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**Metaphor universals in literature<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

In the paper, I propose that metaphor is a near-universal feature of poetry (in that most poetry operates with metaphor). A second metaphor universal in poetry (but possibly also in much of literature in general) is that the metaphors are conceptual metaphors expressed by certain linguistic manifestations. Third, the (unconscious) selection of the metaphors used by poets can be influenced by the various types of context: situational, discourse, bodily, and conceptual-cognitive. Fourth, the metaphors occur on various levels of schematicity. Fifth, the conceptual metaphors that are based on universal correlations in experience are potentially universal; they are present in the poetry of certain unrelated languages/cultures, but not in that of all languages/cultures (i.e., they are not absolute universals). At the same time, the conceptual metaphors based on resemblance tend to be highly variable cross-linguistically.

*Keywords:* metaphor, universals, variation in metaphor, context, schematicity

**1 Introduction**

In the paper, I will be concerned with the issue of metaphor universals in poetry only – leaving aside the genre of the novel, for example (but see Hogan, *The Mind*). This decision is the result of practical considerations, rather than any theoretical reasons. Within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory, a lot more work has been done on poetry than on the novel, probably mostly because a pioneering study on metaphor by Lakoff & Turner (1989) also focused on poetry.

By metaphor I mean conceptual metaphor, which consists of a set of systematic mappings between two domains of experience (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). One domain, which is typically more abstract, is called the target domain, and the other, which is typically more concrete or physical, is called the source domain. The more concrete domain is used to understand the more abstract one. A conceptual metaphor can have a variety of different manifestations in various modalities, including, most importantly for the present purposes, linguistic manifestations. In other words, a distinction is made between metaphor as a conceptual pattern (given structure by the mappings) and the linguistic manifestations (or examples) of this conceptual pattern (for overviews, see, e.g., Lakoff 1993, Kövecses 2002/2010).

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## 2 Metaphor universals and universal metaphors

We should make a distinction between metaphor universals and universal metaphors. The notion of metaphor universals is more general than that of universal metaphors. Metaphor universal can be conceived of as any metaphor-related phenomenon, including universal metaphors. For example, one metaphor universal is the use of metaphors by poets. Probably, there is no poetry without the use of metaphors in some form. It is an interesting question why this should be the case. The answer favored by cognitive linguists would most probably be that typical topics of poetry, such as love, freedom, beauty, history, time, life, honor, nature, suffering, and so on, all invite metaphoric conceptualization, as they are highly abstract concepts that make excellent target domains in conceptual metaphors.

Universal metaphors, on the other hand, are the conceptual metaphors that are used universally, near-universally or potentially universally. Conceptual metaphors such as LOVE IS FIRE, TIME IS MOTION or LIFE IS A JOURNEY are potential universal conceptual metaphors in everyday linguistic usage, but also in literature, as poetry in many unrelated languages around the world shows.

## 3 The cognitive-linguistic study of conceptual metaphors in poetry

The study of conceptual metaphors in cognitive linguistics began with Lakoff and Turner's 1989 book, *More than Cool Reason*. Lakoff and Turner made two very important claims concerning conceptual metaphors in poetry. First, they showed that poets share with everyday people most of the conceptual metaphors they use in poetry. The reason for this is that the conceptual metaphors such as the ones mentioned above are based on shared bodily experiences – for non-poets and poets alike. (More about this later.) Second, Lakoff and Turner suggested that metaphorical creativity in poetry is the result of four common conceptual devices that poets use in manipulating otherwise shared conceptual metaphors. These include the devices of elaboration, extension, questioning, and combining. In other words, according to Lakoff and Turner, the conceptual metaphors will be (nearly) the same, but the linguistic manifestations reflecting the effects of these devices will (or can) be (somewhat) different in everyday and poetic forms of language.

