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## **LINGUISTIC AND COGNITIVE MECHANISMS OF THE FORMATION OF SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY TEXTS**

### *1. Introduction*

The present day study of poetic syntax within the framework of cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics in particular is directed at revealing the underlying mechanisms determining the formation and functioning of syntactic constructions in a poetic text. From the cognitive standpoint syntactic constructions, phrases or sentences are viewed as two-faceted formations of conceptual content and verbal means of its expression (Langacker 1987: 83-84, 268). The relations between the form and meaning of syntactic units are considered to be conceptually grounded. The present paper attempts to explicate the mechanism by which the form of a syntactic construction of a poetic text acquires a meaning and thus produces a certain aesthetic effect upon the reader.

### *2. Linguistic and cognitive mechanisms*

#### *2.1 Conceptual metaphor theory*

The linguistic and cognitive mechanisms of the form-meaning projection are elucidated with the help of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (G. Lakoff, M. Johnson) in terms of which metaphor is treated not as a stylistic device but as a conceptual structure where one set of conceptual entities, usually more abstract, is interpreted in terms of another set of entities, more concrete and structured (Lakoff 1993: 220). In contrast to linguistic metaphor associated with the verbal level, conceptual one underlies cognition and is organized by means of projecting or mapping entities between two conceptual domains. Consider the following examples:

- (1) She was deep in her work.
- (2) He was plunged in remorse.

The sentences in (1, 2) activate in our mind the conceptual metaphor MENTAL STATES ARE CONTAINERS where MENTAL STATE is the target (the domain being described) and CONTAINER is the source (the domain in terms of which the target is described).

In the framework of the above mentioned theory the form of the syntactic unit can be interpreted by relating it to the domain of a spatial object whose elements (words) are presented in a linear sequence (Lakoff, Johnson 2003: 126-

127). Consequently, linguistic expressions can be regarded as containers with meanings being the content of them. These relations can be represented with the help of two conceptual domains: SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTION, the target, which is conventionally structured in terms of CONTAINER, the source. According to the conceptual metaphor SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTIONS ARE CONTAINERS FOR MEANINGS small containers, e.g. simple sentences, are filled with small content, whereas large containers such as compound and complex sentences, can include large content (Lakoff, Johnson 2003: 128).

## *2.2 Conceptual grammatical metaphors*

The shaping of conceptual content into the verbal form of syntactic constructions is regulated by the peculiarities of human conceptualization of the objects and phenomena of the surrounding world (Langacker 1987: 76). These peculiarities are represented by the three principles of syntactic iconicity which are part and parcel of our conceptual experience: the principle of sequence (the order of the events described is mirrored in the linguistic expression), the principle of distance (conceptual similarity of objects and events described is reflected in shorter linguistic distance between the elements of the sentence while dissimilarity is expressed in greater linguistic distance) and the principle of quantity (formal complexity of the syntactic construction reveals conceptual complexity of the situation described) (Dirven, Verspoor 2004: 8).

These cognitive principles are deep-rooted in our conceptual system in the form of conventional conceptual structures for which the Japanese cognitive linguist M. K. Hiraga suggested the term of conceptual grammatical metaphors. Thus, whenever we read some sentence, it activates the corresponding structure in our conceptual apparatus in terms of which we understand the syntactic construction. Unlike conceptual metaphors in general, conceptual grammatical metaphors are concerned with different grammatical conventions such as word formation, phrase and sentence configuration, syntactic relations of their parts and the rules of combining words into different constructions (Hiraga 1998: 10). In terms of this approach conceptual grammatical metaphors were subdivided into ontological ones, i.e. mirroring the relations between the elements (SEQUENCE OF FORM IS SEQUENCE OF CONTENT, SAMENESS/DIFFERENCE OF FORM IS SAMENESS/DIFFERENCE OF CONTENT, MORE/LESS OF FORM IS MORE/LESS OF CONTENT, SYMMETRY/ASYMMETRY OF FORM IS SYMMETRY/ASYMMETRY OF CONTENT) and orientational metaphors dealing with the location and movement of objects in space (LOCATION OF FORM NEAR CENTRE IS STRENGTH/IMPORTANCE, CLOSENESS OF FORM IS CONNECTION). Let us illustrate it with the following example of the syntactic construction:

(3) If you never do anything for anyone else

You are spared the tragedy of human relationships  
(Creely 2007: 164)

The construction in (3) evokes the conceptual grammatical metaphor SEQUENCE OF FORM IS SEQUENCE OF CONTENT in terms of which we understand the conceptual relationship of cause and effect embodied into the verbal structure with the help of a complex sentence with a conditional clause.

