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Embodied Criticism. Theoretical Foundations of Cognitive Poetics

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to discuss the cognitive approach to metaphor launched by Lakoff and Johnson, which turns out to be also the key question to the problem of intersubjective communicability of literary work. Based on this approach, the literature can simply be considered a kind of language using spatial metaphors with additional emotional content.

Keywords:

literary theory, cognitive science, poetics, metaphor

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of human experience is profoundly cultural in character. It means that the environment in which man lives has been shaped under the conditions of human cognition. As Ernst Cassirer expressly emphasised – man may not relate to a reality other than culture (Cassirer, 1977, p. 14). This proposition ensues important consequences from the point of view of language researchers. Firstly, language may not directly refer to a reality other than a humanised reality; secondly, its structure

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stems from typically human predispositions, not the other way round²; thirdly, in order to become a universal medium, language as a tool had to, in its early beginnings, work out universal techniques that made human communication possible.

Given that literature is made up of language and does not exist beyond it³ (constituting a secondary modelling system⁴) according to the cognitive theory it also has to be based on those universal methods of communication. The dispute on whether the genesis of language is constituted by a universal need for expression, or language is largely mimetic in nature, belongs to the Enlightenment era. Nevertheless, regardless of the character of the *signifiant* (whether it was related to human emotions or the elements of the world which the primitive man treated in separation) many language researchers agree that the relationship between the signifier and the signified, before it even came to be conventional, was based on resemblance (Todorov, 2012, p. 244). The common feature of these primeval signs (treated, e.g., by Freud as symbols)⁵ was the association based, among others, on the relationship of probability and adhesion of the elements present in the metaphor understood in terms of cognitivism (Todorov, 2012, p. 252). The originally visual character of symbols which became conventionalised was also advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure, who treated the modern symbol as a petrified association that originally had a literal meaning (Frye, 2012, p. 140). How does a symbol understood in such a way connect with metaphor understood in cognitive terms? According to Northrop Frye, an American critic of myths, what actually connects symbols can only be a metaphor (2012, p. 140), for only the metaphor provides an opportunity for condensed meanings so that they are easily communicable. Although Frye is not a cognitivist and does not use cognitivist terminology, he

² This means that the nature of language is determined by human mind and not by the objectively understood nature of the world. So far only one book fully devoted to cognitive analysis of literary texts has been translated into Polish (Stockwell, 2006). In addition, the following are some of the most significant publications in cognitive criticism of the text (Semino, Culpeper, 2002), (Gavins, Stern, 2003).

³ He defines the language of literature following Jakobson who sought the essence of literacy in the autotelic attitude of the sign. In this perspective literature constitutes a language system whose main function is aesthetic and not cognitive, whereas the cognitive assertion that linguistic formations always construct an interpretation of reality leads to the reflection on the character of literary distinctive features. See (Jakobson, 1960, pp. 431–473) and about the theory of *quasi-judgements* as constituent features of literature (Ingarden, 1988, p. 237).

⁴ The term has been taken from the terminology of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School and means that in its structure, the poetic language imitates general language (Łotman, 1984).

⁵ One should note that the symbol constitutes a notion, which for Freud meant an imperfect tool for communication and belongs to the primitive people (Freud was an advocate of the evolutionary theory of culture). As such it was based on associations and was a predecessor of conventionalised signs, characteristic of developed cultures. See: (Dybel, 1996, pp. 17–38).

shares the view that the manner of communications is based on metaphor (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010). This theorem, although it has been formalised in the last few decades (Todorov, 2012, pp. 242–244), is not new as even in the times before the development of the cognitive theory of language. Thus, for example, Émile Benveniste claimed that metaphor, which was later popularised by cognitivists, has been used for communication between humans since the beginning of humankind (Todorov, 2012, pp. 242–244). He argued that the evidence for the existence of primary visual metaphors is their modern-day exhaustion – language must have been based on visual associations from the very beginning (Todorov, 2012, pp. 242–244).