However, others have shown that these four cognitive devices, or strategies, exist not only in poetic language but also in more ordinary forms of language use, such as journalism (see, e.g., Jackendoff & Aaron 1991, Semino 2008). Thus, on this basis alone, it is not possible to distinguish poetic from non-poetic metaphor. Moreover, in accounting for poetic metaphors, Turner (1996) proposed that in many cases poetry (and literature in general) makes use of what he and Fauconnier call “blends,” in which various elements from two or more domains, or frames, can be conceptually fused, or integrated (see, e.g., Turner 1996, Fauconnier & Turner 2002).

Although many conceptual metaphors are shared by poets and non-poets, many are clearly not. These are metaphors that are *not* based on universal bodily experiences but on certain creative analogies between a source and a target domain set up either by lay people or poets. In these cases, we have certain resemblances between a source and a target. While the dominant trend in the cognitive linguistic study of metaphor is to deal with metaphors where the source and target are related by some correlation in experience, analogical relations between a source and a target build on similarities, or resemblances, of various sorts (real, physical similarities, generic-level similarities, imagined similarities, etc.). They range from simple to

complex. Below is a simple one that comes from William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills...

A more complex example is from Shakespeare's King John. The king says the following to a messenger whose face reveals that he has some bad news to tell him:

So foul a sky clears not without a storm.  
 Pour down thy weather.

We can spell out the similarities in this example as a set of mappings between the scene of an imminent rainstorm and the scene of a messenger just about to deliver a message to the king:

the appearance of the sky  $\Rightarrow$  the appearance of the messenger's face  
 the imminent storm  $\Rightarrow$  the bad message likely to be delivered  
 the rain  $\Rightarrow$  the act of telling the bad news

We can take similarity-based metaphors (i.e., analogies or similes) as a special case of conceptual metaphors (besides correlation-based ones). Needless to say, such potential similarities can be used to create a huge number of cases in metaphorical expression that are anything but universal.

#### **4 Metaphorical universality and non-universality in poetry**

Given the rough sketch of conceptual metaphors above, it seems that certain poetic metaphors (those that are correlation-based) are (potentially) universal at the conceptual level but non-universal at the linguistic one. According to the "standard" account of conceptual metaphors (see, e.g., Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1993), conceptual metaphors are based on fundamental bodily experiences (i.e., correlations in experience). It is this basic bodily experience that may potentially lead to universal conceptual metaphors in poetry.

A more refined version of this idea in cognitive linguistics can be found in the theory of "primary metaphors" (see Grady 1997, Lakoff & Johnson 1999). On this view, there are correlations between certain sensorimotor and subjective, abstract experiences, such as between destinations and purposes, body heat and emotion, verticality and amount, and so on. The repeated experience of such correlations results in primary metaphors that are, at least potentially, universal, including PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS, INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, EMOTION IS HEAT, MORE IS UP. The primary metaphors constitute the basis for complex or compound conceptual metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY and LOVE IS A UNITY. For example, PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS is one primary metaphor that, in part, conceptually constitutes LIFE IS A JOURNEY, INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS is one that, in part, constitutes LOVE IS A UNITY, and EMOTION IS HEAT is one that, in part, constitutes ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. As a result, these pairs of primary and compound metaphors are potentially universal. Indeed, the ANGER IS A HOT FLUID and the ANGER IS HEAT conceptual metaphors are found in dozens of genetically unrelated and spatially and culturally independent languages, such as English, Chinese, and Hungarian (see, e.g., Yu 1998, Kövecses 2000a, 2005, 2002/2010). It would not be surprising to find linguistic metaphors based on these and other similar body-based conceptual metaphors in the poetry of these and other languages. As an

example, let us take a poem by Anne Bradstreet, a seventeenth-century American poet, who in her poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband” wrote:

If ever two were one, then surely we.  
 If man were loved by wife, then thee;

The first line is a straightforward linguistic illustration of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A UNITY (OF TWO COMPLEMENTARY PARTS) (see Kövecses 1988). It is very likely that the UNITY metaphor for love can be found in the poetry of many languages and cultures around the world.

While the view briefly described above provides an elegant and coherent account of universality in everyday and poetic metaphors, it does not pay sufficient attention to the many cases of non-universality. Non-universality in metaphor is complementary to universality; one assumes the other. Since we already provided an answer to the question of what makes some conceptual metaphors universal, we can take this as our point of departure in attempting to answer the next question: What makes some other conceptual metaphors non-universal? Or putting the question differently: Where does non-universality in everyday and poetic metaphorical thought come from?

