COGNITIVE POETICS AND ITS APPLICATION TO SARAH TEASDALE’S POETRY

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Abstract: The terms “cognitive”, “cognitive rhetoric” (Turner’s Reading), “cognitive stylistics” (Semino and Culpepper), “cognitive grammar” (Langacker) “cognitive poetics” (Tsur Toward; Stockwell; Gavins and Steen), and “cognitive theory” (Richardson and Crane) are all in circulation now. Of all these scholars, this paper has prioritized and tackled Turner’s theory which is aimed at combining linguistics, literary criticism, and cognitive science. For Turner, everyday cognition and literary expression spring from the same principles of thought, which in turn derive from very basic interactions of the human body with its environment. Thus, the study of literature is fundamentally similar to the study of how the human being (defined by Turner as “a mind in a brain in a body”) thinks. From analyses of metaphoric modes of expression and understanding, Turner has moved further away from literature as the principal object of his investigations, becoming more of a cognitive scientist than a literary scholar. Turner does see literature as special, but it is special not in terms of which thought processes it uses but in how it uses them. This paper starts with Langacker’s cognitive grammar concepts of active zone, perfective/imperfective verbs then delves into Turner’s cognitive rhetoric and will try to apply the basic tenets of mapping and blended spacing -temporal and spatial spacing- to a poem of Sarah Teasdale in an attempt to show cognitive rhetoric is not so dissociated from literature.

Keywords: Cognitive Grammar, Poetry, Mapping


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1. COGNITIVE GRAMMAR

It is apparent that applications in the field of cognitive poetics comprise two broad areas: close cognitive stylistic analysis, and more general schematic or world-level analysis. Approaches that have proven very fruitful in cognitive poetics include applications of the notions of frames, schemas, scenarios, domains, possible worlds, and text worlds. These are all different theoretical frameworks for accounting for, more or less, the same phenomenon: that is, how general knowledge and experience are deployed as a central factor in the particularities of a literary reading.

Cognitive grammar analysis falls into a close cognitive stylistics. Studies are conducted more on word level analysis. Tabakowska (1993) and Stockwell (2002) use the cognitive grammar and become the pioneers in the cognitive stylistic analysis. The first part of this study is dedicated to the notions of Langacker and the second part is related to the application of Turner’s cognitive rhetoric.

This first section deals with action chain, trajector/landmark, and perfective/imperfective verbs. Action chain belongs to a model of event structure in the cognitive grammar, having two perspectives: force dynamic and absolute. For the latter one, “she is at the bus stop” or he is phenomenal”, location and static properties are stressed.

In an event structure we have the roles of agent (he washed the dishes – he initiated the action), patient (he helped her- her is the patient, affected by the action), instrument (he cleaned with a broom- a broom is the instrument), experiencer (he felt happy- he undergoes mental experience), mover (the plane landed) and zero (he is at school- zero shows location or a static property such as it is cold). All these semantic roles appear in a dynamic event.

For the absolute construal, an event is perceived as autonomous and there are 4 semantic roles: experiencer, mover, patient and zero showing there is no energy transmission.

Trajector and landmark correspond to figure and ground. Trajector is related to the primary focal point whereas landmark is the secondary focal point. On a sentential level, trajector is the subject; landmark is the object.

Active zone indicates the scope of the relationship. In the sentence “I made the bed”, it is not the whole body of the speaker that made the bed but only hands and the bed is not the whole bed but only the exterior and visible side of the bed where we sleep.

As to the imperfective and perfective verbs, the first includes the verbs that are not bounded in time and that is the continuation of the state while the latter group of verbs are bounded in time and show some change or process. For example, she fell down, here “fell” shows it is perfective whereas in the sentence “I believe that it is going to rain”, “believe “ is imperfective.

The poem chosen here is taken from Sarah Teasdale known as having rich textuality and poetic ambiguity. The aim is to show how linguistic features in the poems by Teasdale give warrant to the thematic development.
In order to identify the event structure and the semantic roles played by the poet, the verbs are underlined first.

I have come to bury Love
Beneath a tree
In the forest tall and black
Where none can see

I shall put no flowers at his head
Nor stone at his feet
For the mouth I loved so much
Was bittersweet

I shall go no more to his grave
For the woods are cold
I shall gather as much of joy
As my hands can hold

The first stanza starts with a force dynamic perspective (come) and a stronger transmission come with “bury” showing that the poet has semantic role of an agent, a doer whereas her lover is the patient and the locations for his grave are clearly shown with the words “forest and tree”, parts of nature. However, the last line has a different agent (none) which is negated to have the dynamic perspective, the energy source of the others is taken away.

The second stanza starts with “put”, a full dynamic force and “love” shows the energy transmission rendering the subject “I” in the agent role and her lover is in the patient/recipient role, totally passivized and dominated. However, by saying “no more”, she adamantly refuses to do the action of “putting” and “loving”. In these two stanzas the poet willfully initiates the actions and become the energy source of the events. The last line has “was” making the lover acting as the zero.

