

Analysis of Metaphors in John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*

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Abstract

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning is one of the masterpieces of the metaphysical poet, John Donne. The poem was written when the poet was sent to France on business and had to be separated from his wife, who was about to give birth. The poem uses a lot of metaphors to describe the pure love between the poet and his wife, and explains that distance can separate them. Influenced by the environment of the time, Donne used metaphors in his poems involving astrology, refining technology, and geometry. Donne used these seemingly unrelated elements of love to describe the feelings between his wife and himself, which formed his own unique style, and his love poems have been widely praised by later generations. This thesis uses the mapping theory in cognitive linguistics to further analyze the main metaphors mentioned in the poem, in order to make readers have a clearer and deeper understanding of metaphors and the poem.

Keywords

John Donne, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, the mapping theory.

1. Introduction

The metaphors of the universe and science used by John Donne in this poem has something to do with the background of the times. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans were enthusiastic about the exploration of science, especially astronomy and navigation. In 1513, Copernicus proposed the heliocentric theory. From the year 1609 to 1610, Galileo used a handmade telescope to observe celestial bodies, providing relevant evidence for Copernicus' heliocentric theory. In 1610, the Englishman Hudson sailed to what is now called Hudson Bay. During his travels across Europe, John Donne met such scientists and learned something about science, astronomy in particular, which contributed to his literary ambition and unique style in writing poems.

John Donne (1572-1631), one of the representatives of the metaphysical poets, was a writer and philosopher. Containing philosophy, his poems are sincere and warm, and his thoughts are novel and unique, which give people artistic enjoyment. Donne was famous for his metaphysical conceit, which is in fact, a special kind of metaphor in cognitive linguistics field. Conceit refers to a novel and strange idea or concept for two seemingly unrelated things to create a surprising or surprising effect[1].

John Donne was born in a wealthy Catholic family and received an orthodox Catholic education in his early years. In 1601, Donne secretly married Anne More, who was only seventeen years old at that time. Their marriage was known for its fidelity. In the winter of 1611, Donne went on a diplomatic mission to France. Before he left, he wrote a poem called *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* for his wife Anne. The poem, like Donne's other love poems, is not about beauty and tenderness, but about reason and argument. Donne also went against the tradition of taking metaphors from natural scenes, instead, he excavated images from the new knowledge of that time, such as astronomy, geography, medicine and mathematics, which can be shown in the metaphors like gold and compass.

As for the research question, this thesis aims to analyze the main metaphors used in John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* by using a linguistic theory called mapping theory. By analyzing them from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this thesis hopes that readers will have a clearer understanding of the metaphors used in this poem and better insight of the love between couples.

2. Literature Review

This section firstly reviews the definition of metaphor and the mapping theory. The second section of this section explores works related to this thesis.

2.1. Theoretical bases

The theoretical bases of this research are definitions of metaphor and the mapping theory. Although there are plenty of scholars who have defined the meaning of metaphor, the present study of this thesis is based on Lakoff and Johnson's definition of metaphor and their interpretation of the mapping theory. Metaphor is not only a kind of rhetorical device, but also a research subject of cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, they argue that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 4), and they illustrate that "the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system" [2]. After 12 years, Lakoff further elaborates the nature of metaphor, he comments that metaphor is the major mechanism by which people understand abstract concepts and reason of these concepts, and metaphor makes us get the meaning of a comparatively abstract or unstructured subject matter from the aspect of a more concrete, or a more highly-structured subject matter[3].

Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson actually have mentioned the mapping theory through the study of conceptual metaphor for the first time, and they describe the mapping theory in the following way[2]. Two domains exist in the same metaphor: the first is called the target domain, which consists of the immediate subject matters, and another one is called the source domain, where significant metaphorical reasoning occurs, and the source domain provides the source concepts which are used in that reasoning process. In a source domain, metaphorical language embodies literal meaning. Additionally, a metaphoric mapping is multiple, that is to say, two or more elements are mapped into two or more other elements. Lakoff illustrated the mapping theory in detail in his thesis, and he said that each mapping was a fixed pattern of conceptual correspondences across different conceptual domains[3]. If it was activated, a mapping might apply to a new source domain knowledge structure and feature a corresponding target domain knowledge structure.