In recent years, I suggested that it is necessary to make certain adjustments to the standard theory of conceptual metaphors in order to be able to answer this question (see Kövecses 2005, for some initial ideas). The adjustments concern the role of context in the creation of novel metaphors (both conceptual and linguistic), on the one hand (see Kövecses 2015), and the various degrees of schematicity of conceptual metaphors (and their linguistic expressions), on the other (see Kövecses 2017). We can term the resulting conception a *contextualist* and *multi-level* view of conceptual metaphors.

Both adjustments concern, in part, the issue of why conceptual and linguistic metaphors diverge from the universal patterns suggested above. They point to two major forms of deviation from universality. First, the insistence on the role of context helps us account for the kind of metaphor variation that derives from *individual and group differences in human experience*. And second, the multi-level view can explain the divergences in the use of metaphor resulting from *individual and group differences in how higher-level conceptual metaphors are elaborated by lower-level ones*. Actually, the two processes are related: various contextual factors can trigger particular elaborations of higher-level conceptual metaphors. This interaction will be demonstrated below.

Since deviations from universality occur on a large scale, we should not consider the issue of universality to be the main focus of metaphor research, as is often the case by cognitive linguists. As was noted above, universality and variation complement and assume each other. In conceptual metaphor theory, we should pay just as much attention to variation as to universality (see Kövecses 2005), since variation is pervasive in the use of metaphor. This, I suggest, is due, to a large extent, to the role that context plays in metaphorical conceptualization – both in everyday usage and poetry.

## 5 How context shapes metaphorical conceptualization

Based on my findings (Kövecses 2015), I suggest that there are a variety of *contextual factors* (to be discussed below) that prime speakers when they use metaphors in communicative situations. The contextual factors belong to several *context types*: situational context,

discourse context, conceptual-cognitive context, and bodily context. These types of context each come in two forms: local context and global context, as shown in Figure 1 below. The *local context* involves the specific knowledge conceptualizers have about some aspect of the immediate communicative situation. By contrast, the *global context* consists of the conceptualizers' general knowledge concerning their community. It involves knowledge shared by an entire community of speakers / conceptualizers. The distinction is mostly of theoretical nature. In many actual communicative situations, there is no sharp dividing line between the local and the global context. The Figure below presents the four major context types as four sections of a circle and their division into local context (as the inner circle) and global context (as the outer circle). The box in the middle represents a particular act of metaphorical conceptualization in context. The contextual factors subsumed under the context types are not given in the Figure. They are discussed in the text following Figure 1.

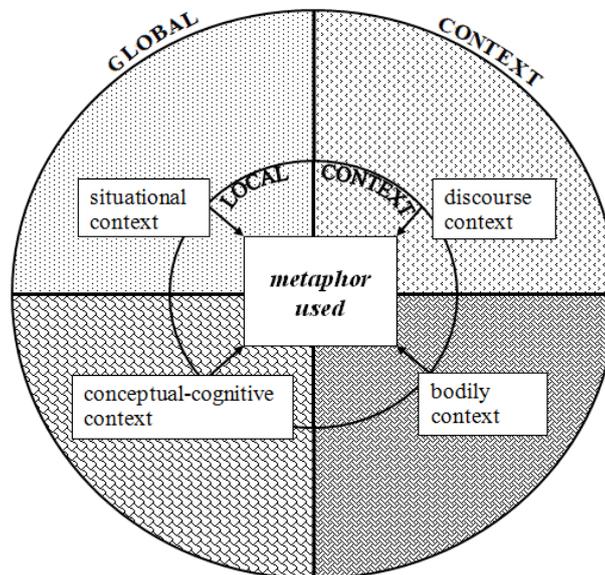


Figure 1. Summary of types of context

The four types of context can be briefly described in the following way:

#### SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

The situational context comprises a variety of different contextual factors. Most commonly this type of context can be thought of as including the physical environment and the social-cultural situation. The *physical environment* includes the flora, the fauna, the landscape, the temperature, the weather, perceptual properties of the situation, and so on. For example, it is a common observation that American English metaphors relating to the physical environment are characteristically different from those of other English-speaking countries (see, e.g., Kövecses 2000b). The small-scale, local environment, such as the visible events in or the perceptual properties of a situation, can also make its influence felt in shaping metaphors. The *social-cultural situation* consists of social aspects of life that typically center around notions such as gender, class, politeness, work, education, social organizations, social structure, art and entertainment, and others. All of these can play a role in metaphorical conceptualization. For example, Kolodny (1975, 1984) shows that American men and women developed very

different metaphorical images for what they conceived of as the frontier in America. While the women commonly thought of the American frontier as a “garden to be cultivated,” men conceptualized it as “virgin land to be taken.” (For several other examples, see Kövecses 2005.)

As an example of how the immediate physical situation as part of the physical context can prompt, or prime, a poet to use a particular conceptual metaphor, consider the poem “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold. In the first stanza, we get a glimpse of what the physical context consists of:

The sea is calm to-night.  
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
 Upon the straits, - on the French coast, the light  
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

The speaker (poet) is looking out to the sea from inside a house and can see a variety of things. One of them is that “The tide is full.” In the last stanza, however, he can see the tide “retreating” with a “withdrawing roar,” exposing the bottom of the sea:

The sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.

At this point Arnold introduces the conceptual metaphor (CHRISTIAN) FAITH IS THE SEA (“The sea of Faith”) in a special way. As the sea retreats, it leaves the bottom of sea exposed, and, in the same way, human beings become unprotected by Christian faith that once protected them. It is fairly safe to assume that what induced, or primed, the poet to use this conceptual metaphor in this particular way was the sight before him: the physical event of the ebb and flow of the sea, that is, a contextual factor belonging to what was called the situational context.

## DISCOURSE CONTEXT

The discourse context involves the immediate linguistic context (i.e., cotext), the previous discourses on the same topic, and the dominant forms of discourse related to a particular subject matter. We'll look at an example for the linguistic context below. The metaphors in one discourse can also derive from previous discourses on the same topic. This can take a variety of forms ranging from elaborating, extending, questioning, negating, reflecting on, ridiculing, to otherwise taking advantage of a metaphor previously introduced. For example, an MP in the British Parliament responded to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair who said he does not have a reverse gear (i.e., he can only go forward – basing the statement on the PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD metaphor) with the reply: “*but when you're on the edge of a cliff it is good to have a reverse gear*” (example taken from Semino 2008: 81). This was a humorous twist induced by the prior discourse on the PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD conceptual metaphor. The dominant forms of discourse and intertextuality can also influence the production of metaphors. Since certain forms of discourse can acquire dominant status in a

community, the metaphors used in or based on this discourse can become widespread both temporally (historically) and spatially (cross-culturally). For example, the discourse of Christianity commonly gives rise to the use of metaphors in the Christian world.

To see how the immediate linguistic context can produce metaphors in poetic discourse, let us turn to Sylvia Plath's poem, "Medusa." Here are some relevant lines:

Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,  
 Eyes rolled by white sticks,  
 Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,  
 You house your unnerving head – God-ball,  
 Lens of mercies,  
 Your stooges  
 Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow,  
 Pushing by like hearts,  
 Red stigmata at the very center,  
 Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of  
 departure,

Dragging their Jesus hair.  
 Did I escape, I wonder?

