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Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

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Abstract

This research article highlights the semantic and syntactic deviations in the metaphors used by Larkin in his poetry. Larkin's metaphors are rich in meaning and they convey

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

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Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

340

implicit meanings in addition to the apparent simple thought. The purpose of this article is to study the metaphors in relation to cognitive stylistics. The prototypical concepts of old age, death and loneliness are presented deviant and in an extraordinary manner. The study of these metaphors clearly shows the method for manipulating deviant meanings from text. The implicit meanings are traced by applying the model of Short (1997). This study is mainly concerned with semantico-syntactic deviations. It manifests that deviant concepts are yoked together with the help of unconventional collocates and colligates. In spite of the analogy, the group of words used in the metaphors possesses similar cognitive value which provides justification for their grouping.

Short (1997) in ‘Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose’ comments that literary criticism is based on an active and the most important ‘core’ and a less active ‘periphery’. The basic core has three constituents which are as follow:

Description → Interpretation → Evaluation

Although, there is a strong relationship between literary criticism and stylistics and at times both overlap each other. However they differ in degree of textual evidence used to support their point. The stylistic analysis is much more detailed, systematic and in depth.

Deviation as a Stylistic Device

Stylistic device of foregrounding, deviation and parallelism affects the readers on psychological levels. Deviation can be achieved through inversion that is disturbing the normal order or structure of a sentence. The traditions and norms are not followed which gives a sense of newness. In parallelism and repetition the importance and force of the linguistic expression is emphasized. Parallel structures are noticed for having a connection and link. This connection may go unnoticed in the absence of this technique. Ellipses and parallel structures add to the functional aspects of text interpretations and analysis.

Deviation is employed in a number of ways. For instance, semantico-syntactic deviations explain the relationship between the two domains – namely source and target, this relationship may be based on similarities or differences. There are different kinds of deviations which are given by Short (1997).

1. Phonological and graphological deviations
2. Morphological deviation
3. Lexical deviation
4. Grammatical deviation
5. Semantic deviation
6. Discoursal deviation
7. Internal and external deviation

All the above discussed deviations foreground a text. This foregrounding consequently helps to convey the implied meanings and the final result is the realization of the text on cognitive level. The use of deviations is very frequent in metaphorical language and therefore it is studied in detail to analyse the metaphors of Larkin.

Conceptual Metaphors

As discussed earlier that our worlds are represented by the use of metaphorical language, abstract concepts are also conceptualized with the help of metaphors.

Conceptual metaphors are not examples of a use of language in text but an instance of how we conceptualize or grasp an abstract topic (Holme, 2004, p. 11)

So we can generate a link between the idea that is mentally grasped and the metaphor which represents it. This process of conceptualization of reality through metaphors involves instincts and intuitions. Conceptual metaphors provide a chance to understand the working of human mind.

Holme (2004) in his book 'Mind, metaphor and language teaching' discusses that metaphors help to find out the use of language for the expression of feelings and ideas.

The semantico-syntactic deviations make a piece of literature novel and strange. This deviation can be traced in the metaphors of Larkin and gives rise to new semantic fields. The semantic deviation appears to be non-sense at the surface level but at a deeper level there is the transformation of 'non-sense' to 'sense' on some literary grounds. In our everyday communication the norm and tradition is to share explicit cognitive pieces of information. Metaphors are deviations in terms of traditional exchange of information. The implied meanings of metaphors create a sense of wonder and strike the cognition. This semantic oddity is the essence of figurative language especially metaphors.

Data is collected from all the four collections of poems by Larkin, namely 'The Less Deceived', 'The Whitsun Wedding', 'High Windows' and 'Collected Poems'. The poems dealing with the themes of death, irreverence towards religion, isolation and failure in love or fidelity are selected. These themes are selected because they occur frequently in the poetry of Larkin and thus provide ample data to analyse the cognitive value of the metaphors.

