

Metaphor Analysis of Dickinson's Because I Could Not Stop for Death

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ABSTRACT. *Metaphor is the soul of poetry. Dickinson's poetry metaphor is rich in philosophy. In Dickinson's poems, metaphor has risen from the word level to the text level, and the selected "because I can't stay for death" is a typical example. With the help of the theory of textual metaphor and cohesion, this paper discusses the function of metaphor in the organization and cohesion of the poem, and tries to further understand the deep meaning and aesthetic value of the poem.*

KEYWORDS: *Textual metaphor, Discourse, Dickinson's poetry*

1. Introduction

According to Wang (2013), the theoretical study of metaphor, which can be traced back to two thousand years ago, has gone through three different stages. Initially, metaphor was studied merely as a figure of speech by Aristotle, who defined metaphor as a device to talk about one thing in terms of something else. Later, metaphor was explored from a semantic perspective and was studied at sentence level. With the development of linguistics and the increase in our knowledge of the external world, scholars started to look into metaphor from a cognitive view. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put forward the idea that our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical. From this perspective, it is believed that metaphor is not merely a matter of words but a matter of thought and that language and cognition cannot be separated from each other. Metaphors enable us to understand one conceptual domain with regard to another. They state that metaphorical linguistic expressions can reflect the way we think and what we do in our everyday life. In this regard, language is considered to be a tool for accessing the general principles of understanding. In addition, Turner (1996) claims that literary mind is indispensable to human cognition. Therefore, it can be seen that a large number of metaphors are used in literature.

Among all types of literature, poetry is one of the most prominent examples. Poetry is a powerful medium that can 'instruct us in what to notice, how to understand and how to conduct our lives' (Lakoff and Turner, 1989:110). By using metaphor, poets can express their feelings or convey a meaningful idea. Poetic metaphor, as Lakoff and Turner (1989) point out, deals with the central parts of the conceptual system. In her poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, for example, Dickinson depicted a different image of death and explored the meaning of death through metaphor. In this essay, a critical metaphor analysis of Dickinson's poem further reveals how she used the power of metaphor to present her unique insight into death.

2. Target Domains of Because I Could Not Stop for Death

2.1 Death

In the poem, death is conceived as a gentle and polite coachman who kindly stopped for the speaker and took her to the carriage. In this case, the abstract target domain 'death' is understood in terms of the concrete source domain 'coachman'. The metaphor here is DEATH IS A COACHMAN. This metaphor, according to Lakoff and Turner (1989), is an extension of the general metaphorical concept that we have of death. That is, DEATH IS DEPARTURE. When talking about the concept of departure, the thought of the place from which we depart, of the way we depart and of the people with whom we depart may come to our mind. By mapping a coachman onto death and the carriage onto the tool for departure, therefore, Dickinson provided readers with a vivid picture of the coming of death through the concept of departure. Without mentioning anything about departure or dying, Dickinson did indeed convey the message that death is departure. Moreover, we can actually make sense of the

poem and understand that the speaker was not merely going to visit some place. As Freeman (2003) suggests, the same ordinary cognitive principles of embodied knowledge of the world is shared by both poets and readers. We are able to read the message that Dickinson conveyed because we share in our mind the same basic metaphorical concept that death is departure (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

Although the actual metaphor that is used in the poem by Dickinson is DEATH IS A COACHMAN instead of DEATH IS DEPARTURE, we grasp the profound meaning because we understand the conventional metaphor that shapes our understanding of the world (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). In addition, the idea of 'stop for death' can also be understood through another basic conceptual metaphor that LIFE IS A JOURNEY. Since life is a journey, there should be a destination of the journey and death is the destination. In the poem, the speaker was not willing to stop at the destination. She was reluctant because she got both her labor and leisure in life and she did not want to abandon them. However, death is what everyone has to be faced with, no matter how terrible you think it is and how unwilling you are. Because of her unwillingness to stop, death came kindly as a coachman to take her to the destination. When death came, the time was still and there was no need to be in a hurry.