The third stanza has the full dynamic force in the verbs “go, gather and hold”, for the first verb, she refuses to go acting as the agent. The subject of the third line of the third stanza “woods” has the role of “zero” and it is an absolute construal.

The last stanza has two verbs for the poet: stay and cry, both have the dynamic force and she is the agent of these lines and the subject of the last line “people have the verb “know”, making it dynamic but having no energy transmission. The other agent in the stanza is “wind”, having the strongest dynamic effect.

The second step is to check trajector/landmark relationship in the lines and notice the syntactical prominence of the pronoun “I”:

I have come to bury Love
Beneath a tree
In the forest tall and black
Where none can see

I shall put no flowers at his head
Nor stone at his feet
For the mouth I loved so much
Was bittersweet

I shall go no more to his grave
For the woods are cold
I shall gather as much of joy
As my hands can hold
I shall stay all day in the sun
Where the wide winds blow
But oh I shall cry at night
When none will know

The poem has 7 sentences all of which start with the pronoun “I” and the other trajectors “none”, “wind” and “woods” are in the subordinate clauses not in the main clauses. The frequent use of “I” delineates that the more something is emphasized, the more its truth value disappears. She insistently uses “I” so much that readers cannot help wondering whether she is really sincere or not. As Hamlet says of his mother “methinks the lady protests too much”, this loses its effectiveness and gives an implication that in the relationship, she is not the dominant one as she persistently acknowledges she is. Readers doubt whether she will truly stop loving him or she will bury him or it is so easy for her to abandon her lover. This symbolizes that she is not the agent in the relation and he is not the absolute and zero, the roles are reversed in real life.

The third step is to check the perfective/imperfective verbs. The verbs used in the poem are come, see, put, love, go, gather, hold, stay, blow, cry, know. Most of these verbs are perfective: come, put, go, gather, hold, blow, cry, stay; “know, love, see” are imperfective. The perception verbs “know and see” are semantically negated, expressing continuation and constancy. The fact that more perfective than imperfective verbs are used signifies that it seems that she is ready to take actions, initiate things, and she is determined to actualize her wishes, however, readers doubt whether she is telling the truth or not. The negation of the imperfective verbs is related to the others’(the society’s) perspective that they will never understand how she feels, why she feels, what her true feelings are. The use of “love” requires a different consideration. It is the only verb used in the past tense whereas the others have either “shall” or “can” or the present tense. It could mean she loved him once but now she is in pain and tries to forget the heartbreak because of his words that are bittersweet. At the same time it might denote that he truly died and she is mourning over him. The notion of unboundedness and duration of “love” is attached to her feelings in the past, indicating a certain loss.

The fourth step is to draw the boundaries of the active zone. In the first stanza, the location is the forest and tree. The modifiers for the forest incidentally correspond to the possible characteristics of her lover “tall and dark”. The choice of the tree in the forest might let readers know that he is truly buried or she buries and tries to forget her love. This symbolizes that she is not the agent in the relation and he is not the absolute and zero, the roles are reversed in real life.

2. COGNITIVE RHETORIC

Mark Turner has developed an approach that combines linguistics, literary criticism, and cognitive science. He starts from the assumption that the study of so-called literary modes of expression in particular (i.e., metaphor, analogy, or parable)
will lead to detecting the mechanisms of thought in general. The study of literature is—or ought to be—fundamentally similar to the study of how the human being thinks as Turner defines it as a mind in a brain in a body. He claims that good literature is powerful because it masterfully evokes and manipulates our cognitive skills. He is against the critics who mistakenly see literature as separate from other texts. As culture is embodied in the minds of the readers, it is their background schema that activates this metaphorical delienation. Turner demonstrates that individual phrases lend themselves most easily to a cognitive-rhetorical analysis. Since poetry may be the genre where metaphoric modes are most densely employed in short segments of language, poems are the most obvious material for analysis (Hamilton & Schneider, 2002).

For Turner, the most important aspect is the metaphors as he claims its major qualities are:

--A metaphor is an emergent whole, created by an interaction between its primary and secondary subjects;

--A single metaphor should be understood within a larger context (such as provided, typically, by the literary text);

--Comprehending a metaphor is akin to problem solving, and in its most creative form (“productive thinking”) involves an act of perceptual and semantic restructuring.

Turner thinks the way to decode texts and metaphors is through the fusion of general knowledge schemas and knowledge of pragmatic principles of interaction and text genres and knowledge of textual features which can be summarized in the following way:

1. The nature of the information in the given text:
   a. specificity/abstraction: degree of detail, quantity, balance between assertion and implicature etc.,
   b. world-building function: does it contribute information on properties of the fictional world, on primary and secondary protagonists, their goals and motivations, on acting situations (states of affairs), on actions, or does it evaluate these in the wider context of the narrative?

2. The distribution within the text:
   a. range between announce and target narrative,
   b. frequency: number of annonces for a given event (or vice versa).