2. COGNITIVE RESEARCH VERSUS LITERATURE

The starting point for the considerations below is the assertion that the meaning of a literary work of art in the process of its reception is created in exactly the same way as meaning in a process of natural communication. Leaving aside the cognitive disputes within sciences concerning the detailed theory of meaning, we may make a simplified assumption that meaning is understood as “a potential activation of different levels and semantic associations of a given unit with others in the context of compatible conceptual framework” (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006). As there is no larger difference between general and poetic language in cognitive science, both are treated as a symbolic continuum which is comprised of the phonetic and semantic side of language – language, which is nothing but a manifestation of a more profound and universal cognitive structure, contains an infinite number of potential possibilities to update meanings (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006).

The cognitivist view is therefore the opposite of the theory of compositional grammar, which tried to explain the form of lexemes in combination with an extralinguistic plain (e.g. to explain the suffix ‘ik’ or ‘yk’, used in Polish to build the lexeme that points to the features of immaturity or smallness of the referent which is deemed as objectively existing and possessing the inherent feature of smallness or immaturity). Lakoff and Johnson in pursuit of contradicting the participation of this extreme objectivism in constructing meanings (whilst at the same trying to protect their theory against solipsistic subjectivisation) find a solution in the gestalt theory (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 124). In spite of having rejected the existence of the category of objectivism in constructing meaning, they consider man capable of communicating with others because he is in the possession of a basis of experience.

And Wierzbicka corroborates Lakoff and Johnson arguing that meaning follows from the interpretation of the world with the help of sensorium assigned to each individual, and for this reason it is always anthropocentric, or even egocentric (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 183). Although meaning as such does not have a natural structure, the experience on which it is built is universal in character, therefore some of its elements can be communicated intersubjectively. Similar arguments apply to poetic language – although the author generates meanings with the help of individual associations and (less individual) encyclopaedic knowledge (as we may share certain convictions and antiquarian knowledge) when building the elements of the presented world, at their core remains a scheme of constant, universal patterns of neural network activation (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006, p. 8), which leads to conceptualisation (assigning meanings). However, how can one explain that what is individual (as based on individual associations, attributing value, and knowledge) is transmittable into what is social, and therefore intersubjective and communicable? The answer to this question lies within the properties of one of the most rudimentary cognitive tools: the metaphor.

Contrary to a classical approach, initiated by Aristotle, which regards metaphor as having two notions coming from different orders integrating into one meaningful quality (Aristotle, 1989, 1457 b), metaphor in the cognitive theory constitutes a conventional operation of the mind which must not be identified with its linguistic manifestation (we must bear in mind it is not language that creates our reality but it is the effect of universal cognitive structures at work). At the root of metaphorisation (which has the properties of a semantic shift) one may find the process of blending which, according to Fauconnier and Turner, “constitutes a collection of operations that combine dynamic cognitive models into a network of mental spaces” (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006, p. 10). In this manner the cognitive theory again starts a discussion with the theory of meaning put forward by conventionalists, including Katz and Fodor, for whom meaning was only a sum of its components (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006, p. 8). In the theory of blending, on the other hand, which results in obtaining a new meaning, a major role is played by the process of adding new knowledge to that which has been given to us. An important role in this process is played by stereotypes whose framework delineates the scope of properties typical for a given notion (this framework is obviously vague). The effect of blending is an amalgam which, after two input spaces have been selected, according to the principle of integrity postulated by the authors of the theory, should comprise a coherent notion; as an emergent quality it does not constitute only a sum of information from input spaces but an independent effect of blending of its elements, and additionally (allowing for

the idiosyncrasies of individuals) may be equipped with occasional features by them (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2006, pp. 10–14). The consequence of thus understood effect of blending on the plain of literature is the very possibility of an interpretation – amalgams may vary from each other while simultaneously being derived from the same input spaces (e.g. the knowledge of the author and the times that constitute the background of the work of art). From this perspective one may paraphrase Derrida that no interpretation is more privileged than the other (1978, pp. 374–411).