Text 1

And at his age having no more to show

Than one hired box should make him pretty sure

He warranted no better, I don't know. (Mr. Bleaney, 1955, line 26-28)

'Hired' and 'box' are unconventional collocates. The quality of a box may be described by using the adjectives like big, small or hard etc. an unconventional Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

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Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

adjective 'hired' is colligated with 'box' to narrate that the room hired was as small as a box. This depicts the dejection of all those who lead an unpleasant, lonely and boring life in small apartments. The parallelism of 'no' also evokes the conceptual image of nothingness and disillusionment. Home is a place where we feel relaxed and pleased. The term 'box' is used for the room which Mr. Bleaney has taken on rent. The idea of living in a small room is conceptually mapped by the use of 'box' for the rented room. The depression and disillusionment for not saving much is also referred to by calling a room 'box'.

Text 2

Their yearly trick of looking new

Is written down in rings of grain. (The Trees, 1955, line 7-8)

To make attempts to look young is a natural human desire but a noun with negative connotation is used with this verb which is a deviation. 'Trick' cannot be written down, which is an instance of unconventional colligate because tricks are played and not 'written'.

Parallelism of dynamic verbs 'look' and 'write' shows the intentional attempt to remain young and also the continuity of the natural phenomenon. The comparison of trees and life cycle of human beings is compared to the life cycle of trees on firm grounds to support the idea that both 'hide' their age. This word leads us to the concept of hiding the reality. It hints at the fact that things are different from what they appear to be. The layers put a veil on the destruction caused by passing time.

This destruction in human beings is in physical terms, that is decomposition of body
Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

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Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

features in old age and human beings try to hide it with the help of make-up or surgery which gives them a young look.

Text 3

High and preposterous and separate –

Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!

O wolves of memory!

(Sad Steps, 1955, line 10-12)

The conventional sense attached with moon is that of love, beauty and all positive emotions but semantically a deviated sense of loneliness and irony are attached with moon being ‘separate’ and ‘preposterous’. Preposterous is a word with negative connotation. The laughable old age is the semantic concept which is conveyed through the picturization of ‘laughable moon’. Wolves of memories are unconventional colligates.

Grammatically the conjunction ‘and’ is deviant because it is used two times. This is highlighting the continuity of the theme of loneliness after presenting it ironically by the word ‘preposterous’. The dash (--) after separate graphically stands for the distance and isolation. Parallelism of exclamation marks (!) intensifies the emotions and further adds to the sense of loneliness.

‘High’ and ‘separate’ both reflect aloofness and isolation of moon and have grave tone. It is high and unreachable and the aloofness is taken as the initiator of schemata of loneliness rather than joy and comfort. Moon’s metaphorical description evokes the same feelings. Hence the moon is a reminder of loneliness because the life of old man is akin to it, that is absurd, isolated and lonely. The ‘memories’ are haunting and

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12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

therefore metaphorically called ‘wolves’. The sight of the lonely moon reminds the old man about his unfruitful and solitary life.

Text 4

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life? (Toads, 1955, line 1-2)

Hard work has positive connotations and is regarded a good attribute of human beings but the use of ‘toad work’ is having negative connotation in the metaphor. ‘Toad’ does not collocate with ‘work’ because generally the expression of hard work is in use. ‘Toad’ is arousing a cognitive schema of disgust and disliking.

The daily hard work which is a continuous demand of life causes a feeling of disillusionment. That is implied in the metaphor ‘toad work’. The disgust with life is narrated in the use of metaphor ‘toad’ for ‘man’. The hardships in life overpowers just like a frog squats on ground. The similarity between the disillusioned life of modern man and the ugliness of a frog is the basis to use the cognitive metaphors ‘toad work’ and ‘squat’ for human beings.

‘Squat’ is used for physical movement of body, that is a position in which we can sit to relax for sometime, however it is used deviant to show that daily hard work is overpowering the lives of modern man. Semantically it is ‘negatively overpowering’ the life of modern man to such an extent that it fills him with disenchantment and a strong feeling of loneliness.

Text 5

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12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-

Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back

A huge and birdless silence.

(Next Please, 1955, line 21-23)

Death is metaphorically described as a ship moving in a huge, silent and isolated sea where no life is seen. The words 'black', 'unfamiliar' and 'birdless silence' strengthen the metaphorical mapping of death which is following us everywhere. The ship is a cognitive metaphor used for death. The unfamiliarity of the ship is analogous to the unfamiliar world which we shall encounter after death. The absence of human life is depicted by 'birdless' and silence. Thus all these linguistic clues act as vehicles to describe the idea of death.