2.2. Previous researches

As one of the prestigious poems of John Donne, various scholars have done researches on *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. Meanwhile, metaphor has always been a heated topic in the study of cognitive linguistics. The following sector is a brief review of the research status and achievements of these topics from different aspects.

To commence with, a lot of scholars studied the metaphors and rhythm in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. Wu and Huang make an analysis about the conceits in the poem, and they point out that the compass metaphor is the most predominant one in this poem, and Donne uses a kind of rebellious writing style in this poem[4]. Hu and Wang did a research on both the metaphors and rhythms of *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, and they firstly analyze the rhythm of the poem, its stanza form and so on. Then they also analyze the conceits in the poem by pointing out that the conceits were metaphors which seem unreasonable but actually have

profound meanings[5]. Zhang also makes a research on the conceits of A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, and he comments on the three major metaphors in the poem from three aspects, namely love surpassing life and death, love is stronger than gold, as well as love is a compass[6].

In addition, besides metaphors and rhythm, there were some scholars showing interest in the study of images. Hu analyzes the influence of John Donne's life experience on his poem A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, and she combined the findings with the images in the poem. She finds out that the images like "moving of th' earth", "trepidation of the spheres", "gold" and "compasses" are related to the poet's experience and Donne's insight about astronomy and science[7]. Zhang also investigates the images in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, and notices that a lot of images which symbolized pure love are used by Donne. The famous image, compasses, symbolizes the fidelity between the poet and his lover[8]. Meanwhile, Donne uses concrete object to show his abstract ideas, which is a kind of innovative idea at his time.

Last but not least, researches also studied other rhetorical devices used in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. Li made an analysis on the rhetorical devices in the poem. Instead of focusing on the major rhetorical device, metaphor, Li studies the analogy and paradox used in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning[9]. The researcher interprets the poem from a different angle, that is, to show that the poem is the combination of the poet's physical love and spiritual love.

From the above-mentioned previous studies, we can see that the present researches are mainly focus on the analysis of metaphors, rhythms, images and other rhetorical devices on the basis of literary theories. Nevertheless, there are few researches analyzing A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning by using linguistic theories. Therefore, the research of this thesis is innovative and worth doing.

3. The Analysis of Metaphors in The Poem

This section mainly analyzes the major three metaphors (metaphor of movement, metaphor of gold and metaphor of compass) used in the poem A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning by using Lakoff and Johnson's mapping theory, aiming to make readers get clearer understanding of the metaphors.

3.1. Metaphors of movement

"Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears/Men reckon what it did, and meant/But trepidation of the spheres/Though greater far, is innocent." In the third stanza, the poet used two metaphors to describe different kinds of love: moving of the earth and trepidation of the spheres.

Firstly, Donne uses the metaphor: departure between dull sublunary lovers is moving of the earth. The mapping process of this metaphor is shown in table 1.

Table 1. The mapping process of earthquake metaphor

source domain	mapping process	target domain
moving of the earth	→	departure of dull sublunary lovers
earthquake's huge influence	→	the intense and painful feeling between dull sublunary lovers

From the mapping process, we can see that in Donne's opinion, the moving of the earth refers to earthquake, which usually intense and destructive. He thinks that the earthly love is the same as earthquake, because when dull sublunary lovers are forced to separated from each other,

they tend to feel a kind of sharp pain. Their love is based on physical pleasure, and the separation usually means a huge and destructive change of emotion between lovers.

However, Donne uses another metaphor to describe the departure between his wife and himself, that is their departure is trepidation of the spheres. And the mapping process is shown in table 2.

