom (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020). On the other hand, others claim that the condensed and imagery-filled language of poetry, including metaphor, is what makes poetry an important source of language teaching because it provides intellectual and emotional engagement to learners.

This paper seeks to deal with this problem head-on. The paper considers the nature of metaphor within modern English poetry with regard to cognitive linguistics and stylistics and discusses the findings of research on learners' understanding of poetic metaphor, translating them into practical guidelines for English language teaching (Ahrens, 2010).

While modern English poetry is included in the curricula of many countries as part of the secondary and higher education system, in practice, the instruction of poetry often takes on a transmission orientation where the teacher directly explains the significance of the metaphors, without giving the learners the opportunity to analyze them themselves (Kilag et al., 2023). Studies into high school teaching of poetry show that in most cases, the teacher sees poetry not as something to be interpreted but as another piece of information that needs to be communicated through mediation rather than interpretation; as a result, the potential for developing the ability to interpret figurative language gets limited for learners. To make matters worse, those who learn English as a foreign language find it especially hard to recognize and analyze metaphors in poems, and even first-language learners often cannot get past their literal understanding of the poem. This paper seeks to bridge this gap between the significance of metaphor in poetry theory and its teaching practice.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore metaphor usage in modern English poetry within the theoretical bases of cognitive linguistics and literary stylistics.
2. To incorporate findings related to the learners' perception of and difficulties in comprehending the metaphorical language of poetry.
3. To examine educational approaches used in metaphor education and their efficacy.
4. To propose methods of teaching metaphors in modern English poetry to secondary and higher educational institution students.

Research Questions

1. How do modern English poets organize their metaphors? What theoretical approaches are useful in studying this aspect of modern poetry?
2. Which obstacles prevent students from understanding metaphorical meanings in poetry? What factors are associated with successful and unsuccessful interpretation of metaphors in poetic texts?
3. How can we teach students to read metaphors and engage with literary texts more actively through them?
4. What pedagogical practices are appropriate according to the results mentioned above in the context of teaching modern English poetry?

This study will be helpful for teachers of English language and literature looking for research-based pedagogical practices regarding figurative language; curriculum developers planning the integration of metaphor and poetry into their programs; and teacher trainers designing courses on teaching literature. In addition to that, it is one of the attempts at integrating cognitive-linguistic theories of metaphor, which were mainly developed in relation to everyday language and thought, into the practice of teaching literature.

Literature Review

The one thing that has been the greatest influence on metaphor theory in modern times is undoubtedly the conceptual metaphor theory (e.g. *Metaphors We Live By*). According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments but a basic process of thinking where the abstract domain of understanding (like time, argument, and love) is perceived systematically in accordance with some

concrete domain of understanding (money, war, and journey). In this case, the poetic metaphor, where life is compared to a journey or death to sleep, is not simply a poetic construction but an elaboration of the concept of already existing metaphorical understanding.

Framework applied explicitly to poetry in *More Than Cool Reason*, in which it is explained that poets create novelty not by inventing completely new conceptual metaphors from scratch but by taking some conventionally mapped domain and applying it to an unconventional context, by working out a conventional mapping with unconventional specificity, by challenging the mapping, or by combining a number of conventionally mapped domains in one metaphorical image. Framework provides an explanation for the fact that even very novel metaphors used in poetry can be interpreted by the reader because their novelty is always based upon a common conceptual ground. Systematization of this framework is possible by differentiating three kinds of metaphors: structural, ontological, and orientational; besides, a characteristic feature of source domains is their grounding in embodied experience.

Besides the cognitive and linguistic approach, classical and stylistic approaches to metaphor have proven their value for pedagogy as well Steen, (2011). In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, the highly valued notion of the tenor and the vehicle was developed; these terms denote the essence and imagery used to denote the essence, respectively. This notion is widely utilized in the classroom analysis of metaphor, because it provides students with the necessary vocabulary, with which they can understand how a particular image correlates with its essence Posselt & Hetzel, (2023). In addition, in *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*, the idea was stated that the stylistic analysis of texts, including the analysis of metaphors, may help students to relate literary language to their everyday language (Stockwell, 2020).