The verb 'seek' does not collocate with noun 'ship'. Seek is the old and formal verb used for searching and is conventionally used with living nouns. Ships do not seek anyone, they simply travel. Thus we can infer that death is seeking its prey. The comparison between death and ship is drawn on the base of unfamiliarity and a feeling of dread affiliated with both.

Birdless silence is another case of words which are colligated unconventionally to increase the cognitive value of the metaphor.

The dash (-) after black shows the gap in life as a result of death.

Text 6

.....their looks show that they're for it:

Ash hair, toad hands, prune faces dried into lines-

How can they ignore it?

(The Old Fools, 1955, line 22-24)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

348

The ugly look of toad's hands and dehydrated fruits are used as sources to describe the concept of flawed old age. Beauty and freshness of both is lost which makes them unappealing to the beauty loving eyes.

'Pruned' and 'faces' do not collocate with each other. The adjective pruned is used with fruits as a norm. The use of the adjective with a body part is a deviation. The wrinkled face which is a sign of old age and unsmooth skin of the dried fruits is the semantic similarity for the otherwise deviant comparison.

Text 7

... and them crouching below

Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving

How near it is. (The Old Fools, 1955, line 40-42)

'Crouching' semantically and conventionally refers to a position of sitting by folding legs or bending. Here the semantic meanings are changed and crouching is taken as approaching the end of life. Thus the verb is used in deviated semantic terms and crouching is no more a physical activity. The approach of old age and consequent death is narrated in metaphorical spatial and temporal terms. Although the use is a deviation but it fulfils the cognitive demands. Linguistically extinction and death are different terms but they have a close relationship because the end product of both is non-existence of life. In addition to this, extinction is used subjectively and death as objective or universal concept.

Death is a form of extinction as existence ceases at the approach of death. 'Extinction's alp' is a cognitive metaphor for 'death' and crouching below this alp refers to reach an age where next stage is death. Old age is followed by death; therefore the metaphor clearly serves as vehicle to narrate the implicit reference to the undeniable reality that old age leads to death.

Text 8

Can they never tell

What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?

Not when the strangers come? Never throughout

The whole hideous inverted childhood? (The Old Fools, 1955, line 44-47)

'Inverted' is conventionally used as a prototype of any concrete object that is physically 'upside down' but the metaphor inverted childhood it is not the physical inversion. It is in fact, the mentally changed situation when old people behave like children due to their feelings of insecurity and that is why old age is stated as another facet of childhood.

The backward pull, hideousness and child like attitudes tell us that these concrete images are implying towards the abstract idea of old age. Mentally old age is comparable to child hood but physically the two stages of life are separate. Therefore the semantic similarity and physical dissimilarity makes it reasonable to narrate the two deviant stages in similar terms. This implies that 'inverted childhood' is a cognitive metaphor for old age. 'Inverted' is unconventionally used in mental and psychological terms which is a deviation because the traditional meanings are Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

changed semantically. Inverted is also not a conventional collocation of the abstract noun childhood. We use the adjective 'inverted' is used with concrete nouns like glass, table, chair bed etc.

Text 9

All is the wind

Hunting through clouds and forests, thrashing

My apron and the hanging clothes on the line. (Wedding Wind, 1955,
line 15-17)

'All is the wind' is placed at the thematic position to map the cognitive image of 'loneliness'. The expression suggests that no one except the lonely girl is present at the scene. This loneliness increases the depression which is exhibited by an aggressive tone as is stated in the verbs 'hunting' and 'thrashing'. An element of violence which is implicitly traces in these verbs which is the effect of feeling of being 'all alone'.

The dynamic verbs 'hunting' and 'thrashing' do not collocate with wind. Living beings hunt and wind can cause destruction in form of a storm, but if the verb is used with wind, it semantically refers to an aggressive state of mind. The whole schemata of an atmosphere of depression and tension are aroused by these verbs. 'All is the wind' has already foregrounded the metaphorical idea of loneliness which is further intensified by these verbs. Moreover, 'thrashing' is a verb with negative connotation which also implies the frustration because of being all alone.

