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Synesthetic Metaphors in William Butler Yeats' Poetry

Abstract

This paper discusses the phenomenon of synesthetic metaphors in William Butler Yeats' poetic works. The revealed synesthetic metaphors have been analysed according to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) which forms the theoretical basis of the research. In 15 randomly selected poems, 15 samples of synesthetic metaphor have been encountered. After analysing and calculating the percentage of the evidenced examples combining different perceptual categories, **visual + tactile** type has turned out to be the most frequently used combination of modalities. As the results have shown all the categories of perception are included in the discussed examples except the olfactory one.

Keywords: Synesthesia, metaphor, perceptual category.

1. The aim of this study:

In this paper I examine the phenomenon of synesthetic metaphors in William Butler Yeats' poetry. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) forms the theoretical basis of the study. The empirical data embraces the samples from 15 of Yeats' poetic works.

The aim of the investigation is to:

1. Discuss the essence of a synesthetic metaphor;
2. Reveal synesthetic metaphors in Yeats' poetic works;
3. Analyse them from the standpoint of Conceptual Metaphor Theory;
4. Calculate the percentage of the evidenced combinations of perceptual categories in order to reveal the most frequently used modalities.

2. Introduction

2.1. The definition of Synesthesia

As is known, human perception is based on five accepted senses: hearing, touching, seeing, smelling and tasting. However, the given senses are not employed by humans separately, but blendingly, synesthetically. The blending is possible by means of metaphor, hence, as Heyrman puts it: “*Metaphor is a universal translator of sensory concepts*”(Heyrman 2005). For instance, in English the following collocations are frequently used: *sweet personality, bright idea, bright future, cool and warm colours, sweet music, frozen silence, bitter cold, prickly laugh*. The above mentioned examples are samples of synesthetic metaphors. According to Leech (1969), synesthetic metaphor is one of the most frequent types of metaphor and thus it is pervasive in language across different cultures.

According to the widely accepted definition **Synesthesia** (from the ancient Greek σύν [syn], ‘together’, and αἴσθησις [aisthēsis], ‘sensation’) is a neurological phenomenon when the stimulation of one sensory modality causes a perception in one or more different sensory modalities (Cytowic, 1995). Synesthetic metaphor is a kind of metaphor that exploits a similarity between experiences in different sense modalities. Synesthetic metaphors frequently appear in people’s everyday language, but they prevail in literary works. Since our awareness of synesthesia is relatively new, synesthetic metaphors are respectively not studied thoroughly. Thus, every attempt to approach this problem scientifically can be a step forward to explore it profoundly. In this paper this phenomenon is examined using the material from William Butler Yeats’ poetry.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and analysis

There are many types of metaphors and they can be classified according to various criteria but my research is based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory, sometimes called Cognitive Metaphor Theory, was developed by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 with the publication of ‘*Metaphors We Live By*’. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the nature of metaphor is conceptual, not linguistic (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As a way of cognition, metaphors play an important role in how individuals perceive the world. The fundamental tenet of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is that metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of

another conceptual domain. These two conceptual domains are the ‘source’ domain and the ‘target’ domain. Conceptual metaphors typically employ a more abstract concept as target and a more specific or physical concept as their source. Respectively, the revealed synesthetic metaphors have been analysed in terms of the source and target domains. During the research both the qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used for analysing the data.

In Yeats’ randomly selected poems metaphors have been revealed and classified according to involvement of the perceptual categories. This study has revealed two kinds of synesthetic metaphors: synesthetic metaphors based on the synthesis of either two or three types of perception. After employing the quantitative method from the evidenced samples the most frequently used perceptual categories have been singled out.

Yeats (1865-1939) is considered one of the foremost figures of the 20th century literature. Being a Symbolist poet, he uses allusive imagery and symbolic structures. Beyond his plain words deeper thoughts are hidden. His poetry has turned out to be rather interesting in terms of synesthetic metaphors and provided valuable data for analysing synesthetic metaphors. As a result of the empirical observation of the material, which includes 15 examples of synesthetic metaphors from 15 of Yeats’ poems, the following categorical pairs were revealed in which the most frequently evidenced combination is connected with tactile and visual perceptions. The Table below shows the frequency of different perceptual categories in the evidenced examples:

4. Results

Perceptual Categories	Quantity	Percentage
1. visual + tactile	3	20%
2. temporal + visual	2	13.3%
3. abstract + tactile	2	13.3%
4. abstract + spatial	2	13.3%
5. auditory + spatial	2	13.3%
6. spatial + tactile	1	6.7%
7. gustatory + visual + tactile	1	6.7%
8. auditory + visual + tactile	1	6.7%
7. abstract + visual + tactile	1	6.7%

5. Discussion and analysis:

The following models of synesthetic metaphors have been singled out:

I. LOOKING IS TOUCHING:

Visual + tactile:

According to the poet, looking can be soft:

”When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the **soft look**.
Your eyes had once.”