3. The manner of presentation of the above information, including stylistic grounding devices, etc.

In this study Turner’s cognitive mapping and blending techniques are used to study Teasdale’s poem. Cognitive mapping, which is a technique that captures an individual’s view of a particular issue in a graphical representation (Tegarden & Sheetz, 2003:114) has both spacial and conceptual connotations. In the poem, the first sentence starts with the perfect aspect and the rest of all sentences have “shall” which is used in comparison with “will” to refer to the others. The poet herself uses “shall” for herself and “will” for the others. Why does she prefer such a nuance? what is her purpose? The fact that she
starts with the perfect aspect might be related to the process that she is ready to bury her love / lover and shall shows “promise and determination whereas “will” denotes the future certainty. If that is the case, she is determined to bury her love and she is sure that she will succeed in it. The subordinate classes are 4, each stanza having one: these are constructed as “In the forest tall and black / Where none can see”, the mouth I loved so much”, “(joy) As my hands can hold”, and “at night when none can see”. When they are analysed in depth, there are four adjectival and one adverbial clauses. Why is the adjective clause used more frequently? They are used to give extra information about the other people and the lover. One thing is definite about him. His mouth was bittersweet, easily breaking the heart of the poet and the other people will never see and know how she feels. Maybe she is hiding her true feelings from the society.

The second step taken from Turner is blending. Blending as a theory describes the products of mental actions and tries to specify the related psychological processes. However, when Turner with Foucannier (2002) say that “blended spaces do cognitive work in the strongest sense” and that “they provide inferences, emotions, and novel actions” (74), just how the blended spaces provide the inferences and so on remains unsaid. If everything humans do with their minds can be called literary, then “literature” becomes synonymous with “thought” and literary texts with “thoughts in books.” Summing up his chapters on blending, Turner reiterates his creed: “processes that we have always considered to be literary are the foundation of the everyday mind. Literary processes like blending make the everyday mind possible”(115). Turner in his website (markturner.org) furthers the idea of blending first stating that “blending is a process of conceptual mapping and integration that pervades human thought. A mental space is a small conceptual packet assembled for purposes of thought and action” then mentioning “a mental space network” which connects an array of mental spaces and which contains one or more “blended mental spaces.”. In the poem, the conceptual blending can be talked of two things: “Love” and “bury”. As to the first concept, there is not much information stated in the poem but only physicalities such as his head, mouth, feet and they are beneath the tree and in the forest tall and dark. The adjectives describing the forest can stand for the poet’s lover as well. This first concept refers to a man due to the modifiers and possessive adjectives that are used, however, it could mean that the poet does not wish to fall in love any more as it
gives her more suffering, pain and torture, hence she wishes to bury the feeling of love. Turner and Fauconnier (2003: 5) argue that “various kinds of polysemy occur as a result of blending. We will argue that the following principles guide the development of polysemy and furthermore that most polysemy is invisible”. This polysemy “love” gains another meaning when it is treated as a blending. The other word is “bury” Teasdale often refers to in her poem. Conceivably, it has more than one meaning (freedictionary.com):

1. To place in the ground: bury a bone.
2. a. To place (a corpse) in a grave, a tomb, or the sea; inter.
   b. To dispose of (a corpse) ritualistically by means other than interment or cremation.
3. To conceal by or as if by covering over with earth; hide: buried her face in the pillow; buried the secret deep within himself.
4. To occupy (oneself) with deep concentration; absorb: buried myself in my studies.
5. To put an end to; abandon: buried their quarrel and shook hands.

The blending networks of “bury” is multifolded. This might mean the poet’s lover is dead and she tries to bury him and her feelings, or she tries to conceal her great love for him, or she tries to abandon him and start a new chapter in her life. When this word "bury" operates in all the networks listed above, this word is proven to have many meaning, which all might be the exact interpretation about the poem, hence “the flexibility of blending with selective projection and contextual elaboration allows for this intermediate kind of situation which does not fit a prototypical semantic or pragmatic characterization” (Fauconnier and Turner, 2003:12) of the word ‘bury’. For Fauconnier and Turner such “kinds of blends are often constructed using language”. They claim that “the reason language can prompt for blends that result in the same word’s being used to pick out different meanings is that language does not represent meaning directly; it instead prompts for the construction of meaning in systematic fashion” (14) and the result is different grammatical forms prompt different infinities of conceptual meaning.

As a conclusion, cognitive grammarians stress conceptualization a lot by maintaining that the meaning of a linguistic unit resides in people’s minds and in the way they perceive the world not in the objective states. The literary texts do not present the things as they are but as the artists perceive them. To understand the micro level of meaning Langacker (1988) proposes a meaning comprises its content and the way of construing the content. The term construal/ imagery helps readers perceive the situation in different ways. The dimensions of imagery are: scope, specificity, prominence, perspective, background information and secondary activation.

Apart from clarifying the cognitive processes that are employed to understand the text, another assumption of cognitive poetics is to see “organized violence against cognitive structures”. The goal to use cognitive poetics is to how a text means as to what it means. Cognitive grammar might yield thought provoking and stimulating insights and depth to literary interpretation.
REFERENCES


http://markturner.org 10.02.2013