

# Nature and Classification of Poetical Metaphor

## NATURE AND CLASSIFICATION OF POETICAL METAPHOR

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**Abstract:** Metaphor is by some interpreted as a kind of human thinking mode and cognitive means instead of a linguistic phenomenon merely. This paper aims at exploring the nature and features of metaphor in English poetry. Systematically, poetical metaphor is classified into three groups according to the existing forms.

**Key words:** poetical metaphor, features, classification

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**Mots-Clés:** poetical metaphor, features, classification

### INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is by some interpreted as a kind of human thinking mode and cognitive means instead of a linguistic phenomenon merely. Metaphor links not only two single "objects", but the semantic networks around them. In this light, metaphor is more like an indispensable bridge than as a reducible language decoration in poetry. It links the unknown with the known domain, abstract concept with concrete one, and thought with reality.

#### 1. METAPHOR AND POETRY

Usually, poets use a chosen and arranged language to create a literary form that can evoke an emotional response by expressing the poets' own imaginative awareness of experience. "In order to convey the awareness, instead of 'ordinary' language, people tend to use poetic language that is favored by creative writers, especially poets". (Geoffrey N. Leech, 2001: 5) Then, how to arrive at the metaphorical purpose? In the eyes of cognitive theory, "metaphor is one of the main cognitive and rational factors by which we develop a sense of coherence among our innumerable experiences". (Fiumara, 1995: 98)

Metaphor structures not only how we talk but also how we think and act. Through it we can understand ourselves and the world we live in. So poets in the same

case primarily rely on poetic metaphor. Poetry has long been seen as the paradigm site for metaphor. Metaphor is the "logic" of poetry. Metaphor and poetry are of the same essence. The close relationship between metaphor and poetry can be revealed from what Aristotle wrote in *Poetics*, "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor," and in his *Rhetoric*, "From metaphor we can best get hold of something fresh." (John Briggs & Richard Monaco, 1990: 257).

But it used to be investigated into by stylisticians and literary critics, with their focus on the function that metaphor performs to the bringing about of poetic diction. Despite Alexander Pope's warnings against the overuse of far-fetched imageries and Wordsworth's commitment to the use of every man's speech, metaphor is generally considered the chief characteristic of poetry. "Traditionally metaphor is regarded as the decoration or ornament of poetry, a kind of rhetoric. And attention is also paid to linguistic features such as diction, special grammatical inflections and metrical patterns." (嚴世清, 1999: 106)

#### 2. POETIC METAPHOR AND POETICAL METAPHOR

John Briggs & Richard Monaco distinguished poetic metaphor from common metaphors in their *Metaphor: The Logic of Poetry, A Handbook* as follows: "In the everyday use of metaphors for clarification of persuasion, the emphasis is nearly always on the

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similarity between terms; in poetic metaphor, it is on the tension of both similarities and dissimilarities between them” (John Briggs & Richard Monaco, 1990: 6). Compared with overused common metaphors, which lose their novelty in everyday life, poetic metaphors often juxtapose irrelevant things together and create a similarity between them from a perspective people have not noticed before, through which the new awareness of the poet is passed to the readers. During this process, the cognitive function of metaphor is realized as well as its defamiliarization and aesthetic function.

It should be pointed out that the term poetical metaphor is used here instead of poetic metaphor. Poetic metaphor is the opposite to ordinary metaphor or common metaphor. It is equal to some other expressions such as literary metaphor, live metaphor, original metaphor, fresh metaphor, etc. Poetic metaphor may occur not only in poetry, but also in every gossip, in scientific reports, in commercial or political persuasion, and in any other kind of language. But in this dissertation, attention is paid merely to the application of poetic metaphor in English poetry. We term it as poetical metaphor for clarity of discussion, although it is obvious that all poetical metaphors in good poems are poetic metaphors.

### 3. NATURE OF POETICAL METAPHOR

Metaphor in poetry is many-leveled and has particular characteristics, in addition to the semantic features of ordinary metaphor such as literal contradiction, fuzziness, directionality, dynamicness, etc. Three typical features of metaphor in poetry are discussed: creativeness, inexhaustibility, and coherence.

#### 3.1 Creativeness

“A poem is nothing if not creative. A poem is regarded as insightful or perceptive only if with creative or original metaphors which make it fresh and intriguing. Creativeness is the crucial feature of poetical metaphor.” (胡壯麟, 2004: 107) According to cognitive theory, the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another. Things in the universe are objectively related. Poets, a special kind of artists, are more intuitive than ordinary people. They have metaphorical eyes to discover the similarity between one domain (source domain) and the other (target domain). The discovery is new and unique, which can only be discovered through certain poet’s individual efforts of thinking and experiencing. To express new awareness, poets need a new language, poetic language instead of expository terms in poetry.