(“When You Are Old”)

To the poet’s perception afternoon has the colour of purple and midnight is a glimmer.

II. PERIOD OF A DAY IS A COLOUR:

Temporal + visual (2):

“There **midnight**'s all a **glimmer**, and **noon a purple glow**
And evening full of the linnet's wings.”
(“The Lake Isle of Innisfree”)

In the following passage fullness is presented by the poet as a form of liquid, which flows into the mind.

III. FULLNESS IS A LIQUID:

Visual + tactile:

“Such **fullness** in that quarter **overflows**
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind.”

("A Dialogue of Self and Soul")

IV. SWEETNESS IS A LIQUID:

Yeats represents the taste of sweetness as a liquid, which flows into the breast:

Gustatory + visual + tactile:

"When such as I cast out remorse
So great a **sweetness flows into the breast**
We must laugh and we must sing."
("A Dialogue of Self and Soul")

In the author's imagination, dreams are things that can be touched, in the present case they can be trodden on softly:

V. DREAM IS A TOUCHABLE THING:

Abstract + tactile:

"I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you **tread on my dreams.**"
("He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven")

In the discovered and studied poetic samples from Yeats' poetry we met a rather unusual perception of music-the poet presents it as a sharp thing which can even wound a person:

VI. MUSIC IS A TOUCHABLE THING:

Auditory + visual + tactile:

“No matter what disaster occurred
She stood in desperate **music wound**,
Wound, wound, and she made in her triumph.”
 (“A Crazy Girl”)

As the poet perceives, darkness is a touchable thing, which means that it is represented in combination with visual and tactile perceptual categories. The poetic expression of the concept of sleep is also noteworthy: Yeats represents it with a tactile perceptual category and describes it as a stonelike thing:

VII.DARKNESS IS A TOUCHABLE THING:

a) visual + tactile:

VIII.SLEEP IS A TOUCHABLE THING:

b) abstract + tactile:

“**The darkness drops** again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of **stony sleep**
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.”
 (“The Second Coming”)

Another case has also been revealed where the concept of sleeping is synesthetically represented with the dimension of height.

IX.SLEEP IS HEIGHT:

Abstract + spatial

“When I clamber to the **heights of sleep**,
Or when I grow excited with wine,
Suddenly I meet your face.”
 (“A Deep-Sworn Vow”)

To the poet’s perception vow can have a spatial dimension, namely – depth. Probably the vow sworn from the depth of the heart is implied in the “deep-sworn vow”.

X.VOW IS A DEPTH:

Auditory + spatial:

“Others because you did not keep
That **deep-sworn vow** have been friends of mine.”
(“A deep-Sworn Vow”)

In the following stanza the poet describes the low sounds of the lake which he hears in the deep heart’s core. The low sound refers to the fact that people divide sounds into high and low pitch sounds:

1)auditory + spatial:

2)spatial + tactile:

“I hear lake water lapping with **low sounds** by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the **deep heart's core.**”
(“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”)

The concept of love is not an exception for the poet, he interprets it also very differently. In his opinion love has a shape and is crooked, uneven:

XI.LOVE IS A SHAPE:

Abstract + visual + tactile:

“O **love** is the **crooked thing**,
There is nobody wise enough
To find out all that is in it.”
(“Brown Penny”)

6. Conclusions

As has been revealed, synesthetic metaphors, though not very numerous in Yeats’ poetry, are rather productive comprising two, sometimes three, various perceptual categories and contribute to the

enlivening and enriching of the language. As we have seen in the examples above, synesthetic metaphors help us to look at things from several different perceptual dimensions. The examined metaphors are singled out for being rather creative, characterising the poet's individual metaphorical perception.

After analysing and calculating the percentage of the evidenced examples combining different perceptual categories in 15 of Yeats' poetic works, 15 examples of synesthetic metaphor were encountered; the most frequently evidenced combination being **visual + tactile**(20%). As the results have shown, all the categories of perception are included in the discussed samples of synesthetic metaphors except the olfactory one. In the literary works by Yeats not only two-componential but also three-componential synesthetic metaphors have been evidenced from which the majority are combinations of two perceptual categories.

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Internet Resources for:

1. Information about Yeats: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._B._Yeats
2. Definition of synesthesia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synesthesia>
3. Definition of synesthetic metaphors: [http://www.thefreedictionary.com/synesthetic+metaphor](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/synesthetic+metaphor;);
4. <http://www.fgcnp.org/uhc/linguistics/synesthetic-metaphor>

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Author's biographical data

Rusudan Japaridze was born on 21 February, 1986. She has BA, MA and PhD from Tbilisi State University. Rusudan teaches English at TSU and her research interests include the theory of metaphor, pragmatics and stylistics.