One of the common methodological problems encountered by both literary and pedagogical studies of metaphors is the reliable detection of the metaphors within a text. The solution to this problem is provided through the creation of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), which is the step-by-step process where each lexical item of a text is compared to its basic, generally more concrete or bodily meaning, and marked as metaphoric if the contextual meaning is different from but at the same time understandable in relation to the basic meaning. This procedure was further developed by Steen to MIPVU with additional instructions on dealing with phrasal verbs, compounds, and borderline cases and created a large corpus of annotated metaphors in English (Group, 2007). Even though MIP(VU) was initially designed for corpus-linguistic studies, it still has direct pedagogical value: teaching students the basic-versus-contextual-meaning contrast, simplified for the classroom needs and based on MIP, makes the process of detecting metaphors in poems less intuitive and more methodical (Nacey et al., 2019).

Gibbs, in his book *"The Poetics of Mind,"* contends that figurative comprehension is not a secondary process that takes place after a failure in literal comprehension; instead, it is just as quick and essential in language comprehension as literal comprehension, which raises significant implications for the teaching of metaphor in the classroom: if the learner is taught to approach metaphor as an enigma that can only be deciphered after a failure in literal comprehension, he or she may well be approaching metaphor in a manner contrary to how figurative comprehension usually takes place. Low, Todd, Deignan, and Cameron gathered research from both theoretical and practical perspectives in relation to metaphor in educational, occupational, and daily life situations, making it clear that, in reality, metaphor comprehension involves considerable discourse, genre, and prior knowledge on the part of the reader.

In fact, empirical research dedicated to the analysis of poetry proves that understanding metaphors becomes a significant barrier for learners. The qualitative investigation of university students showed that learners tend to get stuck in the vicious circle of misunderstanding or non-understanding of the metaphor

assigned in their poems with the help of the culturally distant metaphorical mapping or combination of various figurative means. Analyzing the process of teaching English poetry to EFL students in a Saudi Arabian university, also concluded that traditional methods of poetry analysis in classrooms are teacher-centered and learners are treated as passive receivers of information about the interpretation of the poem (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2008).

Nonetheless, the findings about these challenges show there is increasing research on the development of metaphorical competence through instructional interventions. The meta-analysis of the twenty studies that investigate the effectiveness of instructional interventions in teaching second language metaphorical competence revealed large effect sizes, showing the effectiveness of instructional interventions based on sustained input of metaphorical ideas with practice in developing metaphorical competence, and also a positive correlation between the length of the instructional intervention and its success (Zhou et al., 2022). Concerning the pedagogical possibilities of poetry in teaching English, it has been suggested that poetry provides opportunities for learning by engaging in both emotional and intellectual exploration of the content, which at the same time develops analytical skills and cultural awareness, as long as the approach taken by the teacher to teaching poetry is interactive and open. A helpful structure to guide such educational efforts, taking into account the different aspects of literature instruction that include cultural, language-oriented, and growth-related models of instruction each suggesting a certain approach to metaphor, where the cultural model considers metaphor as a means to enter the value system and worldview of the target culture, the language-oriented model views it as the object of linguistic analysis aimed at building language awareness, while the growth-related one sees the individual's personal interpretation of the images used by the poem as the key aim of instruction (Kopper, 2010). In the majority of cases, effective modern instructional strategies for poetry use metaphor and incorporate the mentioned aspects.

Methodology

This research being a literary research paper, the procedure of the research is through systematic review and not through collecting any new data. The sources have been found from literature reviews on cognitive linguistics, stylistics and English language teaching focusing particularly on metaphor, poetry, and pedagogy. Preference has been given to theoretical literature in the field of conceptual metaphor theory and methodologies of metaphor identification and empirical findings related to learner comprehension.

For researchers interested in replicating a classroom-based study of metaphor involving a particular modern poem or poetry module, the reviewed literature would suggest the following protocol:

1. Selection of the text: choose a modern poem in English that will be suitable for the particular group of learners and contains a variety of both traditional and innovative metaphors.
2. Identification of metaphors: employ an adapted version of MIP as a tool for detecting candidate metaphorical constructions in the text and distinguish between basic and contextual meaning of each unit.
3. Conceptual mapping: for each of the discovered metaphors, teach learners to name its source domain and target domain and explain how the poet makes correspondences between them based on the tenor-vehicle distinction.
4. Assessment of comprehension: conduct pre- and post-intervention activities aimed at measuring learners' success in understanding metaphorical constructions through activities such as paraphrasing, comparative judgment, or written interpretations.

5. Productive extension: encourage learners to construct metaphors themselves on a related topic by employing the personal growth and language-based models.