Death, the kind and gentle coachman, took the speaker away from her labor and leisure calmly and peacefully and brought her toward eternity. In this sense, Dickinson presented death as something that we should not be afraid of. Also, this stopping point of life can be seen as the starting point of death's departure (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Instead of saying 'die', we tend to use 'somebody passed away' or 'somebody has gone', which are coherent to the concept of departure. In our concept, a person will leave us and go to another world if he or she dies. That is to say, this person will start another journey after dying. If life is a journey, therefore, death can be considered to be a journey too. Although Dickinson did not directly talk about journey in the poem, the words she used like 'carriage' implicate that death is a journey too and death itself is who takes the speaker to start her second journey (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Looking deeper into this metaphorical concept, we can notice that life is a circle for Dickinson. The journey of life and death is a cycle process that never ends. Death is the destination of life, and at the same time, it is the starting point of hereafter. As a result, to die is to move toward eternity. Because metaphors have the power to structure our concepts, we are able to contemplate the nature of death and the destination by conceiving death in this way (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

2.2 People and a Lifetime

Another two target domains in the poem are people and a lifetime, whose source domains are plants and a day respectively. As mentioned above, death came as a coachman and took the speaker on a journey where she passed different stages of life. The concept of 'the school', 'the fields of gazing grain' and 'the setting sun' respectively refer to three different stages of life – childhood, maturity and old age. As readers, we have no difficulty understanding what these three things Dickinson referred to because the basic conceptual metaphor of life is embodied unconsciously in our mind (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). The first stage that they passed was childhood, where they saw students playing during the break at school. The image of young and active students appropriately presents the characteristics of childhood. Later, they passed a field where the grains were ripe. By saying 'the field of gazing grain', Dickinson was actually talking about the life stage of maturity. The metaphor here is PEOPLE ARE PLANTS. In terms of life circle, there is similarity between people and plants. For plants, they have to go through the process of sprouting, blossoming, bearing fruit and withering. After being born, similarly, people will experience childhood, maturity and the stage of old age. In this case, we get to understand the stages of life in terms of the life cycle of plants. Perceiving the similarity between people and plants, the cognitive skill that Dickinson used here is called attribute mapping (Freeman, 2003). After passing the field, death took the speaker pass the setting sun. That is, they moved from maturity to old age. The cognitive metaphor here is A LIFETIME IS A DAY. As a lifetime is a day, born then is dawn, childhood is morning, maturity is noon and the old age is twilight (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

This kind of metaphorical concept is what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define as orientational metaphor, which is associated with spatial orientation like up and down. Such metaphorical orientations are based on our physical experience. As humans, for example, when we grow from infants, children, teenagers to adults, our heights grow. Based on this physical experience, we have the conceptual metaphor that GROWTH AND LIFE ARE UP. One example in English expressions is 'somebody grows up', which is used to talk about the change that occurs from being a young child to being an adult. When we are getting old, on the contrary, our back may be bent and we may not be able to stand up straight. Also, for most people, the stereotype about the old is that they are easier to get ill. According to our physical experience, we have to lie down in bed when we are seriously ill. Therefore, there is the basic conceptual metaphor that OLD AND DEATH ARE DOWN. Accordingly, Dickinson mapped the setting sun onto the stage of old age. Based on our knowledge of life in our conceptual system, we can easily resonate with this mapping in the poem; we can understand the poet's view of death in

terms of the ordinary metaphorical concept of life. No matter it is the school children, the ripe crops or the setting sun, what Dickinson presented to us through metaphor is a beautiful picture of life. The speaker was on her way to death, yet she could still see the beauty of life. Through death, she understood the value of life. Employing the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS and A LIFETIME IS A DAY metaphor, Dickinson was actually presenting her attitude toward the relationship between life and death.

3. Metaphor of Dickinson's Because I Could Not Stop for Death

After the sun set, there came the night, which in fact referred to death. Corresponding to the metaphor that A LIFETIME IS A DAY, the metaphor that Dickinson used here is DEATH IS NIGHT. Lakoff and Turner (1989) point out that a large number of conventional metaphors are unconscious and automatic. Conventional metaphors map two conventional concepts in different domains together, and we understand these concepts through metaphor. In this metaphor, the target domain is death and the source domain is night. We try to understand that death is night by means of drawing on our conventional understanding of night. How we understand the concept of night is grounded in our experience of it (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). According to our conventional knowledge of night, the temperature drops and the coldness sets in when night comes. As night fell down, thus, the speaker started to feel cold and shivery. Once one is dead, as we all know, he or she will stop breathing, the body temperature will start to decrease and the body will become cold and stiff. Therefore, it is not difficult to tell that the quiver and chill of the dews implicate that death is approaching. Based on the discussion above, we should know that metaphor is not just a matter of language, but a matter of concept. From the metaphorical perspective, the coldness of night is the coldness of death (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). The gown that the speaker was wearing was merely made of gossamer and the tippet was made of tulle. With these thin clothes, it was hard to not feel cold. Moreover, the gossamer gown and the tulle tippet in the poem can be seen as the shroud that is used to wrap the body of a dead person. With death's companion, the speaker was getting nearer and nearer to the destination. Death was approaching, but there was no fear; there was no pain. Thought it was terribly cold, there was just coldness.

