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An analysis of figurative language in the interpretation of contemporary English poetry

This article examines the various facets of figurative language. This study considers figurative language from a traditional perspective as an embellishment of language and compares it with contemporary theory in literature especially in poetry. The main material for the analysis of figurative language in poetry is poetic texts of contemporary American poets like William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein. We selected 15 poems that contain a lot of figurative expressions and analyzed them namely “The Red Wheelbarrow”, “This Is Just to Say”, “To a Poor Old Woman”, “The Road Not Taken”, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “Fire and Ice”, “Mending Wall”, etc. The authors conducted an evaluation of the use of metaphors, hyperboles, idioms, and similes. The most used figurative language in all the analyzed poems is metaphor. It occurred in all 15 poems. Figurative language adds an element of beauty and artistry to poetry. Metaphors, similes, and other figurative expressions infuse the language with color, imagery, and creative aesthetics that captivate the reader's senses.

Keywords: poetry, poems, figurative language, metaphor, interpretation.

Introduction

Figurative language in poetry is a way of conveying ideas, feelings, and impressions through the use of images, metaphors, allegories, and other literary devices. Imagery in poetry is created using vivid, creative, and meaningful words and expressions to evoke emotions and associations in the readers or listeners. Images can be abstract or concrete, their purpose is to enliven the text and make it more expressive. Figurative language in poetry gives the text depth and emotional richness, allowing the poet to express his thoughts and feelings more vividly and artistically. Each poetic image can have many interpretations, which makes poetry a rich and interesting art form.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about figurative language in his work *Poetics*, where he emphasizes the importance of imagery (metaphors, similes, etc.) in poetry as a means of giving poetry expressiveness and artistic quality. He believes that images and metaphors help the reader or listener to better understand and perceive the text, as they create associations and emotional reactions. Additionally, Max Black, a 20th-century philosopher, metaphors can influence our thinking and perception, creating new associations and deepening understanding. One of the key aspects of Max Black's work was the introduction of the concept of “metaphorical transfer”. This means that metaphors transfer meanings and associations from one context to another, helping us understand and describe something new through analogies with something familiar. For example, the metaphor “time is money” transfers associations with the idea of the value of time to the understanding of money. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, explored the ambiguous use of metaphors in everyday language and argued that metaphorical thinking is fundamental to human cognition [1; 37].

The traditional understanding of figurative language includes the use of literary and stylistic devices, such as metaphors, similes, allegories, and other figurative expressive means, in order to enhance the emotional impact of the text and make it more vivid and expressive. Figurative language can be used in literary works, poetry, speech, and journalistic texts. This involves studying and understanding how language goes beyond its literal, straightforward meaning to convey deeper layers of meaning, imagery, and emotion.

Modern linguistic theory is an excellent example of using metaphor as a figurative language to change theory. In the last century, two main theoretical schools in linguistics have appeared. The first was created by Leonard Bloomfield, who was an influential linguist and one of the founders of structuralism in linguistics. In his book “*Language*”, he proposed a new way of analyzing and understanding language with his empirical

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view of language that differed from traditional approaches [2; 20]. The second school of linguistic analysis appeared in the works of Noam Chomsky. His works on intellectual grammar and syntax theory, especially “Syntactic Structures” (1957) and “Aspects of the Theory of Syntax” (1965), redefined the field of syntax and influenced the modern understanding of language. Noam Chomsky's ideas about syntactic structure and generative grammar greatly influenced the development of linguistics and cognitive science. His work has helped to understand how the human brain processes language and how different language structures are built.

Alexandra Pisis (2014), argues that poetics is usually defined in terms of its literary text, which means that poetics is often viewed and analyzed in the literary arts and traditions. This approach assumes that poetics is primarily concerned with language, verbal arts, and literature and that it is evaluated and interpreted through the lens of literary devices and styles [3; 5].

The term “poetics” refers to the study and analysis of the art of poetry, including verse structure, meter, rhyme, imagery, symbolism, and other literary elements. This approach to poetics involves analyzing poetic texts and attempting to understand how poets use language to express their ideas and emotions.