Findings and Discussion

Modern Poets Extend Rather than Invent Conceptual Metaphors

In line with this, the metaphors used in modern English poems that create the sense of originality in them usually function through elaborating or questioning conceptual metaphors already embedded in the everyday conceptual framework, such as the death being perceived as a journey, an ending, or rest, or emotions being conceptualized as weather or temperature. The above point has a very significant implication for teaching poetry: students do not need to rebuild an entirely new conceptual framework in order to understand the central metaphor in a modern poem; rather, they need guidance in identifying the conceptual metaphor underpinning the poem's unique and often unusual imagery.

Metaphor Comprehension Is Cognitively Challenging but Can Be Taught

From the findings of the reviewed literature, two related results can be summarized: metaphor comprehension is cognitively challenging for learners, especially where cultural knowledge is required or multiple figures are involved; and metaphorical competence can be effectively trained with targeted instruction. The meta-analysis shows that the effect sizes of different instructional interventions on metaphor comprehension are consistently large. Therefore, difficulties in comprehending poetic metaphors should be viewed as an instructional objective rather than evidence against the use of poetry in foreign language learning.

Teacher-Centered Delivery Limits the Development of Interpretive Competence

There are several pieces of research that have found a similar tendency of teaching poetry and metaphors in schools by means of transmission, where the teacher provides the proper meaning, and students receive it passively, without developing their own interpreting skills. This idea has been explicitly stated by Alvi and Alvi, whereas in studies concerning the teaching of poetry at high school level it has been found that the positive effects of poetry are achieved only when students become active participants in the process of sense-making.

Systematic Identification Procedures Provide a Practical Classroom Tool

While the MIP and MIPVU approaches have been created for corpus-linguistics studies and not for teaching purposes, the core idea of both approaches, that a metaphor is defined through comparing the contextual meaning of a word and its general meaning, can easily be applied in class. The ability to do such a comparison becomes a technique for students to find metaphors on their own in an unknown poem.

Pedagogical Implications

Several implications can be made for teaching metaphors in modern English poetry based on the literature discussed above. First, teachers should take an explicit approach to metaphor instruction that consists of showing the students how to use a technique (e.g., a basic versus contextual meaning test) to identify metaphors in poems. Second, teachers should teach the imagery found in poems using more abstract and general conceptual metaphors, so that students would understand that the unique imagery used in a modern poem is often an extension of common metaphoric thinking. Third, teachers should use reader-centered and discourse-based approaches that regard poetry interpretation as construction by readers

instead of the transfer of information from teachers to students, since this approach is linked with better engagement and interpretative skills. Fourth, reading comprehension activities should be complemented by production activities involving metaphor creation, since producing metaphors is linked with the same cognitive processes that are necessary for understanding them.

Recommendations

1. Teach the students an easy-to-use technique for finding metaphors based on MIP to ensure that the students can use this procedure to find figurative language in poems that are unknown to them.
2. Use the terminology of tenor and vehicle to discuss how the particular image in the poem is represented by the subject in question.
3. Show explicitly the connection between the specific metaphors used in the poem and the general conceptual metaphors used by extending them.
4. Construct lessons on metaphor based on an integrated model that includes cultural, linguistic, and personal development objectives, not just viewing metaphors as something to overcome in the comprehension of poems.
5. Include both production tasks and interpretation tasks for learning metaphors.
6. Spread the instructional interventions through several lessons not one lesson as long interventions yield larger increases in metaphorical competence.

Limitations

Unlike other research papers that have presented results from actual classrooms, this paper is an aggregation of existing literature, both theoretical and empirical in nature. The research articles that have been reviewed above differ in terms of the nature of the students, the language in question, and the poems, and therefore, generalizing the results is quite difficult. It is important for teachers to apply the methodology suggested above in order to conduct their own experiments.

Conclusion

Metaphor is not a decorative element of modern English poetry but its major source of meaning, working by way of the very same cognitive mechanisms that underlie everyday cognition while extending them into unaccustomed territory. The double nature of this source known from the perspective of cognitive structure and new from the perspective of poetic implementation accounts both for the difficulties many learners have with metaphors and for their teachability through a conscious and systematic approach. The body of literature considered here provides grounds for teaching metaphor through systematic identification of metaphorical instances, explicit conceptual mapping, reader-oriented interpretation, and metaphor production. It allows bridging the gap between the central role of metaphor in modern poetry as theorized and its often neglected status in the language and literature classroom.

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