

## Cognitive analysis applied to the literary genre: the concepts of “body” and “nature” in the Shakespearean tragedy of *King Lear*

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### **Introduction**

Throughout history, there have been many linguists interested in the study of metaphor. New perspectives have been created and three main trends of research can be distinguished in the cognitive study of metaphor, such as comparison, interaction and experientialist approaches. According to the comparison view, metaphors are grounded in similarity but we have to distinguish between comparison statements and metaphor (Ortony, 1993; Miller, 1993). The interaction theory defends that metaphors arise from the interaction of the two entities involved in the metaphorical process. Indurkha's study argues that metaphor involves “an interaction between its source and its target” (1992: 3), and Kittay's theory is based on the linguistic framework of semantics, according to which “the meanings of different words are related to each other and it is these structural relationships that are referred to as semantic fields” (1987: 225). Regarding the experientialists, Lakoff and Johnson, “metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words.” Besides, “metaphor is often not based on similarity. It is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought, action” (1980: 3-6). They demonstrate how many of our everyday concepts are structured by conventional metaphors, and how many of the novel metaphors in the literary discourse can be analyzed as new extensions or new combinations of conventional metaphors.

### **Cognitive theory of metaphor in the Shakespearean literary discourse**

Although the metaphorical quality of Shakespeare's language has been ignored in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a great interest in metaphor has appeared within the fields of linguistics, psychology and philosophy, where a confused notion of imagery still remains. There is a conception of metaphor as “controlling structure” (Berry, 1978:1), where “metaphor is treated as something, which can control or organize an entire play.” His aim is to detect in each play the extent to which a certain metaphoric idea informs and organizes the drama. However, according to Van den Berg, there are two features in Shakespearean drama: “its use of performance as a metaphor of reality, and the subjective nature of that reality” (1985:52). A different critical position is maintained by Donawerth (1984: 45) who suggests that “Shakespeare's metaphors are based not on the magical properties of words, but on the likeness of speech to music.” On the other hand, Davidson (1978) adopts a version of the literal meaning theory in which metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more. He argues that a metaphor does not say anything beyond its literal meaning. Following the cognitive linguists, “the meanings of words are determined not by a collection of features or by a system of differences within a semiotic system, but by ‘encyclopaedic’ cultural knowledge that provides domains, frames, and scripts within which words have meaning” (Lakoff and Langacker, 1995: 83-4). These domains are conventionalized in the language, and

they underlie a range of everyday linguistic expressions. This theory of metaphor applied to a literary text will derive in the understanding of the conceptual world of the poets. It is believed that they create the most authentic examples of metaphor. Although Kövecses (2002: 43) argues that this idea is partially true, since everyday language and its conceptual system contribute a great deal to the working of the artistic genius.

## Methodology and Corpus

The methodology applied follows parameters to identify the conceptual schemas found in this tragedy regarding the concepts of “nature” and “body”. I will describe different kinds of metaphors according to the cognitive function of the mappings involved in the metaphorical process, such as structural and ontological metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1989), as well as image-schemas (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Turner, 1989). I have also accounted for the existence of personifications, conceived as a form of ontological metaphor (Gibbs, 1994; Barcelona, 2000). In addition, I will illustrate poetic metaphors following criteria that distinguish them from conventional schemas such as extension, elaboration and combination metaphors (Kövecses, 2002).

Concerning the corpus, *King Lear* is a very open play to different interpretations. This tragedy means something different to Dr. Johnson (1968) and Richardson (1974) than it does to Muir (1965) and Mack (1967) or to the historicist critics Eagleton (1986), Greenblatt (1988), Halpern (1991) and to the feminists Adelman (1992), Boose (1993) and McLuskie (1994). The reader is involved in the metaphorical process of this tragedy which dramatizes on the great themes of human discourse that are so close to us. The language of the characters gives the source and target domains for the comprehension of abstract concepts, such as *intentions, thoughts, experiences, feelings* and *behaviors* within the Renaissance conceptions.

