

Continuous reframing: cognitive linguistics meets experimental poetry

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Keywords: framing, conceptualization, poetry, experiment, language

The paper discusses a little-known episode of direct contacts between cognitive linguistics and experimental poetry. The 1960-70s was, in the United States, an era of the so-called "linguistics wars" conducted between representatives of generative grammar and cognitive semantics. In the wake of these linguistic debates, poets of the 'language school' were involved into "poetic wars" between traditionalists and avant-gardists. George Lakoff, who gained prominence as a cognitive linguist in the 1980s, published a series of polemical articles in which he discusses the value of the "language movement" in poetry and its proximity to the strategies of cognitive linguistics. Lakoff focused on the issue of "framing" and "reframing" knowledge in language. "Language poets" and cognitive linguists had in common the focus not only on metaphor as an operator of thinking, but also on language as a mediator between cognition and aesthesis, between experience and consciousness, between the poetic and metalinguistic functions of language.

Building upon Lakoff's considerations about the nature of 'framing' in experimental poetry, we will analyze examples from American language-centered poets (Michael Palmer, Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten) from the perspective of metalinguistic framing, i.e., cases where linguistic concepts themselves function as metaphorical fields structuring poetic experience. For instance, Charles Bernstein dedicates some of his poems to the cognitive framing of language: *Imagine poetry as a series of terraces, some vast, some no bigger than a pinprick, overlooking the city of language. The sound and light show begins in the dark: sentences dart by, one by one, forming wave after wave of the rag and bone shop of the quotidian, events passing before our eyes like the faint glimmer of consciousness in an alcoholic stupor. Facts, facts everywhere but not a drop to drink.* Metaphor, for Bernstein, is often conceptual, i.e. does not simply connect two dissimilar entities, but connects them in the act of thinking and in the act of writing itself. Similarity as the basis of ordinary metaphor is questioned. The metaphor here is built as a parataxis: *the blame is like the blame / the guilt is like the guilt / the quilt is like the quilt / the blank is like the blank / the end is like the end / the loop is like the loop / the there is like the there / the here is like the here / the how is like the how / the now is like the now.* The poetic function of language, foregrounding the message as such, lays bare the structure of the conceptual metaphor itself.

In Language Poetry, language itself, as well as particular linguistic categories, are conceptualized and categorized, as in this fragment from the poem by Michael Palmer "Notes for an Echo Lake": *An eye remembers history by the pages of the house in flames, / rolls forward like a rose, head to hip, recalling words by their accidents.* The syntax here is quite coherent at the local level, but the meanings and images are layered on top of each other, moving from one frame to another. In another poem by Palmer (*Someone identical with Dante / sits besides a stone. Enough / is enough is enough of. / It's odd that your hand feels warm / (snow carefully falling)*), the syncopated construction *enough is enough of* actualizes the frame of frustration, interspersed with the frame of the very syntax of speech, as well as with the framework of the idiom "Enough is enough". The poetic line switches the frames with its unique structure, it frames, deframes, and reframes the frames themselves. The borders between frames as areas of experience in consciousness are foregrounded in a poetic utterance. George Lakoff called this process of self-reflexivity in language-centered poetry a "continuous reframing" [Lakoff 1982]. In this paper, we will analyze, from the perspective of contemporary cognitive poetics, how and to what extent experimenting with language in poetry may challenge the procedure of conceptualisation as a linguistic mechanism.

References

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