However, in the modern world, the understanding of poetics is expanding and includes not only literary aspects but also other forms of art and culture, such as cinema, visual arts, music, and even media. In this broader context, poetics is seen as a way to express creativity and emotion through various artificial means. Thus, while literary basis remains an important part of poetics, there is a broader understanding of the concept that includes various arts and cultural expressions.

Studying figurative language in poems serves several important aims, both for readers and for those aspiring to become poets or scholars of literature. First, understanding figurative language allows readers to appreciate and enjoy poetry at a deeper level. It helps readers uncover the layers of meaning, symbolism, and creativity in poems, leading to a more profound and enjoyable reading experience. Second, by studying figurative language, readers can interpret poems more effectively. They can uncover the hidden messages, emotions, and themes within a poem, making it easier to connect with the poet's intentions and the poem's central message.

Theoretical Framework

Poetry expresses the ideas and feelings of the poet by considering diction, figurative language, rhyme, rhythm, and other elements. Poets often use language as a powerful medium to express their thoughts and feelings. Through carefully chosen words, phrases, and literary devices, they convey their emotions, experiences, and ideas in a way that resonates deeply with readers.

According to Perrine, in “Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry”, figurative language is a fundamental concept discussed within the context of poetry analysis. Figurative language contributes to the depth and richness of poetic expression [4; 6].

Figurative language, according to M.H. Abrams, encompasses a variety of literary devices and techniques used by authors to create meaning and impact in their works. Figurative language relies on non-literal and imaginative expressions to convey ideas, emotions, and images [5; 96].

The most well-known and now traditional view of how listeners understand non-literal meaning comes from the theory of colloquial implicature H. Paul Grice [6; 41], which is often called the “standard pragmatic” view. Grice proposed a set of conversational maxims that guide the way people communicate. These maxims include the maxim of quantity (providing the right amount of information), the maxim of quality (speaking truthfully), the maxim of relation (making relevant comments), and the maxim of manner (being clear and avoiding ambiguity). Grice introduced the concept of conversational implicature, which occurs when people communicate meaning indirectly by violating or flouting one of the conversational maxims. This can be used for rhetorical effect or to convey a deeper meaning.

Colston Herbert L. is focused on aligning accounts of language production, use, comprehension, and structure with current understandings of various aspects of human and animal functioning. This includes not only cognitive aspects but other dimensions like social, emotional, etc. Additionally, the approach appears to consider the various layers of language and their nature [7; 15]. This interdisciplinary approach to language and its use, particularly in the context of figurative and indirect language, is in line with contemporary linguistic research. Understanding language in a holistic way, considering its cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational aspects, can provide a more comprehensive view of how language operates and evolves.

Material and research methods

Figurative language in poetry plays a vital role in creating an emotional and aesthetic impact on the reader. The analysis of figurative language in poetry includes an analysis of the structure, functions, and impact of figurative expressions, such as metaphors, comparisons, metonymies, etc. The researchers also consider the symbolic meaning of figurative expressions and their role in conveying the theme, mood, and meaning of the poem.

The purpose of this study is to identify some figurative languages by understanding the general meaning when they are used in poems. The method of descriptive analysis suggested analyzing the data by reading them and then identifying the figurative language used in the poems. Having identified some figurative languages, the researcher divided them into several types of figurative languages. Then the researcher analyzed the general meaning of the figurative language, revealing the contextual meaning of fifteen selected poems.

The main material for the analysis of figurative language in poetry is the poetic texts of contemporary American poets like William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein. We selected 15 poems that contain a lot of figurative expressions and analyzed them namely “The Red Wheelbarrow”, “This Is Just to Say”, “To a Poor Old Woman”, “The Road Not Taken”, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “Fire and Ice”, “Mending Wall”, etc.

Results and discussion

Forms of figurative language

In this research we study metaphor, hyperbole, simile, and idiom. The poems in that study were contemporary American poems. Table shows the frequencies of figurative language appearance in these analyzed poems.