On the other hand, according to 張沛, chronically speaking, the degree of creativeness decreases if it is used too often or for too long. Some poetical metaphor

is regarded creative and new when it was newly-invented. As time goes on, readers get familiar with the expression. For example, the metaphor in “my love is a red, red rose” or “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances...” The primitive live metaphor may change into dying metaphor, and from dying metaphor into dead metaphor. (張沛, 2004: 8)

#### 3.2 Inexhaustibility

The feature of inexhaustibility refers to readers’ inexhaustible understanding of poems. The inexhaustibility of poetical metaphor is closely related to its ambiguity. Take Shakespeare’s metaphor of “Juliet is the sun” as an example. In people’s mind, the sun might be warm, bright, reviving, etc. But what did Shakespeare refer to? Literature researchers still cannot agree on its understanding over hundreds of years’ debate. A poem is written in words, the media of poem, but the mere mastery of the words used does not guarantee the acquisition of the meaning of the poem. In poetry, it is the connotations and the “baggage” that words carry (the weight of words) that are most important. These shades and nuances of meaning may be difficult to interpret and cause different readers to “hear” a particular piece of poetry differently.

#### 3.3 Coherence

The contemporary text linguistics holds that “cohesion” and “coherence” are the two basic necessity to structure conversations. The former “refers to the consistency of form”, and the latter “refers to the consistency of content” (束定芳, 2000: 87). A poem is an organic whole, whose lines or stanzas interact harmoniously and systematically. Once a metaphoric subject is chosen, the whole text should be extended around the central concept. Once a metaphoric subject is chosen, the whole text should be extended around the central concept. A genuine poet always keeps coherence in his mind and coherence is the essential feature of poetical metaphor.

It is poetical metaphor that functions most in organizing or structuring a poem, while it is not the only factor. 張沛 argues that the subject, rhymes, sound, images, especially controlling image are all the factors to make a poem into an organic whole (張沛, 2004: 183).

### 4. CLASSIFICATION OF POETICAL METAPHOR

Eli khamarov claimed, “Poets are soldiers that liberate words from the steadfast possession of definition” (靳

涵身, 2004: 62). Words are combination of meaning, sound and form, especially in poetry. We can say poets are liberators of ordinary genres at the three levels of meaning, sound and form. When rendering Chinese classical poem, Xu Yuanhong raised his "Three-Beauty" approach in rendering poetry. That is beauty in sound, beauty in form and beauty in meaning. 羅良功 proposes that English poem composes three systems: musical system, visual system and semantic system (羅良功, 2002: 1-104). According to the partition made by Leech, there are eight kinds of deviation: lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, dialectal deviation, deviation of register and deviation of historical period (Geoffrey N. Leech, 2001: 42-55). For the convenience of investigation, the eight deviations can be grouped into three: sound deviation, formal deviation and semantic deviation. The realization of the three-level deviation relies mainly on poetical metaphors: sound metaphor, formal metaphor and semantic metaphor.

#### 4.1 Sound metaphor

A good poem, to begin with, it sings; as Pound said, "Poetry withers and dries out when it leaves music, or at imagined music, too far behind it. Poets who are not interested in music are, in a sense, bad poets." Poetry has its roots in song. The earliest poetic forms were the epics and ballads sung by traveling bards and minstrels. Though no longer sung, poems retain their musical quality.

"Reasons for poets using sound and metrical patterning include: for aesthetic pleasure, to conform to a convention/ style /poetical form, to express or innovate with a form, to demonstrate technical skill, for intellectual pleasure, for emphasis or contrast, and onomatopoeia." (胡壯麟, 2001:295-296) Sound metaphor means poets expound their experience of ideas, awareness, feelings, perception, etc by means of onomatopoeia (the imitation of natural sound), the variety of rhymes and the intensity of rhythms.

#### 4.2 Formal metaphor

We say that a poem looks like a poem, meaning that we see lines standing individually apart and usually, not running together as a prose paragraph. A poem has a particular frame which is usually the characteristic line-by-line arrangement in a rather parallel way on the printed page. But "some poets resort to tricks of typographical lay-out to express the meaning beyond the words" (郭暉, 2002: 11).

But do poets create the purely visual patterning for visual beauty? The distinctive visible shape in print is a formal metaphor. The printed shape is closely related to the subject matter of the poem. It is a device to manifest

the poet's insight of complex concept in a visual, direct, simple, and impressive way. The visual shape and the verbal meaning coincide strikingly in "shaped poems" (also called "concrete poems" or "graphological poems"): the shape is not a mere demonstration to meet the eye, but points out meaning and fulfills the specific metaphoric purpose.

Two American poets who explore the possibilities of purely visual patterning in poetry are William Carlos Williams and e. e. cummings. e. e. cummings is inventive and fond of making experiment with language for the sake of art. His poems are combination of the art of poetry, painting and music. The graphological deviation in his poems is at any level, varying from letters, punctuation, parentheses to lay-out of lines. For him, all these become expressive devices.

