

# Conceptual metaphors in poetry interpretation: A psycholinguistic approach

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Research in psycholinguistics has shown that pre-existing conceptual metaphors influence many aspects of how people produce and understand metaphorical language (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994, 2017; Kövecses 2010; Jacobs & Kinder 2017). This conceptual metaphor view was first defined and empirically investigated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*. Since then, an enormous body of empirical evidence from cognitive linguistics, and related disciplines has emerged, detailing how conceptual metaphors underlie significant aspects of both linguistic and non-linguistic facets of life. However, the question of whether metaphor is indeed always understood through the recruitment of conceptual metaphors is currently heavily debated (e.g. Keysar et al 2000, Steen 2017).

The present study explores whether people possibly access conceptual metaphor during poetry interpretation. The hypothesis was tested in a psycholinguistic experiment that was conducted at Lancaster University. In the first part of the experiment, 37 participants were asked to read fourteen two-line stanzas of poetry presented to them on a computer screen. The aim was to find out whether participants rate words that relate to a conceptual metaphor which, according to the researcher, underlies the meaning of the selected poetic stanzas higher than words which do not relate to the postulated conceptual metaphor. If participants rate the mapping-related words as high, I propose that people unconsciously draw on knowledge that they have about concrete concepts (such as journeys) when they encounter abstract, metaphorical concepts (such as love) in the poems. If this is not the case, the participants' ratings of the task items might have been influenced by other factors, such as random choices or lexical/semantic similarities between the words in the poems and the target words. This, in turn, might be an indication that associative relatedness might not (exclusively) depend on conceptual mappings as described in conceptual metaphor theory.

The results of the study aim to offer empirical evidence for the assumption that readers access conceptual metaphor during poetry interpretation. At the same time, they also aim to highlight the many other factors (linguistic, personal, social etc.) which shape the understanding of figurative language in poetic narratives. Eventually, the implications of this work will be discussed for psycholinguistic theories of figurative language comprehension.

## References

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