T a b l e

How often the figurative language occurs in poetry

Type	Definitions and examples	Percent
Metaphor	Implicit comparison “Nothing gold and stay”	21%
Hyperbole	Deliberate exaggeration “I called you a million times”	13%
Idiom	Conventionalized nonliteral expression “Good fences make good neighbors”	8%
Simile	Explicit comparison “Life is too much like a pathless wood”	5%

Metaphor

Metaphor is a strong poetic device used to create bright and imaginative comparisons between two seemingly unrelated things. It involves describing one thing as if it was something else to create a deeper meaning or a more memorable image. Metaphors can add depth, emotion and symbolism to poetry, allowing poets to convey complex ideas and emotions in a concise and creative way.

Gibbs argues that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but are deeply intertwined with our conceptual systems. He emphasizes the idea that metaphor is not limited to poetic or figurative language but is an important part of everyday communication. Some of his key contributions include:

Conceptual Metaphor Theory: Gibbs, along with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, developed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This theory posits that metaphors are not merely decorative language but are fundamental to how we think and understand the world. For example, the “argument is war” metaphor shapes our understanding of argumentative discourse.

Embodied Cognition: Gibbs also explores the embodied nature of metaphorical thought, suggesting that our bodily experiences and interactions with the physical world play a crucial role in the formation of metaphors. For example, the metaphor “happy is up” reflects the connection between positive emotions and an upward spatial orientation.

Here are examples of metaphors in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein:

In Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow", the red wheelbarrow itself can be seen as a metaphor for life's simplicity and beauty. The wheelbarrow, so ordinary and unadorned, represents the idea that beauty can be in the everyday and the mundane.

*"so much depends upon
a red wheel barrow
glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens [8; 63]."*

In "Spring and All", Williams uses the metaphor of a "new moon" to describe the beginning of spring. The new moon represents the fresh start and renewal associated with the change of seasons.

*"All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines
Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches [8; 67]."*

In Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken", the two diverging paths in the woods serve as a metaphor for life's choices and the consequences they entail. The fork in the road symbolizes the decisions we make and how they shape our future.

*"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth [9; 38]."*

In "Fire and Ice", Frost uses the metaphors of fire and ice to represent desire and hatred as destructive forces. These elements symbolize the extremes of human emotions and their potential for harm.

*"Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice [9; 41]."*

Charles Bernstein is known for his experimental and often abstract poetry, which may not always feature traditional metaphors. However, his work often employs language in a way that challenges conventional meaning and invites readers to consider language itself as a metaphor. In poems like "Blind Witness", his innovative use of words and syntax can be seen as a metaphor for the limitations and potential of communication.

*"Not that speech
wishes to be the world
nor that the mouth
wants to be the word
but that the muscles
can't help but want
what the world wants
to make its own contact [10]."*

Bernstein's poetry often involves a play with language that pushes the boundaries of traditional metaphors, inviting readers to engage with the text in a more abstract and self-reflective way.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a poetic device that involves intentional exaggeration for emphasis or effect. Poets use hyperbole to create vivid and memorable imagery, to convey strong emotions, and to make a point more forcefully.

William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost are known for their distinct styles; they have both employed hyperbole in their poems to convey powerful messages or create vivid imagery.

In Williams' poem "*This Is Just To Say*", he uses hyperbole to emphasize the sweetness and temptation of the plums he confesses to having eaten:

*"I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold [8; 32]"*

The overstated illustration of the plums as "so sweet and so cold" adds a layer of sensuality and desire to the poem.

In Frost's poem "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*", there's a subtle use of hyperbole in the repeated line "And miles to go before I sleep". While the line may not seem hyperbolic on its own, its repetition at the end of the poem emphasizes the speaker's sense of the journey's length and the obligations that await:

*"The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep [9; 24]"*

By repeating the line, Frost amplifies the speaker's feeling of the journey's enormity.

