

A Cognitive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Emily Dickinson's Nature-Themed Poems

Yajun Zhou

Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, Guizhou, 550025

ABSTRACT

From a cognitive perspective, this paper focuses on identifying and exploring a series of metaphors and the ways in which they are presented in Emily Dickinson's nature-themed poetry with the aim to reveal how linguistic forms embody meanings. It is found that Dickinson uses ontological metaphors and structural metaphors in poems extensively and the selection of metaphors serves the meaning. The significance of the study contains the following points: firstly, this paper discusses metaphors in Dickinson's nature-themed poems by using the theory of metaphor in cognitive poetics, which is conducive to an in-depth understanding of connotations in poems. Secondly, readers can better understand the role of metaphor in poetry.

KEYWORDS

Conceptual Metaphor Theory; nature-themed poetry; Emily Dickinson

1 Introduction

Emily Dickinson, a prolific American poet of the 19th century, has captivated literary scholars with her poems and profound exploration of natural themes. Her poetry covers such interrelated themes as life and death, friendship and love, faith, nature and freedom. Among her work, the theme of nature stands prominently, serving as a rich ground for analysis. Dickinson's use of metaphorical language to convey the theme has long been a subject of scholarly interest, prompting an exploration into her choices of metaphors. There are many scholars who tend to consider that the use of metaphors is Dickinson's main poetic strategy. For example, Weisbuch (1975) argues that Dickinson's poetry presents an analogical poetics. Freeman (1995, 646) considers Dickinson's analogies as "conceptual metaphors" and argues that "if we are to understand Emily Dickinson's world of experience, we must explore the ways in which she constructs her metaphorical world". In addition, cognitive linguistics focuses on exploring the relationship between speech and cognition, and reveals the nature of metaphor permeating daily life and daily conversations. In cognitive linguistics, metaphors play an important role in human beings' ways of conceptualizing the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Against this backdrop, this paper delves into metaphors in Emily Dickinson's nature-themed poems, employing the perspective of cognition.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies on Dickinson's Nature-Themed Poems

Existing scholarship on Dickinson's nature poetry manifests three principal analytical paradigms: traditional rhetorical analysis, comparative studies, and systemic functional linguistic approaches. Miller's (1987) structural examination demonstrates how syntactic configurations influence metaphorical interpretation in Dickinson's verse. Subsequent investigations by Watson (2013) broaden thematic scope through comprehensive nature studies, while Zhu et al. (2015) advance lexical metaphor analysis across Dickinson's philosophical and natural themes.

Comparative analyses of Chinese and Dickinsonian nature poetry originate from philosophical contrasts between Eastern and Western traditions. Wang's (2016) Taoist-informed comparison reveals temporal transcendence in Dickinson's nature poetry through its proto-postmodernist elements. Complementary perspectives emerge in ecocritical examinations, exemplified by Zhao's (2010) reading of *Nature, is what we see* as ecological consciousness cultivation, and Huang's (2018) metafunctional analysis of attitudinal expression through grammatical metaphors in the same text.

These investigations collectively establish methodological foundations in rhetorical and systemic functional frameworks, prioritizing textual interpretation through linguistic form analysis. Current scholarship predominantly concentrates on semantic decoding and formal manifestation of Dickinson's natural philosophy within her verse architecture.

2.2 Previous Studies on Metaphors in Dickinson's Poems Abroad and at Home

2.2.1 Overseas Studies

Lakoff & Turner (1989) delineate five foundational metaphor schemas in Dickinson's work, positing her metaphorical

expressions as systematic elaborations of these core conceptual frameworks. Freeman (1995) applies schema theory to demonstrate how Dickinson's experiential knowledge structures manifest through metaphor networks, establishing a cognitive framework for interpreting her poetic universe. Pollak (2003) interrogates Dickinson's deployment of economic metaphors, contextualizing their dual significance within personal biography and 19th-century socioeconomic paradigms.

Hamilton (2005) employs conceptual blending theory to explicate the cognitive efficacy of Dickinson's analogical constructs, particularly similes bridging concrete phenomena and abstract cognition. Young's (2019) conceptual metaphor analysis identifies three dominant typologies across her thematic clusters: structural metaphors predominate in mortality poetry to materialize abstract concepts through systematic mappings; ontological metaphors prevail in nature poetry to facilitate vivid image construction via entity conceptualization.