## Results of the Analysis

### Lear, Edmund and Gloucester: Three concepts of Nature

According to the “great chain of being” doctrine, human beings occupied the highest position within the system, followed by animals, plants, complex objects and natural physical things. This system will lead to two kinds of metaphors: the “basic great chain metaphor”, concerned with the relation of human beings to “lower” forms of existence, and “the extended” one, concerned with the relation of human beings to cosmos, the universe and the gods. These metaphors allow us to map the emotional, psychological, social attributes and behaviors of a person onto the physical nature and the elements of weather (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 166-170). Lear identifies his own will with his conception of nature, so that he builds his emotional and intellectual foundation upon the forces of nature. Thus, in this way, *nature* is conceptualized as *a person*<sup>1</sup> and this personification entails *nature* understood as *a powerful force against humanity* in an ontological

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<sup>1</sup> I use italics throughout the article describing cognitive metaphors in order to distinguish their source and target domains.

way. These metaphors result in an extended great chain metaphor in which *the emotional state of the person is mapped onto the physical nature*:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear:  
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend  
To make this creatures fruitful.  
Into her womb convey sterility...  
Create her child of spleen that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her.  
(I.iv.268-275)

Lear, shocked at Goneril's ingratitude, provides us a metaphor against conventions or what I have called "anti-conventional", invoking nature as a force to make her childless. As we know, "womb" is conventionally procreation, it is a container for a baby. However, in this case *womb is a container for sterility*. In "disnatured torment," Lear understands a part-whole metonymy that forms the basis of a great chain metaphor since *the inhuman behavior is mapped onto aggressive weather*. Besides, *anger* is projected as *a physical force* by means of the physical nature.

In addition to this, thunder is introduced in the tragedy as an object to heighten the distresses of Lear. He demands a storm from the heavens whose violence can be compared to the violence of his own mind. However, nature is very different for Edmund from what it is for Lear, who identifies it with social order, and even with the principle of legitimacy of birth. Consequently, in Edmund's soliloquy, he is conditioned by his birth, and he expresses his dissatisfaction with society's attitude toward bastards:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me?...  
With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?  
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take  
More composition and fierce quality...  
I grow, I prosper:  
Now gods, stand up for bastards!  
(I.ii.1-22)

At the beginning of the speech, Edmund understands *nature as power, law and procreation* in an ontological way. In "stand in the plague...base, base" he must remain subject to the laws, which denied a bastard any share of the inheritance from his father's property. However, he forces the rules of nature, rebelling against conventionalities producing *nature as a power against custom, morality and order*. Additionally, in the words "in the lusty stealth of nature" he is *personifying nature* and conceiving it as a container image-schema for *lust*. In these words, there is also a basic great chain metaphor since *a person's quality is shared with an animal quality*. At the end of the speech, he invokes again the *gods as power against conventions* providing another anti-conventional metaphor.

On the other hand, Gloucester believes in astrology and thinks that the eclipses cause the breakdown of human society since they provoke unnatural effects. Gloucester finds the same sort of parallelisms between eclipses as disorder in heavens and disorder in human society:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon  
portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature  
can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself  
scourged by the sequent effects. Love, cools, friendship  
fall off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in  
countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond  
cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine  
comes under the prediction—there's son against father.  
The King falls from bias of nature—there's father against child.  
(I.ii.103-111)

Gloucester recognizes that social bonds are being broken around him, and the social order was disrupted. He understands eclipses as effects on the persons producing a personification metaphor. It entails a link between *the disorder in physical nature* and *the disorder in humanity*, and this link provides an extended great chain metaphor where *the behavior in the physical nature* is compared to *the behavior of the humanity*. In “though the wisdom of nature,” he conceives *nature for human nature* in a part-whole relationship providing the extended great chain metaphor in which *disorders in the human relationships* are mapped onto *the disorders in physical nature*. We can also observe a link between father and son that entails the *family links are broken* anti-conventional metaphor. Furthermore, *nature* is conceptualized as a *disordered power* ontological metaphor that influences the person. Finally, the order is inverted, the world is turned down, resulting in *person is projected as an up-down* image-schema.