### *3. Syntactic foregrounding in contemporary American poetry texts*

#### *3.1 Defining the notion of syntactic foregrounding*

In a poetic text characterized by high expressiveness and emotivity conceptual grammatical metaphors become syntactically foregrounded, that is, they obtain prominence with the help of certain syntactic constructions. This effect can be achieved either due to foregrounding devices which deviate from grammar norms or repetition of similar verbal elements of the poetic texture. Foregrounded syntactic elements draw the reader's attention, touching upon his/her deep-lying chords and calling forth emotional and aesthetic response (van Peer 1986: 21-23). Consider the following poetic abstract:

(4) This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper  
(Eliot 2006: 1925)

The construction in (4) is based on the repetition of the syntactic model – a complex sentence with an attributive clause which activates the conceptual metaphor MORE OF FORM IS MORE OF CONTENT. Being foregrounded in the text with the help of syntactic parallelism, the construction impedes the perception of the poetic text and, consequently, our attention is being attracted to the structure repeated and to the deep poetic meaning realized, that of inevitability and the end of the world. Thus, we can see that large content can be interpreted not necessarily in its direct meaning as the amount of information given but figuratively as the significance of the poetic message.

One of the peculiarities of modernist and postmodernist poetry texts is originality and novelty of their form which is often achieved due to the authors' experimenting with syntactic units. Such syntactic organization of contemporary American poetic texts reflects the inability of poets to come to grips with the rapidly changing reality which is often presented as irrational, illogical and mosaic-like. Observing the syntactic experiments in modernist and postmodernist poetry which often result in the rejection of syntactic norms as

such, the American poet John Cage wrote: *Syntax, like government, can only be obeyed. It is therefore of no use except when you have something particular to command: Go buy me a bunch of carrots* (Cage 2010: 1). From the standpoint of cognitive poetics syntactic violations, such as excessive simplification or complication of sentence structure (the so-called, non-stop sentences), ungrammaticality, changes of word order etc. are considered to be conceptually grounded. They evoke 'delay of cognitive processes', prolonging the state of the reader's disorientation and drawing his/her attention to the poetic texture itself (Tsur 2000: 9).

### *3.2 Techniques of syntactic foregrounding in contemporary American poetry texts*

In the course of our study it has been observed that in the texts of contemporary American poetry the removal of syntactic conventions is subordinated to the purpose of creating the view of the modern world with its distortions and anomalies. In this respect conceptual grammatical metaphors, being culturally entrenched (Johansen 2005: 262), play the role of triggers which, when activated while perceiving the syntactic constructions of the poetic text, can give the reader access to the image of the world created by the author. As a result of our research we have come up with the basic techniques of syntactic foregrounding realized in modernist and postmodernist American poetry. These are juxtaposition, compression, permutation and graphic asymmetry. Let us dwell on each of them and disclose the conventional grammatical metaphors which constitute the conceptual basis of meaning-form mapping operations.

Juxtaposition is considered to be the central technique of poetry writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It consists in situating the elements of a syntactic chain side by side, sometimes not connecting them by linking words and punctuation marks. This results in the so-called stringing of syntactic elements which at first sight seem disconnected from each other both structurally and semantically.

In the texts of contemporary American poetry syntactic constructions based on juxtaposition represent the relations between the events of the surrounding world as equivalent, devoid of hierarchy which accords with the post-modernist principle of non-selection, postulating the equivalence of all linguistic units and their independence of each other. On the syntactic level this effect is achieved due to triggering in the reader's conceptual system the grammatical metaphors SEQUENCE OF FORM IS SEQUENCE OF CONTENT and JUXTAPOSITION OF FORM IS CO-EQUALITY OF CONTENT.

Juxtaposition is an effective means of reflecting the chain of the author's associations, the continuity of thinking and the so-called wireless imagination. The following poetic abstract illustrates this technique:

- (5) Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,  
An ancient aspect touching a new mind.  
It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies  
(Stevens 1962: 284)

In the last line of example (5) the situation is conceptualized as a sequence of simple events independent of each other. It is expressed by a compound sentence whose parts are juxtaposed and connected *asyndetically*. This fragment illustrates the grammatical conceptual metaphors *SEQUENCE OF FORM IS SEQUENCE OF CONTENT* and *JUXTAPOSITION OF FORM IS CO-EQUALITY OF CONTENT*. Their activation enables the realization of a poetic meaning – the depiction of love whose evolvment can be compared to that of a flower.

The next technique wide-spread in the texts of contemporary poetry is compression. Syntactic constructions based on compression reflect the modern world as such which is overfilled with objects and events that can be enumerated but not logically connected (McHale 1987: 153). The conceptual grammatical metaphors activated while perceiving such syntactic constructions are *LESS OF FORM IS LESS OF CONTENT* and *DENSITY IS CONNECTION*.