#### 4.3 Semantic metaphor

Words, sound and form are the "building blocks" of poetry. By far, sound metaphor and formal metaphor have been explored. This part explores semantic metaphor which is used more frequently. Sound and formal metaphor appear in part of poems and are used by some poets, while semantic metaphor is commonly applied by all poets. Although poetry takes language as its material, still it means more than the language itself. Poets use the signifier as a mediator or background to obtain the signified meaning. The essential difference between everyday language and poetic language is that we can't just sit back with a poem and be entertained or excited by it. We can't imagine we have understood it just because we happen to know what all the words mean; we have to work a little, work with the poet, in order to experience for ourselves the poem's mysterious and elusive sense of truth.

A metaphor may occur in poetical words, sentences or an entire poem, so semantic metaphor is discussed at lexical level, syntactical level and textual level.

##### 4.3.1 At lexical level

In a metaphor at lexical level, the tenor and the vehicle both appear in lexical form. 束定芳 argues that according to the functions of words, there are noun metaphor, verb metaphor, adjective metaphor, adverbial metaphor and prepositional metaphor. (束定芳, 2000: 59-66) One example for each is given below:

###### (a) noun metaphor

The old star-eaten blanket of the sky (Thomas Ernest Hulme: "The Embankment")

###### (b) verb metaphor

Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering & dancing in the breeze. (William Wordsworth: "Daffodils")

(c) adjective metaphor

And Frigates-in the Upper Floor, Extended Hempen  
Hands—(Emily Dickson: “I started Early—Took my  
Dog—No.520)

(d) adverbial metaphor

He was a gentleman from sole to crown, Clean  
favored, and imperially slim. (Edwin Arlington  
Robinson: “Richard Cory”)

(e) prepositional metaphor

The space between, is but an hour, The frail duration  
of a flower. (Philip Feneau: “The Wild Honey Suckle”)

#### 4.3.2 At syntactical level

In a metaphor at syntactical level, the tenor and the vehicle both appear in syntactical form. It does not mean that a poem as long as consisting of tenor and vehicle is a poem with poetic metaphor. A poetic metaphor is to tell the reader a new, unique discovery. The similarities between the concepts created by the poet are not recognized by the reader before reading the poem; they are unexpected. A poetic metaphor does not aim at making something known, but at the experience of the unknown. Otherwise, it is not a poetic metaphor, but a description or opinion disguised as metaphor.

#### 4.3.3 At textual level

A whole poem, like the single word, can also be a kind of metaphor itself. A metaphor at textual level means the entire poem is written as a metaphor, more specifically, the vehicle of a metaphor. Let's take *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost as an example.

Reading this poem literally (as many people have), we might conclude that “it's about a man who comes to a place where there are two roads; he can't decide which one to take, and so he takes the one that looks less used and he's glad.” That is basically the story, the “plot”. A superficial reading of the poem leads to the understanding of just a trip which one encounters a crossroads. If the words of the poem were not laid in the structure of individual lines but as a paragraph of prose, or if it appeared in a novel as a scene, it might be appropriate to be interpreted as scene. But as a poem, it means more than the denotations.

Then what is the connotation or metaphoric meaning? The vehicle is “making choice of two roads”, then what

is the tenor or we may say, subject? The narrator's situation implies at least two abstract subjects. One might be called “decision making”, and the other “human limitation”; that is, the narrator choosing between the roads discovers that he is limited, that he can take only one of the choices. This concrete situation allows Frost to explore these abstractions without ever seeming abstract. We cannot really take his remarks as advice or cracker-barrel philosophy, as if someone said, “You can never tell when you make a decision what's going to happen” or “You know, every time you make a decision you have to leave something behind.” Yet, in a sense these statements are contained in the lines “And looked down one as far as I could” and “Yet knowing how way leads on to way/ I doubted if I should ever come back.” These lines do not present philosophy, but description. The roads are not just roads but are pointing to something more (ways of life, experience, events, past hopes and wishes, the pattern of the future, etc.).

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, metaphor is interpreted as a kind of human thinking mode and cognitive means instead of a linguistic phenomenon merely. Therefore, metaphor exists in three aspects of sound, form and meaning in English poetry; and metaphor can be at discourse level: lexical level, syntactical level and textual level. By this approach, three typical features of poetical metaphor are discussed in this dissertation. They are creativeness, inexhaustibility, and coherence. And according to the existing levels, poetical metaphor is divided into three groups: sound metaphor, formal metaphor and semantic metaphor. Semantic metaphor is explored at lexical level, syntactical level and textual level.

Actually, poetry is the queen of arts. The British poet P. B. Shelly once said, “A great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight.” The American poet Linda McCarriston also said, “Poetry allows one to speak with a power that is not granted by our culture.” This dissertation attempts to explore new understanding of the features and classification of poetical metaphor in order to offer the reader a metaphorical eye. As Robert Frost said, “A poem is a metaphor.” The author believes that the tentative research of poetical metaphor is of great significance to push forward the study of metaphor in poetry discourse.

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