Text 10

Since we agreed to let the road between us

Fall to disuse.

(No Road, 1955, 1-2)

The connection and contact between human beings is maintained with the help of roads and bridges. This physical contact also implies the metaphorical relationship. The metaphorical concept of failure in love and estranged relationship of the lovers is presented by the decision 'to stop travelling on the road' This fact is strengthened by the verb 'agreed' which shows that it was an intentional act which is decided by both the lovers who no more want to live together. This is the implied meaning of 'disusing' the road. It explicitly points towards breaking the link between them and thus the metaphorical idea of 'failure in love' is dealt with cognitively.

Literally speaking, roads are constructed from one area to another to link human and assist communication. They lead us from one 'place' or 'area' to another, but if they are existing between 'people', then surely the semantic concept is deviated and now they stand for 'relationship' between people.

The verb 'agreed' is implicitly representing the wilful separation because we decide to disuse the road only if the destination is changed.

Text 11

Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,

They come to rest at any kerb:

All streets in time are visited.

(Ambulances, 1964, line 4-6)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

352

Ambulances do not have 'arms'. Arrival of ambulance is made akin to the movement of a human being. Therefore it is semantically a deviant concept. Grammatically, 'visit' is a dynamic verb and conventionally used for human beings, so its use with ambulance is also a deviation. 'Resting' is an activity which shows relaxation which can never be associated with 'an ambulance' which is a sign of discomfort. So the verb is also used deviant. An intransitive verb 'rest' is followed by a transitive verb 'visit' to imply the movement of ambulance which stops for a moment and then leaves for the hospital. The compliment 'in time' is placed before the verb which is a grammatical deviation. We can develop a link between the figurative use of 'arms' for the ambulance, which is given human attributes, that is having limbs and body parts. This arouses the schemata of picking patients from every nook and corner. The linguistic expressions of 'plague' and 'grey' also work as a vehicle to transport the mind to the image of death and suffering

Text 12

Closed like confessionals, they thread

They thread loud noons of cities, (Ambulances, 1964, line1-2)

Just as death comes and takes away the victim in seconds, similarly the ambulance moves through noisy streets of the cities, which are normally silent at noon but become noisy when ambulance passes through them. The silence of the city is broken by the noise made by ambulance and it gives an impression of restlessness of death. The swiftly approaching death has resemblance with swiftly moving ambulance. The adjective loud does not collocate with 'noon'. Voices have a quality of being loud or

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

low but the unconventional colligate is presenting a view of noisy ambulance passing through silent streets at noon.

Text 13

And sense the solving emptiness.

That lies just under all we do (Ambulances, 1964, line 13-14)

Death brings hollowness and gap in life. This gap is unacceptable and difficult to understand in the beginning but slowly and gradually we feel that a sense of 'emptiness' has entered in live and we also realize its reason i.e. death. So the seeming mystery is solved.

Solving does not collocate with the abstract noun emptiness. 'Emptiness' does not require any adjective but solving unconventionally colligates with emptiness to clarify the cognitive concept that we realize the reality of death when it alienates our loved ones.

'Solving' is an expression which has positive connotations but it is yoked with 'emptiness' which has negative connotation. Therefore the contrary features are presented side by side to highlight the harsh reality that death is inevitable and no one can escape from it.

Text 14

For borne away in deadened air

May go the sudden shut of loss

Round something nearly at an end, (Ambulances, 1964, line 19-21)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

Deadened is defined in terms of a blind alley. The linguistic expression is used in a sense of gloomy atmosphere which is not the norm but suits the occasion of death. When the dead body is carried by the ambulance, the people observing the incident can themselves feel the approaching death. It serves as a reminder that the act will be repeated at their death, making the whole atmosphere filled with a sense of loss and gloom. All the worldly activities come to halt with death and these feelings of loss are intensified by the “shut” doors of ambulance.