Table 2. The mapping process of spheres' trepidation metaphor

source domain	mapping process	target domain
trepidation of the spheres	→	departure of Donne and his wife
little influence of trepidation	→	slight change of emotion

When describing the departure of his wife and himself, Donne shows it in a milder way. According to the mapping process, it can be extrapolated that trepidation of spheres has little influence. Trepidation of spheres is the earth's movement in the deep part instead of on the surface. It is more violent than an earthquake, but it has no effect on the living things on the surface of the earth. Just like the separation of true lovers, although they feel sad about the departure, they still believe that the departure will make no difference on their relationship, thus they remain innocent and calm.

3.2. Metaphor of gold

"But we by a love, so much refined/That our selves know not what it is/Inter-assured of the mind/Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss." In the fourth stanza, the word "refined" used indicates that the process of pursuing pure love is like refinery of gold.

"Our two souls therefore, which are one/Though I must go, endure not yet/A breach, but an expansion/Like gold to airy thinness beat." In the sixth stanza, Donne uses the metaphor: their love is gold. The mapping process of this metaphor is as following table 3.

Table 3. The mapping process of gold metaphor

source domain	mapping process	target domain
gold	→	the pure love between Donne and his wife
refinery of gold	→	the process of pursuing pure love
expansion of gold	→	departure

John Donne uses the metaphor of refinery here to suggest that their love is different from the worldly love: just like the alchemists extract pure gold from the dirty soil, his wife and himself purify pure love from physical love. Then, John Donne uses the metaphor of gold here, comparing the love between his wife and himself to gold. Therefore, the short separation for them is actually the expansion of love. This piece of transparent and flawless gold thinness beat symbolizes the sincere and pure spiritual love between them. Donne believes that their love can stretch like gold, which will not be broken in the process of separation, and will not be altered by time or place.

3.3. Metaphor of compass

“If they be two, they are two so/As stiff twin compasses are two/Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show/To move, but doth, if th’ other do”, “And though it in the centre sit/Yet, when the other far doth roam/It leans, and hearkens after it/And grows erect, as that comes home.”, “Such wilt thou be to me, who must/Like th’ other foot, obliquely run/Thy firmness makes my circle just/And makes me end where I begun.” The most famous metaphor is encompassed in the last three stanzas, that is, the compass metaphor. And the mapping process of compass is shown in table 4.

Table 4. The mapping process of compass metaphor

source domain	mapping process	target domain
setting foot	→	The soul of Donne’s wife
rotating foot	→	Donne’s soul
center	→	their home
circle	→	the perfect love between Donne and his wife

Here, John Donne uses the metaphor of a compass, comparing the feet of the compass to a husband on a trip and a wife at home. The woman is the setting foot, which is fixed in the center while the man is the rotating, always circling around the center. John Donne, who is the rotating foot, has to leave his wife for a short period of time when she is in need. In order to comfort her, Donne compares himself to the rotating foot of a compass, which will always center around the rotating foot. And finally, as long as they are steady enough, the compass will draw a perfect circle, which symbolizes their perfect love.

This is a wonderful metaphor for the ever-lasting love between a husband and his wife. The compass is a geometric tool made of metal material, which is cold and hard. It is hard for poets to associate it with love. However, Donne received the scientific theories like astronomy knowledge, which contributed to his innovative metaphors in this poem.

4. Conclusion

This thesis analyzes the major metaphors used in John Donne’s A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning by using Lakoff and Johnson’s mapping theory. By analyzing them through making tables, the elements related to metaphors are clearer. Meanwhile, we can sense the pure love between Donne and his wife, which worth remembering.

Nevertheless, this thesis just makes a preliminary analysis, in-depth researches depend on our joint efforts. It is believed that more and more modern readers will appreciate Donne’s poetic wisdom combined with his passion in literature and poetry. With his unique charm, John Donne’s poetry has become a beautiful scene in English literature, and his profound influence on later generations is humongous.

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