In the world of the poem, Sylvia Plath addresses her mother as Medusa. In Greek mythology, Medusa is a gorgon with snakes for her hair, who turns people who look at her to stone. As the lines quoted above suggest, the poet is trying to escape from the harmful influence of the mother. (This can be seen most clearly in the line "Did I escape, I wonder?"). What is remarkable here is that, to convey this, the poet makes use of the other sense of *medusa*: the "jellyfish" sense ("Your stooges / Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow"). She's trying to get away from an overbearing mother, and the mother is portrayed analogically as jellyfish. Schools of jellyfish move about in the sea, and jellyfish stings can inflict pain and even death in humans. Thus it can be suggested that the "jellyfish" meaning of *medusa* is used by the poet because the mythological Medusa was introduced early on in the poem (in the title) to begin with. This is one kind of linguistic context – the close relationship between two senses of a word, that is, their polysemy. The word form *medusa* evokes all the knowledge structures associated with it (given as the two senses of the word), and the poet is taking advantage of them, as they analogically fit the nature of the relationship with her mother.

## BODILY CONTEXT

A particular state or condition of the body can produce particular metaphorical conceptualizations in specific cases, such as a poet's or writer's illness. I call this the bodily context. People's bodily specificities can influence which metaphors they use. Casasanto (2009) found that left-handers prefer to use the MORAL IS LEFT, as opposed to the MORAL IS RIGHT conceptual metaphor. Such metaphors contrast with the metaphors that evolve on the basis of the general properties of the human body (i.e., the correlation-based primary metaphors). Given the capacity of body specificities to prime metaphorical conceptualization, we can take the body as a further type of context.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the body is not only responsible for the production of hundreds of conceptual metaphors through the many correlations in subjective

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<sup>2</sup> At a meta-level of analysis, it can of course be suggested that assigning different values to left and right is a universal. But the analysis I conduct here is not at the meta-level. At the same time, I recognize the possibility of legitimately identifying universals in this particular case, as well as in other cases mentioned in the paper.

and sensorimotor experience (cf. Grady 1997, Lakoff & Johnson 1999), but it can also prime the use of particular metaphors in more immediate, local contexts (see, e.g. Gibbs 2006, Gibbs and Colston 2012, Boroditsky 2001, Boroditsky & Ramscar 2002).

The idea that the general physical, biological, mental, emotional, etc. condition, or situation, of a poet can influence the way a poet writes poetry is well known and is often taken into account in the appreciation of poetry. Dickinson is a well-studied case, as discussed by several authors, among them, James Guthrie. Guthrie (1998: 4–5) has this to say on the issue:

... I propose to concentrate on the fact of illness itself as a governing factor in Dickinson's development as a poet. We are already accustomed to thinking about ways in which illness or deformity modulate the registers of expression we hear while reading Milton, Keats, Emily Bronte, Lord Byron. For Dickinson, illness was a formative experience as well, one which shaped her entire poetic methodology from perception to inscription and which very likely shook the foundations of her faith. Reading Dickinson's poems in the full knowledge and belief that, while writing them, she was suffering acutely from a seemingly irremediable illness renders many of them recuperable as almost diaristic records of a rather ordinary person's courageous struggle against profound adversity.

Elsewhere, I showed how Dickinson's (unconscious) choice of metaphors may have been influenced by her optical illness (see Kövecses 2010, 2015).

#### CONCEPTUAL-COGNITIVE CONTEXT

The conceptual-cognitive context includes the metaphorical conceptual system at large, knowledge about the elements of discourse, ideology, knowledge about past events, interests and concerns. In the *metaphorical conceptual system*, many concepts (sources and targets) stand in a metaphorical relationship with one another (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY, ARGUMENT IS WAR) in long-term memory. Given such metaphorical relationships between concepts (such as between, say, LIFE and JOURNEY), their presence or absence in the metaphorical conceptual system may function as a precondition for the production and comprehension of particular metaphors. A metaphorical conceptual system can function as context in this sense. Furthermore, conceptualizers often rely on their knowledge concerning the main elements of a discourse: the speaker, hearer, and the topic. Ideology can also be a formative factor in how metaphors are used in discourse. One's ideology concerning major social and political issues may govern the choice of metaphors (as work by, for instance, Goatly 2007, shows). A good example of this is George Lakoff's 1996 study of American politics, where conservatives tend to use THE NATION IS A STRICT FATHER FAMILY metaphor, while liberals prefer THE NATION IS A NURTURANT PARENT FAMILY version of the generic metaphor THE NATION IS A FAMILY. Knowledge about past events (i.e., items in short-term and long-term memory) shared by the conceptualizers may also lead to the emergence of specific metaphors in discourse. For instance, it has often been observed that the memory of historical events can lead to the production (and comprehension) of some metaphors (see, e.g., Deignan 2003, Kövecses 2005).