Idiom

Idioms are expressions or phrases that have figurative meanings beyond their literal definitions. They are often used in everyday language to convey ideas or emotions in a concise and culturally specific way. While idioms are more commonly found in prose and everyday speech, they can also be used in poetry to add depth, create imagery, and connect with readers on a cultural or emotional level.

Idioms in William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein's poems may not be as prevalent in their work as in some other forms of literature. However, they each have their unique ways of using language, which may include elements of idiomatic expression.

In "*This Is Just To Say*", Williams employs a conversational tone that can be reminiscent of everyday language. While not using idioms directly, he captures the essence of personal communication. The poem's simplicity and directness reflect the kind of language one might use in a note or conversation.

Frost's poetry often features rural and colloquial language, which may include idiomatic expressions. In "*Mending Wall*", the phrase "*Good fences make good neighbors*" is repeated and becomes a kind of idiom within the poem, reflecting a common saying:

"Good fences make good neighbors"

Frost explores the meaning and implications of this idiom throughout the poem.

Charles Bernstein is known for his experimental and linguistic play in his poetry. While he may not use idioms in the traditional sense, he often uses language in unconventional ways to challenge meaning and create unique expressions. In "*All the Whiskey in Heaven*", for example, he explores the deconstruction of language:

"All the whiskey in heaven ain't goin' to ease your pain"

While not employing idioms directly, Bernstein's work can involve a complex interplay of language that challenges conventional meaning and expression.

It's important to note that these poets often subvert traditional language conventions and may not use idioms in the same straightforward manner as they appear in everyday speech. Instead, they engage with language in innovative and sometimes abstract ways to create unique poetic effects.

Simile

A simile is a poetic device that compares two different things using “like” or “as” to create a vivid and imaginative connection between them. Similes are used in poetry to make descriptions more evocative, to draw interesting parallels, and to help readers visualize or understand something more clearly.

William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein have different styles of poetry, and while similes may not be as prevalent in Bernstein's experimental and abstract work, they can still be found in some of their poems. Here are examples of similes from poets:

In Frost's poem “The Road Not Taken”, there is an implicit simile comparing the two diverging paths in the woods to life choices. While he doesn't use “like” or “as”, the poem metaphorically likens the choices to forks in the road, inviting readers to make the comparison:

*“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both... [9; 38]”.*

The roads symbolize life choices, and their divergence can be seen as a simile for the different paths we take in life.

In “Birches”, Frost uses a simile to describe the bent birch trees:

*“When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them [9; 26]”.*

The comparison of the birch trees bending to the left and right “like” a boy swinging them creates a vivid image of the trees' flexibility.

Charles Bernstein's poetry often challenges conventional language and meaning, but he occasionally uses similes in his work. In “All the Whiskey in Heaven”, he writes:

*“From a red mouth
of bad dogs
or a wet bear
in the green of 1st rain
from the bottom of the sea
after the spring tides [10]”.*

While Bernstein's work is more known for its linguistic experimentation, the comparison of a mouth “like” that of bad dogs or a bear adds a layer of vividness to the imagery.

Bernstein's use of language is often unconventional and abstract, so similes in his work might not be as straightforward or easily recognizable as those in Frost's more traditional poems. Nonetheless, similes can be used by poets of various styles to create comparisons that enrich the reader's experience and understanding of the text.

William Carlos Williams, known for his modernist and imagist poetry, often used vivid and concise language to create striking images. While he didn't rely heavily on traditional similes, his work is characterized by its precision and ability to convey a clear and tangible sense of the subject matter. Williams' poetry often relies on such concrete and precise descriptions to capture the essence of a moment or an object, which is a hallmark of his modernist style. While he may not use similes in the conventional sense, his poems are filled with imagery and comparisons that engage the reader's senses and imagination.