2.2.2 Domestic Studies

Cognitive linguistic engagement with Dickinson's work within domestic scholarship has emerged relatively recently, with researchers progressively validating the analytical efficacy of cognitive frameworks for metaphor studies. Chen (2012) applies conceptual blending theory and image schema analysis to decode metaphorical mechanisms in Dickinson's verse. Subsequent investigations by Li et al. (2014) examine poetic metaphor's cognitive impact on readers through interactive textual processes, while Zhang (2016) employs cognitive poetics to elucidate metaphorical functions across Dickinson's corpus. He et al. (2019) further extend this trajectory through systematic tracking of death metaphors' conceptual evolution in Dickinson's poetry.

Current scholarship on nature-themed metaphors predominantly employs taxonomic categorization and functional analysis, frequently utilizing restricted corpora limited to single-poem case studies. This methodological tendency underscores the need for comprehensive corpus-based investigations across Dickinson's nature poetry spectrum.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Western scholars have a very long history of studying metaphors. For more than 2000 years since Aristotle, metaphor has been regarded as a rhetorical device, which is mainly studied from the perspective of language. However, today's cognitive scientists generally believe that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but more importantly, it helps people to understand new things, and has the function of organizing human conceptual system and developing human cognition.

According to Aristotle, metaphor is an implicit comparison made according to the principle of analogy. And metaphor is used by everyone (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003). In the centuries after Aristotle, his metaphorical rhetoric has exerted a lasting and profound influence on traditional metaphor theory in the west.

In the 1930s, British rhetorician Richards put forward the Interaction Theory, which holds that metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language. By the 1960s, the focus of metaphor research gradually shifted to structural and semantic aspects. Whorf (1939) mentions people can hardly talk about the simplest non-spatial situations without relying on physical metaphors. Burke (1945) suggests metaphor is a mechanism for understanding something through something else. It was not until 1980 that Lakoff and Johnson published their book *Metaphors We Live By*, which disengaged the study of metaphor from the traditional metaphor theory based on literature and rhetoric, and formally incorporated it into the new field of cognitive science. In this book, the theory of conceptual metaphor is first proposed from the perspective of cognition. The book overturns thousands of years of thinking about metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (2002) proposed that metaphor is a fundamental tool for thinking and reasoning which plays a very vital role in people's thinking and people's basic conceptual systems are metaphorical in nature. It is realized that metaphor is not only a rhetorical phenomenon for purpose of decoration, but rather a basic mode of thinking.

The above scholars have made certain descriptions of metaphor from different angles. Aristotle understood metaphor mainly from the perspective of rhetoric, and thought that metaphor is mainly a rhetorical phenomenon. Some scholars have discussed the importance of metaphor mainly from the perspective of function, while Lakoff and Johnson studied metaphor from a cognitive perspective.

3.2 Classification of Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) propose three types of conceptual metaphors, which are ontological metaphor, orientational metaphor and structural metaphor. Although these three types of metaphors are overlapped with each other, each of them has its own unique characteristics.

Orientational metaphor is the type of metaphor that involves spatial relationships, such as UP-DOWN, IN-OUT, FRONT-BACK, ON-OFF and CENTER-PERIPHERY. It does not structure one concept in terms of another but organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another. For instance, GOOD IS UP gives a UP orientation to the general well-being, and this orientation is coherent with special cases like HEALTHY IS UP and HAPPY IS UP. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) propose that orientational metaphors are rooted in physical and cultural experience, and are not randomly assigned. Thus, which metaphors are chosen are major may vary from culture to culture.

Ontological metaphor is a type of metaphor in which something concrete is projected onto something abstract. When things are not clearly discrete or bounded, it is still possible to categorize them. For example, mountains, street corners and hedges are not completely discrete and bounded things, but they can be treated as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind by people's subjective will. In general, ontological metaphors enable one to see structures with little or no clarity, which are one of the most basic tools one can use to understand experience.

Both orientational metaphors and ontological metaphors are not very rich. They provide very limited metaphorical information. Oppositely, structural metaphors provide the richest source of elaboration. Structural metaphors allow people to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another complex abstract concept. Like orientational and ontological metaphors, structural metaphors are grounded in systematic correlations within people's experience.