Consider the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. It can be found in the poetry of many authors, epochs, and traditions. One of these many outstanding poets is Dante, who uses it in his "Divine Comedy":

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*  
*mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,*

*(In the middle of life's road*  
*I found myself in a dark wood,)*

Another is Robert Frost in his poem “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
 I took the one less traveled by,  
 And that has made all the difference.

The two uses of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor are of course not the same. Employing Lakoff and Turner’s terminology, we can say that although the two poets share the same conceptual metaphor, the metaphor is extended differently by Dante and Frost. And the extensions result in different manifestations of the conceptual metaphor: loss of goals in life by the former and making choices in life by the latter.

## 6 Elaborations of higher level conceptual metaphors

Lakoff and Turner (1989) had in mind the kind of elaboration in the previous two examples where the concept of JOURNEY is realized *lexically* in two ways: in one, there is journey through a dark wood and one, where the road of the journey includes a fork that requires a choice. But there is another way of thinking about elaboration. In it, *conceptual metaphors* may be related to one another at a variety of different levels of schematicity (see Kövecses 2017). I suggested that we need to distinguish at least four levels of schematicity in conceptual metaphors: the level of image schemas, that of domains, that of frames, and that of mental spaces.

An example is provided by the American poet Karl Sandburg. Consider the first stanza of the poem called “Skyscraper”:

BY day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and  
 has a soul.  
 Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into  
 it and they mingle among its twenty floors and are  
 poured out again back to the streets, prairies and  
 valleys.  
 It is the men and women, boys and girls so poured in and  
 out all day that give the building a soul of dreams  
 and thoughts and memories.  
 (Dumped in the sea or fixed in a desert, who would care  
 for the building or speak its name or ask a policeman  
 the way to it?)

The metaphoric-metonymic use of the skyscraper is clearly prompted by the situational (more precisely, physical-cultural) context. The poem was written in 1916 in Chicago, and it was at the turn of the twentieth century that skyscrapers began to be built on a large scale in major American cities, including Chicago.

But what is more important in the present connection is that the conceptual metaphor on which the image of the skyscraper is based is that of SOCIETY IS A BUILDING and that this conceptual metaphor is part of a schematicity hierarchy. At the level of image schemas, we conceptualize complex abstract systems (such as societies) as complex physical objects. At the domain level, societies are conceptualized as buildings and the creation of a society as the physical creation of a building. The latter is the main focus of the metaphor in the poem. At the frame level, the idea of creation is elaborated as construction, which results in the conceptualization of the construction of a society as the construction (i.e., building) of a

building (with tools and ingredients). Finally, at the mental spaces level, the building of a new American society is conceptualized as building a skyscraper (with hammers and crowbars and spikes and girders).

Clearly, this is a progression from the most schematic to the least schematic (or most specific) level of conceptualization (or, the other way around, from the most specific to the most schematic level). Thus, we get a set of conceptual metaphors in a schematicity hierarchy of conceptual metaphors:

Level of Image schema:

COMPLEX ABSTRACT SYSTEMS ARE COMPLEX PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Level of Domain:

SOCIETY IS A BUILDING; THE CREATION OF A SOCIETY IS THE PHYSICAL CREATION OF A BUILDING

Level of Frame:

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SOCIETY IS THE BUILDING OF A BUILDING (WITH TOOLS AND INGREDIENTS)

Level of Mental spaces:

BUILDING A NEW AMERICAN SOCIETY IS BUILDING A SKYSCRAPER (WITH HAMMERS AND CROWBARS AND SPIKES AND GIRDERS)

This is a schematicity hierarchy that, moving downward, ends in the concept of building a SKYSCRAPER. The two highest levels, those of image schemas and domains, may be universal (or at least widespread) in cultures when it comes to the metaphorical conceptualization of societies. But the frame level, and especially the lowest mental spaces level are fairly culture- and even individual-specific. Sandburg captures the idea of building a new American society through the idea of building a skyscraper. At this level of conceptual metaphor, other poets may diverge widely (though using the same conceptual metaphors at the higher levels), depending on a large number of contextual factors (such as the physical environment). In other words, we can conclude on the basis of this example that *elaborations* of high-level conceptual metaphors may contribute to metaphor variation in poetry as well. Metaphors that may be universal or widespread at higher levels of schematicity may turn into something that is specific to particular poetic traditions or to individual poets.

## 7 Conclusions

Are there any metaphor universals in literature? I could not answer this question in the paper because I focused attention on poetry alone. As regards poetry, we can conclude from the foregoing that metaphor is a near-universal feature of poetry (in that most poetry operates with metaphor), or, as Hogan in his introduction to the Literary Universals project puts it, a “statistical universal.”

A second metaphor universal in poetry (but possibly also in much of literature in general) is that the metaphors are conceptual metaphors expressed by certain linguistic manifestations. The conceptual metaphors emerge either from universal bodily experiences (correlation metaphors) or from resemblances of various sorts (analogies).

Third, the (unconscious) selection of the metaphors used by poets can be influenced by the various types of context: situational, discourse, bodily, and conceptual-cognitive.

Fourth, the metaphors occur on various levels of schematicity. Four such levels have been distinguished: the level of image schemas, domains, frames, and mental spaces. While this may be a universal feature of poetry, the actual elaboration of higher level metaphors at the most specific level of schematicity (i.e., mental spaces) may produce metaphor variation.

Fifth, the conceptual metaphors that are based on universal correlations in experience are potentially universal; they are present in the poetry of certain unrelated languages/cultures, but not in that of all languages/cultures (i.e., they are not absolute universals). At the same time, the conceptual metaphors based on resemblance tend to be highly variable cross-linguistically.

The issue of metaphor universals goes hand in hand with the issue of metaphor variation. The former often assumes the latter and the latter often assumes the former; they complement each other.

First, metaphor variation is produced essentially by three forces: divergences in the resemblances observed, contextual influence, and different elaborations of higher level metaphors.

Second, even universal metaphors can vary from culture to culture or individual to individual. This is because the universal metaphors may undergo differential contextual influence and because the universal metaphors may be elaborated in different ways. How they are elaborated may also be the result of contextual influence.

Third, metaphor universality is often a matter of the level of schematicity. Higher levels tend to be more universal than lower ones.

Fourth, differences in the kinds of analogies drawn (i.e., divergences in similarities observed) is probably the most obvious and most common source and form of variation.

Finally, it appears that the discussion of metaphor universals and variation in the paper does not allow us to distinguish the use of metaphor in poetry from its use in everyday language. All the metaphor-related processes mentioned above apply to both poetry and everyday language. It seems that the basis for any distinction should be sought elsewhere. It may well be that the proper basis for such a distinction can only be the degree of creativity (novelty), complexity, and density of metaphor (Kövecses 2010). Metaphorical universality and variation are general properties of the human mind, regardless of the domain (everyday vs. poetic) in which metaphors are used.

As regards future work in the study of metaphor universals in literature, several things can and should be done. First, researchers should propose accounts of metaphor universality and variation in other genres of literature, including the novel. We should find out whether the view of metaphorical universality and variation as presented in this paper is a viable option for the other genres. Second, a huge amount of work awaits us to collect, analyze, and compare data concerning metaphor universality and variation in diverse languages and cultures around the world. We can propose reasonable hypotheses in this regard on the basis of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory approach. Third, and probably most relevantly to literary scholars, we need to figure out whether the findings about metaphor universality and variation as discussed here can contribute useful ideas to literary scholarship in the interpretation of poetry (and other genres). My hope is that the study of metaphor universality and variation along the lines suggested in the paper can enrich accounts of interpretation. At the very least, I hope that the approach I described is not incompatible with certain ways of accounting for poetic meaning, as the comment on the present paper seems to indicate.

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