### **Body is Disorder in the Social Chain of Being**

Disorder in the relationships allows us to understand several metaphors whose source domain is a fragmented or corrupted body through the chaos provoked by Lear in the order of the chain of being. In the Renaissance period wholeness had a connection with the health and the integrity of the body. On the contrary, the deformed, deprived and corrupted body had a link with the disorder and rupture of the social and familial order. Several image-schemas will be shown, which also combine with abstract entities as emotions that are conceptualized by means of a broken or disarticulated part of the body. Thus, Lear's anger is clearly expressed when he talks to Regan about Goneril projecting her ungrateful head and her young bones as containers for anger:

All the stored vengeance of heaven fall  
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,  
You taking airs with lameness  
(II.iv.159-61)

On the one hand, “top” stands for “head”, and *head* is a container schema for *anger*. It is an unconventional and elaborated way of conceiving the heart, since conventionally the heart is a container for emotions, whereas the head is a container for intellectual capacities. However, Lear gets a strong dramatic effect causing the ontological metaphor *head* as a container for *anger*. “Young bones” refers to Goneril’s bones and even the bones of the child she may have. Moreover, a link schema is established between her and her descendants through “bones”, leading to *bones are family links*. Lear wishes them to be lame, and he therefore expresses his anger through the ontological metaphor *anger is a degraded body*. However, in the following words, Lear addresses Goneril establishing a link between father and daughter by means of *blood*:

Thou art a boil,  
A plague sore, or embossed carbuncle  
In my corrupted blood.  
(II.iv.220-2)

*Blood* is *lineage*, *blood* is *family ties* and therefore a link schema is shared by both that interacts with the container schema *blood* as a container for *corruption*, due to the corrupted behavior Goneril has concerning her father. These metaphors combine with the *body heat as a container for emotions* conventional and ontological metaphor. At the same time, he is defining his daughter in terms of a balance schema. In the following lines, Edgar, aware of the chaos in both Lear’s and his own family, also conceives *a broken body* as a container for *emotions*:

I would not take this from report: it is,  
And my heart breaks at it  
(IV.vi.137-8)

*Heart* is conceptualized in a part-whole schema where *heart* is fragmented into parts and it is therefore *a container for sadness*, caused by the disorder in the families. However, Albany uses a broken heart in a part-whole schema, projecting *broken heart as a container for sadness* if his behavior were wrong:

Let sorrow split my heart if ever I  
Did hate thee or thy father  
(V.iii.175-6)

Gloucester, offended by Edgar’s unreal conspiracy, explains to Regan that his heart is broken, using the part-whole image-schema in which the whole and compact *body is divided into parts* due to Edgar’s bad behavior. He also uses *a fragmented body* conceived as *disorder* since conventionally speaking what is lived socially is what is felt psychically.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare knows how to exploit the complexities of meanings using conceptual metaphors and image-schemas. He plays with conventionality creating conventional, unconventional metaphors

and his characters even offer anti-conventional metaphors that are explained through the context. The poet writes rhetorical passages, giving rise to the use of creative metaphors in the expression of concepts. We can observe how the poetic metaphors shown in this Shakespearean drama interact with the cultural and conventional world of the Renaissance period. There is no doubt that Shakespeare is influenced by the social behavior lived by the Elizabethan society and by the cultural framework of meanings since his lexicon shows patterns shaped by his culture. The metaphorical mappings connect ideas of the tragedy, such as the organization of society, hierarchical relationships and patriarchal doctrine with the conventional society. Therefore, the metaphors describe the powerful role of culture and its interaction with the characters, which make use of cognitive models through their experiences.

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