In the linguistic expression “deadened air” the gloomy atmosphere is indicated and is very uniquely narrated in a newly coined adjective “deadened” because air/atmosphere is never dead itself. The verb “go” is actually pointing to a hollow feeling which “comes” when any loved one is snatched away by death. This brings an end to everything including life, relations, wishes etc. “Shut” is again an unconventional adjective used with loss, because we have a “feeling of loss”, but ‘shut’ is used here to convey the image of ceased life. This unconventional colligation is an important feature of cognitive metaphors.

Text 15

Side by side, their faces blurred

The earl and countess lie in stone,

Their proper habits vaguely shown. (An Arundel Tomb, 1964, line1-3)

‘Faces blurred’ and ‘lie in stone’ are unconventional colligates because visions or scenes blur and the verb blur does not connote with faces. Similarly we lie in bed but we do not lie in ‘stone’ which is also an unconventional connotation.

Grammatically the verb blurred is not used with body parts and the application is quite extra ordinary. Similarly the employment of preposition ‘on’ with the noun ‘stone’ is not a norm, we can sit on a stone but cannot ‘lie in stone’. The preposition is used deviant to convey the theme of graves and consequently death.

Death brings decay and destruction which causes the dead bodies to be unrecognizable. This ‘blurring’ of faces is reminiscent of extinction of human beings from the face of earth as a consequence of decaying dead bodies. Moreover stones are hard and the reality of death is also very harsh. The idea of graves being devoid of any comfort is narrated by figuratively calling it stone.

Text 16

They would no guess how early in

Their supine stationary voyage

The air would change to soundless damage. (An Arundel Tomb, 1964, line 19-21)

The image of death is evoked by the cognitive metaphor ‘supine stationary voyage’.

Death is like a voyage to an unknown world but at the same time it ceases all the worldly activities. The social interactions also come to an end. The combination of Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 12 December 2012

Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D.

Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics

Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin

‘stationary’ and ‘voyage’ express these two contradictory yet similar concepts. Decay and destruction caused by death is a slow and ‘supine’ process but cannot be denied.

‘Stationary’ and ‘voyage’ do not collocate with each other. A voyage is full of action and movement where as the adjective supine and stationary signify a resting and ceased position.

This unique colligation is used to focus the attention of the readers to the approaching death which ends all our mundane activities.

Conclusion

The research signifies the fact that the metaphors develop the relationship of the abstract idea with the concrete images quite aptly and precisely. The semantic deviations are created through colligating unconventional collocates. The adjectives which do not traditionally collocate with the nouns are juxtaposed to create the metaphorical idea.

The researchers have noticed that a great variety of combinations is utilized in the creation of these cognitive metaphors. For instance metaphors like prune faces, litter of bird calls, hired box, armada of promises etc present a kind where the adjectives do not collocate with the nouns with which they are used.

Second kind of metaphors are like bleating clouds the air, body growing inaccurate, faces blurred, lie in stone, directing God etc are the cases where the researchers have noted colligation of unconventional verb.

The third category of metaphors involves bonding together the linguistic expressions which are semantically opposite. For instance, happy funeral, cold sun, sunless glare,

tender shock, stationary voyage and many more. These are grouped together in the metaphor to map a particular metaphorical theme.

The fourth kind noted is the one when personification is employed to transport the readers to the implied domain, such as toad for dull human life, road for relationship, unfamiliar ship for death etc. Hence we can divide the metaphors in the following four major types:

1. Metaphors in which adjectives do not collocate.
2. Metaphors in which unconventional verbs are colligated.
3. Metaphors which are a combination of words having opposite meanings or opposite connotations.
4. Metaphors which utilize personification to convey a particular metaphorical idea.

Thus the stylistic analysis of the poems in relation to cognitive stylistics has been very fruitful to study the metaphors. This study is conducted with a purpose to explore the new domain of cognitive stylistics.

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- Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 12 December 2012
- Sadia Waheed, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Mazhar Hayat, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar, Saira Akhter, M.Phil. in Linguistics and Amara Javed, M.Phil. in Linguistics
- Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin 358

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12 : 12 December 2012

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Semantico-syntactic Deviations in Metaphors Used by Philip Larkin