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PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS IN SONG INTERPRETATION – CONSTRUAL AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Key words: cognitive poetics, construal, idealized cognitive model (ICM), perspective, frame

The aim of the present article is to demonstrate how certain notions of cognitive linguistics, especially construal, perspective and background knowledge, can be applied to rock songs interpretation. We are going to show how listeners of rock music interpret song lyrics using their background knowledge, arriving at various meanings within the same age group, as well as meanings different from those intended by the author.

1. Dimensions of construal. Background knowledge

It is widely accepted in cognitive linguistics that construal as developed by Langacker (1987, 1991) is a feature of meaning of all linguistic expressions. As every language provides various ways of describing participants of situations, their features and relations between them, a speaker always has a choice from among those various linguistic expressions:

...a speaker who accurately observes the spatial distribution of certain stars can describe them in many distinct fashions: as a *constellation*, as a *cluster of stars*, as *specks of light in the sky*, etc. Such expressions are semantically distinct; they reflect the speaker's alternate construals of the scene, each compatible with its objectively given properties (Langacker 1991: 61).

Langacker (1987) further defines the construal relationship as the relationship between an individual (a speaker or hearer) and a conceived situation, situation "that he conceptualizes and portrays, involving focal adjustments and imagery" (Langacker 1987: 488). Dimensions of imagery or construal, reflecting cognitive capacities shared by all human beings, include the profile/base distinction, level of specificity, relative

prominence of substructures, figure/ground organization, perspective, background assumptions and expectations, and subjective directionality (Langacker 1991). All of these dimensions impose such aspects of structure on observed situations which are not present in the situations themselves.

The dimension of construal important for the present discussion is background assumptions and expectations – reference to the speaker's background knowledge – what the speaker stores in their long-term memory in the form of frames (Fillmore 1982, 1985) and ICMs (Lakoff 1987) with respect to which the conceived situation is characterized.

Idealised Cognitive Model (Lakoff 1987) seems especially suitable for the purposes of the present paper as a view of cognitive model shared by the members of a society or social group, where a cognitive model is seen as a sum of the experienced and stored contexts for a certain field.

The second aspect of construal of importance for the present study is perspective, which depends on the relative position and point of view of the speakers.

2. Lyrics interpretation – survey description

A survey was carried out by the author to show how a group of readers/listeners might interpret lyrics of a song without prior knowledge of the author's intended meaning. A group of 34 students of the second year of English philology were given the lyrics of a song "My Sweet Prince" by a British rock group Placebo from the album "Without You I'm Nothing" released in 1998¹. The choice of the song was not coincidental, as will be explained later in the article. Prior to reading the lyrics and listening to the song, the informants were asked to decide what was more important to them while listening to music: lyrics, music or both to the same extent. They were also asked to write what their favourite kind of music was, and what the main themes in the lyrics of contemporary rock music are. The vast majority listens to rock music (about 90%) and they also mention pop, heavy metal and jazz, only few mention other kinds (like classical music). The list of the themes included, first of all, love and relationships, but also emotions, especially anger, purpose of life, loneliness, life experiences, especially misfortunes, and problems of contemporary world, like war and anti-globalization. They were also asked to declare whether they knew the song very well, they had heard it before, or whether it was the first time they had heard it. The interpretations of the people who had known the song well were rejected.

The participants of the survey were asked to write a short interpretation of the meaning of the song, as well as to try to answer the questions who the narrator was and what he was singing about. Most of the respondents wrote (25) that it is a song about drugs and the "sweet prince" refers to drugs the author/singer is or was addicted to. The song in general is about a man and his addiction, and the damage that he and others have suffered as a result, or a failure to stop taking drugs. He takes drugs because he wants

¹ The full text of the song is to be found in Bibliography.

them to "close up the hole in my vein". A few people (5) think he is either considering suicide or he is dead already. Two people think the writer is singing about something terrible he did in the past and now regrets it. A relatively small number of people (7) wrote that it is a song about a relationship between two people; one person wrote that it is a song about a person he is in love with: "the prince has ended the relationship but the main character still believes in a special kind of bond between them".

As it turned out, most of these interpretations were wrong: as the author of the lyrics – the band's guitarist, singer, composer and writer, Brian Molko – said himself in a few live interviews, the whole album and this song in particular were devoted to his girlfriend who had committed suicide. On that particular night, she took an overdose of drugs and wrote on the mirror "my sweet prince" as a kind of goodbye letter to Brian. So, the song should be interpreted as a confession of the girl who is about to kill herself and who is talking to her boyfriend in her imagination.

Although the students were right about the song being about drugs, due to the fact the lyrics include some phrases which clearly indicate the use of drugs, most of them failed to notice that it is a song about a relationship, and nobody mentioned that the person singing might be someone of the opposite sex from the singer.