The typical constructions of modernist and post-modernist American poetry texts formed as a result of compression are the so-called syntactic amalgams. The first place belongs to *apokoinu* constructions in which the predicative or the object of the main clause functions as the subject of the subordinate clause due to the absence of linking words as illustrated in the following examples:

- (6) I'm the she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms  
(Ransom 2008: 398)
- (7) It was Life jabbed a spoon in their mouths (Corso 1982: 260)
- (8) The waves were soldiers moving,  
Marching and marching in a tragic time  
Below me, on the asphalt, under the trees.  
It was soldiers went marching over the rocks  
And still the birds came, came in watery flocks (Stevens 1962: 288)

In (8) the absence of the conjunction between the main clause *It was soldiers* and the subordinate clause *went marching* causes the formation of the syntactic blend, in which the predicative of the main clause also functions as the subject of the subordinate clause. The meaning-form mapping is realized by means of amalgamating the conceptual relations between the above mentioned parts of the complex sentence *It was soldiers* and *(They) went marching* with the help of the implicitly given subject which is not verbally expressed in the form of the syntactic construction. As a result, explanatory relations between two conceptual structures are hidden. The absence of the linking words activates the conceptual

grammatical metaphor DENSITY IS CONNECTION. It urges the reader to unpack the fusion of the two structures impeding his/her perception of the syntactic construction.

Thus, as a technique of syntactic foregrounding compression is used to create the picture of the modern reality in which the relations between the phenomena and events of the surrounding world are hidden. The author attains this effect by way of activating such conceptual grammatical metaphors as LESS OF FORM IS LESS OF CONTENT and DENSITY IS CONNECTION.

When the conceptual content is shaped into the form of a syntactic construction of a poetic text in the order unusual for the syntactic rules of a certain language, this technique is called permutation. The conceptual grammatical metaphors embodied in this case are VIOLATION OF SEQUENCE OF FORM IS VIOLATION OF SEQUENCE OF CONTENT and DISTANCE IS VIOLATION OF CONNECTION. In the texts of modern American poetry this technique is used to mirror the state of chaos in the modern world. Let us analyse the abstract from the poetic text *Epilogue*:

(9) But sometimes everything I write  
with the threadbare art of my eye  
seems a snapshot,  
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
heightened from life,  
yet paralyzed by fact  
(Lowell 2006: 640)

The placement of the adjectives *lurid*, *rapid*, *garish*, the past participle *grouped* and participial constructions *heightened from life*, *paralyzed by fact* in post-position to the noun *snapshot* in (9) impedes our perception due to the violation of cognitive constraints imposed by the conventional grammatical metaphor SEQUENCE OF FORM IS SEQUENCE OF CONTENT. Unable to process the conceptual content immediately, the reader dwells on the attributes in post-position and, consequently, his/her attention is drawn to the poetic meaning actualized in the fragment – the artificial character of poems which like photos are only a copy of reality.

In the texts of modernist and postmodernist American poetry syntactic experiments are often accompanied by graphic ones. Such constructions are characterized by the varying length of poetic lines and enjambment (the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza). Such poetic fragments instantiate the conceptual grammatical metaphor ASYMMETRY OF FORM IS ASYMMETRY OF CONTENT and produce upon the readers the effect of asymmetry, disproportion, unbalance and disharmony. Asymmetric constructions often reflect a person's confusion and inability to restore harmony and balance in the surrounding world. The fragment below (10)

of A.R. Ammons' *Poetics* marked the breaking away of modern American poetry from the canons of traditional versification and serves as a certain manifest to free verse:

(10) I look for the forms  
things want to come as

from what black well of possibility,

how a thing will  
unfold:

Not the shape on paper – though  
that, too – but the  
uninterfering means on paper:  
(Ammons 1994: 1850)

The poetic fragment in (10) is characterized by the absence of the linking word *in which* between the main clause *I look for the forms* and the attributive *things want to come*, the violation of grammatical relations since the comparative conjunction *as* is not connected grammatically and semantically with the next part of the sentence from *what black well of possibility*. The smoothness of the syntactic texture of the poem is distorted due to the usage of enjambment which breaks the lines, underlining asymmetry and blanks between them.

#### 4. Conclusion

All things considered, in the texts of contemporary American poetry juxtaposition, compression, permutation and graphic asymmetry turn out to be effective techniques of syntactic foregrounding which create the novelty and freshness of form, making the constructions more vivid. This effect is achieved due to the metaphorical projection of content onto the form of syntactic units. The activation of conventional grammatical metaphors in the reader's conceptual system evokes the image of modern American reality as created by the author of the poetic text.

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