At the same time a literary metaphorisation of the language also acquires a new character. If the metaphor is not merely a rhetorical trail but constitutes a thinking tool (Lakoff and Johnson bluntly refer to thinking by metaphors) (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 251 and 302), each artistic creation will bear its traces. Metaphor thus understood is a “variable with infinite possibilities of execution” (Krzeszowski, 2006, p. 41). This means that the output domain (x) might be any notion (Krzeszowski, 2006, p. 41), although normally it is an abstract notion, with a wider scope of meaning than the definiens, or the target domain (Lakoff and Johnson provide an example of a metaphor: LOVE IS JOURNEY). Since metaphor has scalar properties (meaning that there are metaphors more legible than others), the author (or, in a broader sense, a participant of the discourse), in order to increase his chances of interpreting the intended meaning, may use particular strategies of metaphorisation. One of them is the use of spatial metaphors, which is related to the frequency of occurrence of a given metaphor in natural language. Spatial metaphor, as a cognitive tool, is closely related to one of the main factors of cognitive sciences – the theories of embodiment of experience (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 164). As it has been reported, language (both general and poetic, although in cognitivism this distinction is not present) constitutes but an extension of biological mental structures. It points to the phenomena as such, yet only to their representations processed by the human mind (it is one of the reasons why cognitive theory does not deal with classic veracity relationships (Libura, 2006, p. 72), which in consequence blurs the distinction between natural language and the fictional language of literature).⁶

Being dependent on human experiencing of reality, the poetic language largely uses orientational metaphors. Such metaphors, which are based on a universal perception of the world where one feels to be privileged, use our body as a general

⁶ Please note the theory of *quasi*-judgements by R. Ingarden, who treated them as assertions, but with the reservation that they referred only to a particular work of art in which they appear. See: (Ingarden, 1988).

point of reference (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, pp. 40–45). It means that in this type of thinking it is the ego that is perceived as an orientational element and everything else is centred around it. Orientational metaphors cover most notions used by people, as their structure enables the reification of abstract terms so that they can be perceptible through senses. Having in mind Kant's conception of time as a pure form of sensible intuition apart from space, we may ask why the properties of time do not constitute the structure of metaphor? The reason is that time, as being perceived more subjectively than space (different cultural circles admit the spatial notions of 'up' and 'down', or 'centre' and 'periphery' and value them in a similar manner), constitutes a construct which is elusive by a single act of glancing, and therefore it is less explicitly recorded than space (Grzeszczuk, 2006, p. 105). As it is perceived in a more individualized manner, it does not constitute a good background for creating metaphors, and itself is expressed through orientational metaphors, usually by way of figuralisation and animalisation (e.g. time flies, runs out, etc.) Space, as a dominant element of human perception is reflected in language by building one of the most principal arguments on the possibility of intersubjective transmission of data. The domain of space as such is based on elementary experience of man who dictates his own perspective on reality: he therefore creates a deictic orientation usually expressed by means of demonstrative pronouns (something is in front of, behind – in default – me) (Tabakowska, 2001, pp. 21–22). At the same time it is easy to notice that such a mode of perception *de facto* means conferring anthropocentric features to objects (back or front of a stone depends only on human perspective, and it is not its inherent property). The mechanism of thus understood perception constitutes the core of metaphorisation, stressing that it is a deeply rooted cognitive process which is beyond our awareness in our daily lives. Using the language of poetics, perceiving things and phenomena as being similar to people in quality is nothing but a conventionalised metaphor.

On account of the efficiency of this type of metaphorisation, most metaphors in our daily use are orientational in structure. Since the process is universal, also in terms of culture, one may discern certain regularity related to valorising space within orientational strategies. Some anthropologists, including Mircea Eliade, have found that the movement (in the upward direction), is, in simplified terms, related to the experience of sacrum (one of the most canonical illustrations of this process is Muhammad's Mi'raj) (Eliade, 2009, p. 344) and the implications of this world perception are to be found in various literary genres (e.g. from an English folk tale about Jack and the Beanstalk, to mystical poetry). Conversely, downward movement is normally valorised in a negative manner, and the figuralisation of danger lurking there is symbolised in literature and culture by stairs (worth men-