From the chill of the dews to the thinness of the clothes, what the poet presented to the readers is the coldness and quiver of the destination of life – death. By means of metaphor, Dickinson's description of death is full of beauty. As a matter of fact, the DEATH IS NIGHT metaphor is a conventional metaphor that is embodied in our mind. However, we can read from the poem that Dickinson considered death to be something that is not horrible, which is actually quite the opposite of how most people perceive death. For Dickinson, when speaking of death as night, she did not view death in terms of its negative side. This is metaphor's power of evaluation. In addition to mapping entities and structure of the source domain onto those of the target domain, we also indicate how we evaluate the entities of the source domain (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

After reviewing the different stages of life, death and the speaker finally stopped at a house – their final destination. To understand the concepts of 'the house', 'the roof' and 'the cornice', we have to have in our conceptual system the conventional metaphor that DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION. The DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION metaphor was applied here to present the image of death with regard to a journey to the final destination (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). As stated by Lakoff and Turner (1989), this metaphor is based on the STATE IS LOCATION metaphor, in which to change a state is to change a location. The final state of our life is being dead. That is to say, death is the final location. As human beings, we were born to die. Therefore, we can say that death, the final location of life, is going back to where we are from. The place where we come from is our home. If we believe that our body belongs to the earth, then the earth is where we come from and return to (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

In this sense, the grave is the home of our body after we die. In the poem, therefore, the house at which they stopped actually refers to the speaker's grave; the roof is the convex top of the grave; the cornice under the surface of the ground is the coffin. In these metaphors, the image of the house is mapped onto the image of the grave. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), apart from the mappings of different concepts that unconsciously structure our understanding of the world, there are also metaphors that map one image onto another. Metaphorical image-mappings can lead us to understand knowledge of one image in terms of knowledge of another image. Moreover, image-metaphors can work as triggers and strengthen the mapping of conceptual knowledge (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Here, the image-metaphor that maps the image of the grave onto the image of the house activates our ordinary conceptual metaphor that DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION. When talking about grave, we are likely to associate it with death. When thinking of going home, at the same time, we may consider it to be going to our final destination. Therefore, our conventional images lead us to think of the association between going home and death and thus trigger the DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION metaphor (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).

4. Conclusion

Through the above analysis of Dickinson's poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, we can notice that all the metaphors she used in the poem are based on the basic and ordinary conceptual metaphors that are shared by both the poet and the readers. These basic conceptual metaphors are not created by Dickinson. Instead, they are the reflections of how we as members of a specific culture understand the world (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Again, it should be emphasized that metaphor is not just related to language, but it is actually on a larger scale related to our thought. The reason why Dickinson could convey a different image of death without creating any new conceptual metaphors is that she extended and elaborated the basic metaphors that we all have in our conceptual system. Extending conventional metaphor is one significant mode of poetic thought and it is how poets make use of conventional metaphor to communicate with readers (Lakoff and Turner, 1989). As a consequence, we as readers have to understand basic conceptual metaphor in order to make sense of poetic metaphor. Freeman (2003) attributes Dickinson's greatness to her understanding of the metaphorical essence of our everyday language and thought. He believes that it is her understanding of our metaphorical conceptual system that enables Dickinson to write poems that 'disrupt our commonsensical and folk theory ways of thinking about the world' (Freeman, 2003:267). Lakoff and Turner (1989), similarly, state that poetry has the power to influence the way we perceive the world. Poetry enables us to extend our metaphorical concept and to have a more insightful look into our everyday understanding of the world by means of metaphor. To conclude, through metaphor, Dickinson showed us in her poem her insight into death, which is beyond our conventional understanding of death. Death to her is not terrifying. Moreover, we should calmly accept the coming of death.

5. References

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