Poetic Metaphors: Creativity & Interpretation

Carina Rasse, Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria

Introduction

The present project explores the relevance of conceptual knowledge and embodied experiences in structuring and understanding abstract concepts in the context of poetic narratives. On the one hand, it studies whether poets create conceptualizations of their experiences when they produce metaphors. On the other hand, it analyzes whether readers draw, if at all, on similar conceptual metaphors as the poets do when they interpret poetic metaphors.

Material & Methods

The corpus of texts consists of 8 contemporary poems which are analyzed by the researcher for conceptual metaphors and metaphoric themes they comprise. For data collection, the study uses a combination of three research methods:

1. written think-aloud protocols
2. psycholinguistic experiment
3. in-depth online interviews

In study 1, participants are asked to interpret the eight poems. In study 2, participants select from lists of pre-given conceptual metaphors which ones they think best represent the meaning of the poems. In study 3, the authors of the poems are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors, to name their sources of metaphors and to define their purpose of using figurative language.

Results

The think-aloud protocols demonstrate how various concrete terms in the poems served as source domains for participants to think about metaphorical target domains. Additionally, much overlapping could be found between the ways readers wrote about the themes and topics of the presented poems and the most frequently selected conceptual metaphors in the psycholinguistic study. The in-depth interviews reveal that poets mention different forms of sources that underlie their use of metaphors. In their interpretation of specific metaphors, references to common conceptual metaphors, as well as creative extensions of these, were found.

Conclusion

The results of the study offer empirical evidence for the assumption that readers access conceptual metaphors during poetry interpretation. These references to conceptual mappings are frequently very similar to the conceptual mappings that poets mention when they are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors in their works. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the production and comprehension of poetic metaphors is usually shaped by different, dynamically interacting factors. Conceptual mappings are only one of these.

Acknowledgements

I owe my gratitude to all participants of this study. In particular, to James Arthur, who has given permission to include “Wind” and his interpretations of his poem in my research project. Additionally, I am very grateful to Prof. Alexander Onysko, Prof. Ray Gibbs and Dr. Francesca Citron for their help in conducting the study and interpreting the results. I would also like to thank the AAU Klagenfurt Research Council for continuously supporting my research activities.

Poems

Wind
by James Arthur

it’s true sometimes I cannot stop myself from spilling the recycling
untangling apple blossoms
rashing a picnic
making off with napkins I’m nothing until I happen
flipping an umbrella outside-in
throwing its owner into a tumble
pelting the avenue with sleet or dust
at times downtown
riding over galleries of air
so full of high excitement howling
I borrow an old woman’s hat
and fling it into the road
arriving with news of the larkspur
and the bumblebee
at times embracing you so lightly
in ways you don’t even think of
as touch

“Wind. The title leaves room for numerous interpretations. Will it be a gentle breeze or a violent storm? It cannot be said, not yet. The poem itself has 4 stanzas, or has it not? The lines seem to begin and end randomly; one cannot suppose this was done deliberately to give the impression that the wind is omnipresent throughout the poem. We get a glimpse as how the wind might view situations in life” (Participant 3).

“If you are reading Arthur’s poem for the first time you don’t really get an idea what he wants to tell you with these stanzas. On the second look you will see that he tried to speak in an imagery way to give “wind” as an “abstract” form or natural activity, a personality. In my opinion he is writing in lexical-thematic dimension because he uses the medium “wind” to give an impression of how people can be. Maybe he wanted to show how somebody can act in different situation in life” (Participant 3).

The think-aloud protocols demonstrate how various concrete terms in the poems served as source domains for readers to think about metaphorical target domains. Additionally, much overlapping could be found between the ways readers wrote about the themes and topics of the presented poems and the most frequently selected conceptual metaphors in the psycholinguistic study. The in-depth interviews reveal that poets mention different forms of sources that underlie their use of metaphors. In their interpretation of specific metaphors, references to common conceptual metaphors, as well as creative extensions of these, were found.

Acknowledgements

I owe my gratitude to all participants of this study. In particular, to James Arthur, who has given permission to include “Wind” and his interpretations of his poem in my research project. Additionally, I am very grateful to Prof. Alexander Onysko, Prof. Ray Gibbs and Dr. Francesca Citron for their help in conducting the study and interpreting the results. I would also like to thank the AAU Klagenfurt Research Council for continuously supporting my research activities.