As the survey showed, only few people interpreted the lyrics according to the author's intentions. However, the majority arrived at quite a different interpretation. The answer to the question why their interpretations differed not only from Brian Molko's idea, but also differed considerably from one another can be best accounted for with different concepts from the field of cognitive linguistics and poetics.

3. Lyrics interpretation – reading in the text

To start our discussion of the survey results, it is worth noting that those different lyrics interpretations by the informants may be a result of the so-called defamiliarisation (Shklovsky 1917/1965), the immediate effect of foregrounding (Mukarovský 1964, Leech and Short 1981). In this view, one of the main functions of literature is to defamiliarise the subject-matter, to present the world in a creative way. Foregrounding, which is the most obvious correspondence of the phenomenon of figure and ground in the literary criticism, (for overview, see Stockwell 2002), can be achieved in a text by a variety of devices, which can be easily adopted by song lyrics, such as rhyming, metrical devices, repetition, creative use of metaphor and descriptions, and so on. Glucksberg (1991) and Miall and Kuiken (1994) claim that, due to the fact that foregrounding usually occurs in clusters of phonetic, grammatical and semantic features, the sheer complexity of the process of refamiliarisation (Miall and Kuiken 1994) suggests that it takes time to unfold, and that readers take longer to interpret foregrounded texts simply because it takes some cognitive effort on their part.

Since the survey was conducted in a classroom setting, in some cases the effects might have been more elaborate had the students been given more time. Moreover, some of them reported having difficulty writing "what the song was about" because it

was "difficult" and apparently some of them "did not like poetry". This kind of comments points to the effects that foregrounding may have on some readers, as well as to their treatment of lyrics as poetry.

In cognitive stylistics it is claimed that reading is far from being a passive process. Lakoff and Turner (1989) claim that

all reading is reading in [...] literary works, and poems in particular, are open to widely varying construals [...] poems stand on their own. They evoke our construals and those construals are of value, whether they coincide with the author's or not (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 109–110).

Accordingly, different interpretations are most easily explained by different construals that the informants employed to understand the song lyrics. It is our belief that the primary source of those differences lies in the background assumptions and expectations that were made by the readers and listeners – that is, on hearing that they were going to read and then listen to a rock song, they immediately evoked the ICM of rock music. It was not the subject of our study to examine the ICM of rock music, but we believe that its results would confirm the author's intuitions and beliefs about the typical contents of rock lyrics: love, youth, rebellion, freedom, depression, etc. as the respondents' wrote. Thus, the listeners and interpreters of rock songs bring all their background knowledge – which is, as it was said, culturally based and encyclopedic in nature – into the text they hear and read.

In cognitive poetics it is claimed that interpretation of a literary work begins even before a reader starts to read – in fact, in our culture the reader interprets the text before actually reading it (Stockwell 2002), in agreement with the gestalt psychology principles: first we perceive a certain category as a whole and only then do we decompose the whole into separate attributes or subtypes. Thus, while reading, we begin to rationalize our primary interpretations and pick out more salient attributes for our attention.

Accordingly, when the students were given the lyrics, or even on hearing they were going to be given a rock song lyrics, they probably made certain assumptions as to their contents, on the basis of the ICM they had about rock music in general. Only then, while reading the actual words, did they check their first judgements originating in their background knowledge, analyzing the text bit by bit in order to find the clues – more salient attributes – to justify their opinions. The singer/lyrics writer obviously manipulated the listeners, as he put the confession of his girlfriend into his mouth, thus making her the main narrator, but, as he – a young man – is singing it, the listeners would normally expect him – according to their ICM – to be the one who confesses, as it normally happens in rock music, where we are led to believe that the singer identifies with the narrator of the song.

The whole process of using a text to build and then experience a literary world has been discussed in cognitive poetics using the metaphor *READING IS A JOURNEY*, where a reader "adapts themselves to new conditions, taking on assumed characteristics and attitudes, in order to make sense of the literary scene" (Stockwell 2002: 152); thus, the reader is transported into a different world, the world of the text. In this process, we –

as readers – must take on an imagined model of the point of view of the main character of a literary work. In this new identity we have to predict what are "our" views and beliefs, what "our" motives for "our" actions are. According to Oatley (1992), due to the process of simulation, we can identify with a character – construct the character's plans or goals, and then feel emotional consequences as those plans unfold. While reading, we "dress up" in someone else's personality. We are able to do it not thanks to the actual words we read, but thanks to our knowledge of the real outside world that we bring with us into the text. It should not be surprising then that two readers of the same text may have different interpretations – reading is far from being passive and, according to Turner and Lakoff (1989), these different interpretations are still valuable, even if they do not agree with the author's intentions.