tioning is Gaston Bachelard's conception of the poetic house) (Bachelard, 1975), or numerous crevices (Greek myths!). Another example of universal valorisation related to experience of one's own body in everyday existence is the positive attribution of values to the centre which is situated in opposition to the periphery. The centre in literature, viewed as the centre of the world, *axis mundi*, is most often represented by a house or a castle, as well as a mountain or a single tree (e.g. from a castle as the centre of the world in a fable, to Dante's peak or the Yggdrasil larch), whereas the periphery is usually negative, symbolised by the forest or fantasy creatures. Lakoff and Johnson, who were first to acknowledge universality in spatial thinking, rely on the findings of anthropologists and fail to mention the problematic status of the centre, which was originally primarily treated as the natural boundary of our 'I' and, at the same time, is two-valued in folk axiology (it is also manifested in fables: the castle where the Sleeping Beauty was locked, Rapunzel's Tower). This means that in addition to its indubitably positive valorisation, the centre may be dangerous to humans which is indirectly manifested in the rites of passage (incidentally, a rite for Lakoff and Johnson is also based on a structural metaphor: the structure of a rite contains two domains: input domain refers to a man before the change of ontological status, whereas the target domain is a new state in which the apprentice finds himself after completing all the stages of the rite). The ambivalence of the centre also appears in literature, where, e.g. in gothic novels, the house or castle is a source of danger for man. Therefore, it would be worth researching to see if in the structure of language we are also facing a twofold valorisation in this spatial category. In any case, one must admit that metaphorisation in a spatial category is largely coherent – due to a large experience base and the combination of experiencing their own physicality with the cultural experience (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 49), people in most cases rightly construct the meaning of metaphors (going down into the deep is a danger, climbing up refers to overcoming one's fragile nature, whereas straying away from home may be a foreboding of something dangerous, but also acquiring knowledge on not-I). However, we must note that in spite of the universality, the character of spatial orienteering is largely cultural (Cassirer, 1977, p. 14).

In addition to the content, thinking in spatial categories is manifested through linguistic expression. Treating utterance as a receptacle which must be filled with content we always assume that the more words there are inside, the more meaningful it will be (Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 176). What is also crucial in the context of meaning is the distance between the agent and the patient (e.g. 'John killed Henry' is an unambiguous sentence, but 'John forgot to hide the weapon before he left and thereby John killed Henry' is not) (cf. Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 181). The longer

the distance, the agency of the agent is stressed less markedly, which can be taken advantage of by a conscious author in order to make insinuations or thicken the plot (obfuscating the whereabouts of the key to the story) (cf. Lakoff, Johnson, 2010, p. 181). In literature, the use of spatial form of sentences for conveying the content is usually effected through the selection of appropriate linguistic measures, most notably repetitions, onomatopoeias, elongation of phones in words or, on a stylistic level, the use of an appropriate style. For example, in modern popular literature (romances, detective stories, action novels) sentences are often redundant in character, and the authors use simple, psychological knowledge about people while writing them – the intention of readers of such literature is not to acquire any new information, therefore reading such literature is supposed to affirm their stereotypicality, through the redundancy of its content.

3. WHAT IS THE USE OF A WORD?

Let us conclude this paper with some thoughts on one of the most renowned lines in literature: “words, words, words” which were spoken by Hamlet to Polonius in response to his question “what do you read, my lord?”. A classic interpretation assumes the protagonist’s contemptible attitude towards literature which, as the repetition suggests, is devoid of essential content as it only contains words which have very little relevance to reality. However, from the cognitive point of view which assumes that literature is based on metaphor as the main tool for thinking out of necessity, what Hamlet reads influences the modification of his experience gestalt, a complexity of images that combine the previously acquired knowledge of reality with new information that is acquired through reading (be it information that the content is meaningless). In accordance with the cognitive theory, literary meanings in this sense contribute to the understanding of certain phenomena by an individual in the same degree as antiquarian knowledge or daily experience. Therefore, they are not merely chaotic and impotent words, but words that constitute a meaning that literature does not provide the protagonist with answers to the most important existential dilemmas. Now we move to the issue of our life being influenced by repetitive metaphors: they prove, just like ideologies (which they often express) to be able to shape a specific approach to the world and therefore may be dangerous, (e.g. literature in service of ideology using the anthropological me-other scheme reproduced in the discourse: the country is endangered).

Since the conviction that literature uses more of our imagination than the reason is fallacious (as both these aspects are combined by the metaphor understood in

a cognitive manner), there is a justified conviction that the literary world builds our reality in a certain way – by adding new quality to the human experience myth it causes poetic words to change our conceptual gestalts and thereby changing our perception of the world – so words are more than just words.

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