4 An Analysis of Metaphors in Dickinson's Nature-Themed Poems

Nobody Knows This Little Rose
 Nobody knows this little Rose-
 It might a pilgrim be
 Did I not take it from the ways
 And lift it up to thee.
 Only a Bee will miss it-
 Only a Butterfly,
 Hastening from far journey-
 On its breast to lie-
 Only a Bird will wonder-
 Only a Breeze will sigh-
 Ah Little Rose-how easy
 For such as thee to die!
 (Johnson, 1960: 22)

In this poem, Dickinson describes that a small rose was picked, but was cherished by nature, arousing the remembrance of bees, butterflies, birds and even the breeze. It is through the use of metaphors that readers can feel the harmonious coexistence between all things in nature and the incongruity between man and nature. And at a deeper level, Dickinson's portrayal of herself as a rose hints that her views on nature being out of step with the Industrial Revolution.

Obviously, the subject of the poem is the rose. Readers will spontaneously see it as a metaphor and thus guess its meaning when reading this. Generally, a pilgrim refers to a person who has nothing and is coming to a new place for the first time. Women are known to be socially disadvantaged, so here pilgrims are associated with women because they are both delicate, which can be seen in "how easy for such as thee to die". Meanwhile, flowers are beloved, as seen in the reactions of natural creatures such as butterflies and a bee. From the above, a structural metaphor FLOWER IS WOMAN can be inferred and the reader can reasonably conclude that PISTIL IS BREAST, PETAL IS LIE and BUTTERFLY IS MAN, thus highlighting the physical characteristics of flowers through selective mapping. It is clear that these metaphors are based on the similarity between women and pilgrims' weak position as well as external reactions.

The Dandelion's Pallid Tube
 The Dandelion's pallid tube
 Astonishes the Grass,
 And Winter instantly becomes
 An infinite Alas-
 The tube uplifts a signal Bud And then a shouting Flower-
 The Proclamation of the Suns
 That sepulture is o'er.
 (Johnson, 1976: 636-637)

In this poem, it is easy to visualize the dandelion's struggle to survive, germinate and blossom in the howling winter

winds. And the dandelion's resilience in the harsh environment foreshadows the coming spring. In addition, it also hints Dickinson's struggle against the patriarchal society. Although she is in isolation, she is still full of hope like the dandelion.

As part of the ontological metaphor, personification is often and extensively used in Dickinson's nature-themed poetry to express her view of nature, namely, she tries to integrate herself into it and become a part of it. In the second line, the action of "astonish" personifies the grass and indirectly highlights the bravery of the dandelion which dares to fight the cold winter with only its "pallid" tube. Then, in the verse "The tube uplifts a signal Bud", "uplift" is used to personify the dandelion's difficulty in nurturing new life. Meanwhile, "Proclamation" is given to the seeds it has scattered around, vividly revealing that the rooted seeds will nurture more thriving life and together proclaiming the end of the cold winter.

One Joy Of So Much Anguish
 One Joy of so much anguish
 Sweet nature has for me
 I shun it as I do Despair Or dear iniquity-
 Why Birds, a Summer morning
 Before the Quick of Day
 Should stab my ravished spirit
 With Dirks of Melody
 Is part of an inquiry
 That will receive reply
 When Flesh and Spirit sunder
 In Death's Immediately-
 (Johnson, 1960: 666)

The poem was written in 1883 when Dickinson experienced the sudden death of her beloved young nephew. Undoubtedly, the death of her nephew at the age of eight was the most traumatic experience for her in her fifties (Yue Fengmei, 2011). Therefore, by depicting the birdsong of Monday morning, she expresses her indictment of the cruelty of nature and her resignation to the irreversible laws of nature.

At the beginning, Dickinson transforms the abstract concept "joy of anguish" into an entity that breaks readers' expectations and implies the cruelty and indifference of nature. Irony is used by using "sweet". Moreover, she demonstrates the unconscious state of death in the ontological metaphor to show the cruelty of death. While in "Flesh and Spirit sunder", a container metaphor is embodied in which the flesh is regarded as a container while the spirit is separated from it, vividly depicting the unconscious state of death. In terms of personification, she draws on the ontological metaphor of "Melody is Dirk" and personifies the bird by using the word "dirk", highlighting the bird's extreme pain. As the bird at this point also manifests her nostalgia for her dead nephew.

5 Conclusion

This cognitive linguistic analysis of Emily Dickinson's nature-themed poetry examines metaphorical patterns through close reading of three representative works. The findings reveal two primary characteristics of her metaphorical construction: conceptual metaphors grounded in embodied experience create immediate interpretative pathways for readers, while structural and ontological metaphors demonstrate complementary functions, the former establishing conceptual frameworks for abstract notions, the latter achieving vivid natural imagery through sustained personification. The complete absence of orientation metaphors in the selected poems suggests potential thematic specificities in Dickinson's approach to nature representation.