In the construction-integration model of comprehension (Kinstch 1998), comprehension consists of two stages: construction when "the gist" of the propositional content of the text is created from the text and local inferences, and integration when those inferences are rejected to produce a globally coherent representation. Thus, the final interpretation is a result of reading the text word by word against the reader's understanding of the context. The CI model of interpretation aims to produce representations in which propositional content of a literary work is combined with its personal and social impact – what the reader actually feels.

It has to be mentioned at this point that the author is fully aware of the fact that song listeners are influenced in their interpretations not just by the contents of the song lyrics, but their music as well, and that those two influences blend together (Zbikowski 2001) to form a full image in the listener's mind. According to Zbikowski, a song is a temporary mental construction, recruited from the text and music presented in the performance, although not every song is a good example of blend. However, this problem falls beyond the scope of the present paper and is being currently examined by the author.

4. Summary

The author's intention was to show that it should not be surprising that our informants arrived at different text interpretations – different from the lyrics author's and different from one another. As might be expected, people representing the same speech community, social group and age group should share the knowledge they have to a considerable extent. However, differences are to be expected as well, as poems are open to "widely varying construals" (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 109) of the readers. The reasons for these might be the following:

1. People may have different expectations and assumptions as to the content of a literary work even before they start reading – especially when the work in question is a rock song which has a strong cultural mental model of ROCK MUSIC associated with it, and there is a lot of pragmatic, "real-world" knowledge which they have to possess if they are to interpret the song at all.

2. This cultural model of rock music is most probably of extreme importance to young people, such as the informants in the survey, who list it as the kind of music they most often listen to. Thus, it should be assumed that their background knowledge in this respect is relatively stable, relative and subjective as it may be.

3. In the very act of reading, different words or lines evoke different frames in different readers, thus allowing them to follow a certain way of understanding the text, or rather give it up and find another direction. As it was suggested before, rock music is typically associated not just with one theme, but with a number of themes, such as love, sex, rebellion, youth, freedom, etc. Thus, the readers have a number of options as to the main theme of the song, according to the framing words or lines which caught their attention (foregrounding effect). Thus, a reader may construe the meaning of a song on the basis of frames which she has found in the text – or rather which the text has evoked in her. The frames evoked need not be precisely the same for all the readers – apart from the cultural aspect, they are also characterized by individual differences which the readers bring into their imagined worlds while reading.

4. As it was mentioned before, foregrounding may affect a reader to such an extent that they were unable to interpret the text in a little time they were given, or found it difficult due to its complexity. Thus, some readers did not give any interpretation, and some other people gave vague or simplistic descriptions of what the song was about.

5. Another aspect of construal which the respondents failed to notice was the change of perspective: relying on their background knowledge, they probably assumed that the singer is the alter ego of the lyrics author, and thus the narrator of the story told in the song, as it usually happens in fiction and lyrics. Little did they expect that the whole story could have been told from the vantage point of the other dramatic persona – what is more, of the opposite sex.

6. The influence of music on the readers was neglected in this survey and the present paper, though it has to be taken into consideration. This blended influence of both music and text is the subject of further research by the author.

It is our belief that the tools of cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics are indispensable in interpretation of literary works – and the author of the present paper believes that some song lyrics may be considered as such – and may shed a new light not only on what but first of all why and how people interpret songs in the ways they do. It also seems obvious that in this kind of research it is necessary to regard the semantics-pragmatics dichotomy as false, since no interpretation of texts would be possible without the listeners and/or readers having certain assumptions and knowledge of the world, stored in their minds in the shapes of frames and ICMs. The present paper has been an attempt to show how these tools might be used in practice and is only a sample of research on song interpretation carried out by the author.

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My Sweet Prince

never thought you'd make me perspire
 never thought I'd do you the same
 never thought I'd fill with desire
 never thought I'd feel so ashamed
 me and the dragon can chase all the pain away
 so before I end my day, remember
 my sweet prince, you are the one
 my sweet prince
 you are the one
 never thought I'd have to retire
 never thought I'd have to abstain
 never thought all this could back fire
 close up the hole in my vain

me and my valuable friend
can fix all the pain away
so before I end my day
remember
my sweet prince
you are the one
never thought I'd get any higher
never thought you'd fuck with my brain
never thought all this could expire
never thought you'd go break the chain
me and you baby
still flush all the pain away
so before I end my day
remember my sweet prince you are the one

Summary

The aim of the present article is to show that such concepts from cognitive linguistics as aspects of construal, semantic frames and idealised cognitive models can be applied for the analysis of rock song lyrics. The article describes the results of a survey in which respondents interpreted lyrics of a rock song and arrived at its different interpretations, often different from the one intended by the song writer. The author attempts to account for those different interpretations, relying on concepts from cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics.