

Chapter 10

Literary Metaphor

Comprehension and Production: A Unified View

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses literary metaphors, which are used in literary works to enrich the meanings and evoke aesthetic effects. The aim of this chapter is to provide a unified view that can explain how literary metaphors are understood and generated. The chapter authors argue that comprehension of various types of literary metaphors involves a process of direct or indirect categorization by integrating and extending existing metaphor theories and empirical findings, in particular the author's metaphor research such as the interpretive diversity theory of nominal metaphors and the indirect categorization theory of predicative metaphors. The chapter authors also apply the unified view of literary metaphor comprehension to metaphor production, and discuss how people generate literary metaphors.

INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is one of the most important rhetorical devices that enrich narrative discourse or literary work. This chapter particularly focuses on *literary metaphors*, which are primarily used for evoking aesthetic or poetic effects on readers/hearers, rather than explanatory metaphors used for clarifying what writers/speakers want to convey. In his "*Rhetoric*," for example, Aristotle listed three functions of metaphors by stating that "metaphor especially has clarity and sweetness and strangeness." Literary metaphors are associated with sweetness and strangeness, while explanatory metaphors are associated with clarity.

Literary metaphors often convey a variety of meanings. For example, consider a famous literary metaphor in Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet."

(1) But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!

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Literary Metaphor Comprehension and Production

The metaphor “Juliet is the sun” in (1) can express a variety of meanings such as that Juliet appears above Romeo, bringing him hope and gladness, and he cannot live without her. These rich meanings cannot be conveyed effectively by literal language. More importantly, if these meanings are literally expressed, his words lose aesthetic or poetic effects on the audience. Existing empirical findings support the richness of interpretation as the characteristic feature of literary or poetic metaphors. Utsumi (2005) demonstrated that poeticality rating of metaphors was positively correlated with the richness of interpretation (or interpretive diversity) and richer interpretations of metaphors involved more emergent meanings. Roncero & de Almeida (2015) reported that interpretive diversity was negatively correlated with metaphor conventionality. These findings suggest that literary metaphors tend to be novel or creative in nature.

The question that arises here is how literary metaphors are processed. This chapter addresses this question, and provides a unified view of literary metaphor comprehension and production by reference to the author’s previous studies on metaphors. The central argument of the unified view is that literary metaphor comprehension and production can be explained as *categorization*, the process by which distinct entities are treated as equivalent. In the rest of this chapter, how categorization is essentially involved in metaphor comprehension and production will be described in detail.

BACKGROUND

The Structure of Metaphors

Metaphor is a figurative expression in which a certain concept is described in terms of another unlike concept. *The tenor* of a metaphor is the concept described by the metaphor, and *the vehicle* is the concept employed to describe the tenor. For example, the metaphor (2) has the tenor “my love” and the vehicle “a red rose,” and the metaphor (3) has the tenor “that man” and the vehicle “a wolf.”

- (2) My love is a red rose.
- (3) That man is a wolf.

Metaphors are classified into two types, namely *nominal metaphor* and *predicative metaphor*. Nominal metaphors and predicative metaphors differ in what is being processed metaphorically; some specific things such as living creatures and objects referred to by a noun (or a noun phrase) are figuratively described by nominal metaphors, while actions, events, or properties are described figuratively using predicative metaphors. In other words, the tenor and vehicle are noun concepts in the case of nominal metaphors, and predicates in the case of predicative metaphors. The above metaphors (2) and (3) are typical examples of nominal metaphors, while the following expressions are examples of predicative metaphors.

- (4) Public anger boils over.
- (5) Anna ate up the whole story.
- (6) deep red laugh

Predicative metaphors can be further classified into *verb metaphors* and *adjective metaphors* depending on whether verbs or adjectives are used metaphorically.

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