While limited in corpus scope, this study demonstrates the interpretive value of cognitive frameworks for analyzing metaphorical density in Dickinson's nature poetry. The methodological approach could productively extend to larger-scale analyses encompassing her complete botanical corpus, particularly through comparative examination of metaphorical patterns across different natural elements and seasonal cycles.

About the Author

Yajun Zhou, a female postgraduate student at Guizhou Normal University, specializing in functional linguistics.

References

- [1] Burke K. (1945). Grammaticalization in Creoles: The Development of Determiners and Relative Clauses in Sranan [M]. Amsterdam: IFOTT.
- [2] Chen M. Z. (2012). Poetic Metaphor in Emily Dickinson's Poetry. *Foreign Language and Literature [J]*, (01), 19-24.
- [3] Fauconnier G., & Turner M. (2003). Conceptual blending, Form and Meaning. *Recherches en communication [J]*, 19, 57-86.

- [4] Freeman M. H. (1995). Metaphor Making Meaning: Dickinson's conceptual universe. *Journal of pragmatics* [J], 24(6), 643-666.
- [5] Gibbs R. W. (1999). Taking Metaphor out of our Heads and Putting it Into the Cultural World. In R. Gibbs & G. Steen (eds.. *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics* [M]. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- [6] Hamilton C. (2005). A Cognitive Rhetoric of Poetry and Emily Dickinson. *Language and Literature* [J], 14(3), 279-294.
- [7] He Z. Q., & Zhao J. (2019). Analysis of "Death" Metaphor in Emily Dickinson's Poetry from the Perspective of Cognitive Poetics. *Journal of Xi'an University of Foreign Studies* [J], (03), 1-6.
- [8] Huang G. W. (2018). Analysis of Metafunction and Grammatical Metaphor in Nature Poetry—Taking One of Dickinson's Nature Poems as an Example. *Foreign Language Education* [J], (03), 1-5.
- [9] Johnson T. H. (1976). *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* [M]. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.
- [10] Lakoff G. & Kövecses Z. (1987). The Cognitive Model of Anger Inherent in American English. In D. Holland, & N. Quinn (eds.) *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 195-221.
- [11] Lakoff G., & Johnson M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by* [M]. Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- [12] Lakoff G., & Johnson M. (2002). Why Cognitive Linguistics Requires Embodies Realism. *Cognitive Linguistics* [J], 13(3), 245-263.
- [13] Li C. H., Qu Y. J., & Zhang H. Y. (2014). Cognitive Study on Poetic Metaphor in Emily Dickinson's Poetry. *Language Construction* [J], (36), 59-60.
- [14] Miller C. (1987). *Emily Dickinson, a poet's grammar* [M]. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [15] Pollak E. (2003). *Incest and the English Novel* [M]. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- [16] Richards R. H. (1967). *A Short History of Linguistics* [M]. London: Longman Group Limited.
- [17] Wang J. E. (2016). Interpretation of Ecological Wisdom in Dickinson's Poetry from the Perspective of Taoist Philosophy. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching* [J], (1), 92-96.
- [18] Weisbuch R. (1975). *Emily Dickinson's poetry* [M]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [19] Whorf B. L. (1939). The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language. In *Language, Thought and Reality* [M]. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [20] Young J. (2019). Dissolving Metaphors in Emily Dickinson's Poems About Drink. *The Emily Dickinson Journal* [J], 28(1), 23-42.
- [21] Yu, N. & D. Jia. (2016). Metaphor in culture: LIFE IS A SHOW in Chinese. *Cognitive Linguistics* [J], 27(2), 147-180.
- [22] Yue F. M. (2011). The Beauty of the Finale: Emily Dickinson's Imagination of Death. *Foreign Language and Literature* [J], (06), 24-28.
- [23] Zhang R. (2016). Multiple Meanings of Emily Dickinson's Poetry from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor. *Language Construction* [J], (17), 83-84.
- [24] Zhao X. F. (2010). Emotional Encounter between Human and Nature—Interpretation of Four Nature Poems of Emily Dickinson from the Perspective of Ecocriticism. *Appreciation of Famous Works* [J], (27), 79-80+92.