Poems

Wind
by James Arthur

it’s true sometimes I cannot stop myself from spilling the recycling
untangling apple blossoms
rashing a picnic
making off with napkins I’m nothing until I happen
flipping an umbrella outside-in
throwing its owner into a tumble
pelting the avenue with sleet or dust
at times downtown
riding over galleries of air
so full of high excitement howling
I borrow an old woman’s hat
and fling it into the road
arriving with news of the larkspur
and the bumblebee
at times embracing you so lightly
in ways you don’t even think of
as touch

“Wind. The title leaves room for numerous interpretations. Will it be a gentle breeze or a violent storm? It cannot be said, not yet. The poem itself has 4 stanzas, or has it not? The lines seem to begin and end randomly; one cannot recognise a structure, just like the wind itself. Even the punctuation is missing. I suppose this was done deliberately to give the impression that the wind is omnipresent throughout the poem. We get a glimpse as how the wind might view the world […] The author emphasises that the wind may be exciting, genteel or even so violent. I believe this choice of words shows what the wind is capable of” (Participant 15).

Introduction

The present project explores the relevance of conceptual knowledge and embodied experiences in structuring and understanding abstract concepts in the context of poetic narratives. On the one hand, it studies whether poets create conceptualizations of their experiences when they produce metaphors. On the other hand, it analyzes whether readers draw, if at all, on similar conceptual metaphors as the poets do when they interpret poetic metaphors.

Material & Methods

The corpus of texts consists of 8 contemporary poems which are analyzed by the researcher for conceptual metaphors and metaphoric themes they comprise. For data collection, the study uses a combination of three research methods:

1. written think-aloud protocols
2. psycholinguistic experiment
3. in-depth online interviews

In study 1, participants are asked to interpret the eight poems. In study 2, participants select from lists of pre-given conceptual metaphors which ones they think best represent the meaning of the poems. In study 3, the authors of the poems are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors, to name their sources of metaphors and to define their purpose of using figurative language.

Results

The think-aloud protocols demonstrate how various concrete terms in the poems served as source domains for participants to think about metaphorical target domains. Additionally, much overlapping could be found between the ways readers wrote about the themes and topics of the presented poems and the most frequently selected conceptual metaphors in the psycholinguistic study. The in-depth interviews reveal that poets mention different forms of sources that underlie their use of metaphors. In their interpretation of specific metaphors, references to common conceptual metaphors, as well as creative extensions of these, were found.

Conclusion

The results of the study offer empirical evidence for the assumption that readers access conceptual metaphors during poetry interpretation. These references to conceptual mappings are frequently very similar to the conceptual mappings that poets mention when they are asked to reflect upon their use of metaphors in their works. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the production and comprehension of poetic metaphors is usually shaped by different, dynamically interacting factors. Conceptual mappings are only one of these.

Acknowledgements

I owe my gratitude to all participants of this study. In particular, to James Arthur, who has given permission to include “Wind” and his interpretations of his poem in my research project. Additionally, I am very grateful to Prof. Alexander Onysko, Prof. Ray Gibbs and Dr. Francesca Citron for their help in conducting the study and interpreting the results. I would also like to thank the AAU Klagenfurt Research Council for continuously supporting my research activities.

Poems

Wind
by James Arthur

it’s true sometimes I cannot stop myself from spilling the recycling
untangling apple blossoms
rashing a picnic
making off with napkins I’m nothing until I happen
flipping an umbrella outside-in
throwing its owner into a tumble
pelting the avenue with sleet or dust
at times downtown
riding over galleries of air
so full of high excitement howling
I borrow an old woman’s hat
and fling it into the road
arriving with news of the larkspur
and the bumblebee
at times embracing you so lightly
in ways you don’t even think of
as touch

“Wind. The title leaves room for numerous interpretations. Will it be a gentle breeze or a violent storm? It cannot be said, not yet. The poem itself has 4 stanzas, or has it not? The lines seem to begin and end randomly; one cannot recognise a structure, just like the wind itself. Even the punctuation is missing. I suppose this was done deliberately to give the impression that the wind is omnipresent throughout the poem. We get a glimpse as how the wind might view the world […] The author emphasises that the wind may be exciting, genteel or even so violent. I believe this choice of words shows what the wind is capable of” (Participant 15).