Conclusion

The types of figurative language studied in the poetry of William Carlos, Robert Frost, and Charles Bernstein are metaphor, hyperbole, idiom, and simile. The most used figurative language in all the analyzed poems is metaphor. It occurred in all 15 poems. The Figurative language in poems serves several important functions, enhancing the depth and richness of the poetry and creating a more vivid and imaginative experience for the reader. The primary function of figurative language in poems is to create imagery. Figurative language, such as metaphors, hyperbolas, idioms, and similes helps poets paint vivid and evocative pictures in the reader's mind. It engages the reader's senses and allows them to visualize the scenes, characters, and emotions described in the poem.

The modern perception of poems by young people can vary widely depending on individual preferences, exposure to poetry, and cultural influences. Many young people encounter poetry as part of their academic curriculum. This exposure can shape their perception of poetry and its relevance to their educational and personal growth. In general, modern poetry's appeal to young people is characterized by its diversity, accessibility, and relevance to contemporary issues. It has evolved to meet the changing preferences and needs of the younger generation, making poetry a vibrant and dynamic form of expression in the digital age. We hope this research gives some understanding of figurative language in poems. Of course, the research does not end there, but young researchers of figurative language still continue to search for the correct interpretation of the features of figurative language. The poetry of these poets may be one of the poems used to study the introduction of figurative language in universities for students studying the language.

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С.С. Әубәкір, А.К. Китибаева, Ж.Т. Оспанова

Заманауи ағылшын поэзиясын түсіндірудегі бейнелі тілді талдау

Мақалада бейнелі тілдің әртүрлі қырлары қарастырылған. Бұл зерттеуде бейнелі тіл дәстүрлі тұрғыдан тілдің көркі ретінде зерттелген және әдебиеттегі, әсіресе поэзиядағы қазіргі жаңа теориялармен салыстырылған. Поэзиядағы бейнелі тілді зерттеудің негізгі материалы William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost және Charles Bernstein сияқты қазіргі американдық ақындардың поэтикалық мәтіндері болып табылады. Біз бейнелі сөздері көп 15 өлеңді таңдап алып, оларды талдадық. Атап айтқанда: «The Red Wheelbarrow», «This Is Just to Say», «To a Poor Old Woman», «The Road Not Taken», «Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening», «Fire and Ice», «Mending Wall» т.б. Авторлар осы өлеңдерде метафора, гипербола, идиома, теңеу қолданысына баға берген. Бұл ақындар шығармашылығында ең басым бейнелі тіл — метафора. Поэзиядағы бейнелі тіл өлеңге мән беріп, көркемдік береді. Бұл адамдарға бір нәрсені білдіруге, сипаттауға, адамдарға бір нәрсеге сілтеме жасауды жеңілдетуге, шабыт пен мотивация беруге көмектеседі.

Кілт сөздер: поэзия, поэма, бейнелі тіл, метафора, интерпретация.

С.С. Аубакир, А.К. Китибаева, Ж.Т. Оспанова

Анализ образного языка в интерпретации современной английской поэзии

В статье рассмотрены различные аспекты образного (фигуративного) языка. Здесь язык изучен с традиционной точки зрения как украшение языка и сравнен с современной теорией в литературе, особенно в поэзии. Основным материалом изучения образного языка в поэзии являются поэтические тексты современных американских поэтов, таких как Уильям Карлос Уильямс, Роберт Фрост и Чарльз Бернштейн. Мы выбрали 15 стихотворений, содержащих много образных выражений, и проанализировали их, а именно: «The Red Wheelbarrow», «This Is Just to Say», «To a Poor Old Woman», «The Road Not Taken», «Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening», «Fire and Ice», «Mending Wall» и другие. Авторы провели оценку использования метафор, гипербол, идиом и сравнений. Преобладающим образным

оборотом в творчестве этих поэтов является метафора. Образный язык в поэзии придает стихотворению смысл и красоту. Это помогает людям выразить описание чего-либо, облегчить людям ссылку на что-то, а также дает вдохновение и мотивацию.

Ключевые слова: поэзия, стихи, образный (фигуративный) язык, метафора, интерпретация, идиомы, сравнения.

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