METAPHORS CONNECTED WITH THE SENSE OF SIGHT
IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S THE CANTERBURY TALES

Abstract

The paper analyses figurative applications of phrases containing words connected with human seeing (e.g. the verbs see, look, espy, nouns like sight, look, eye and adjectives such as blynd). It shows the motivation for metaphoric expressions used by Chaucer to express his thoughts and visions in a most vivid and precise way and their further development in the language system. The analysis is based on the data obtained from Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales (Ellesmere MS), the Oxford English Dictionary online and the Middle English Dictionary. As regards its theoretical basis it refers to Lakoff–Johnson’s theory of cognitive metaphor.

1. Aim of the paper

This paper will confront the tenets of the cognitive approach to metaphor and the data obtained from Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. The study contains an analysis of only those metaphoric expressions which refer to the domain of seeing since visual experience is undoubtedly common to both contemporary and medieval man.

2. Metaphor in cognitive linguistics

There is no denying that sight makes the highest rank of human senses. It provides all sorts of indispensable information, like that regarding possible dangers, distance evaluation and physical characteristics of the surroundings. Thus sight and the images it provides become basic tools which help to
describe the world, its beauty and ugliness, shape our reasoning, though not necessarily reaching for literal meaning.

The world depicted as it is, with no use of figurative language, would seem dull and boring like a shopping list or a laundry receipt. Metaphor gives us a shortcut directly into our minds, connects things seemingly unconnected and enables, otherwise not equally precise, transfer, activating all conscious and subconscious associations in the brain.

In fact, the concept of metaphor itself constitutes nothing else but the way of seeing the world, the manifestation of how life and its aspects are conceived of (Turner 1987). Not being a rhetoric device, the approach rejected already in 1893 by Biese (in Kiełtyka 2008: 94), whose view was then advocated by Lakoff – Johnson (1980), it does not merely reflect the structure of our thinking, but also influences and shapes the human reasoning of the world. Thus, if the metaphor is a way of seeing reality, it is unsurprising that sight has established an Ideal Cognitive Model of its own, which presupposes the following for the domain of seeing: “1. You see things as they are; 2. You are aware of what you see; 3. You see what’s in front of your eyes.” (Lakoff 1987: 128)

The Perception ICM provides a matrix for the metaphor operation and thus enables thinking about the world in terms of perception metaphorically and metonymically (Radden – Kövecses 1999: 38).

3. Visual perception in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales

The theory of conceptual metaphor, though relatively young itself, should by no means be applied only to analyse the contemporary language. The same mechanisms operated effectively in the past, shaped human thinking and the perception of the surrounding world.

(1) Thus may ye seen that the gilt disserueth thralldom. (Knight’s Tale, 756)
And this wise man / saugh that hym wanted audience. (Tale of Melibee, 2236)
An whan this goode man / saugh þat it was so. (General Prologue, 850)
This Marchant saugh / ther was no remedie. (Shipman’s Tale, 1617)
(...) ffor wel she saugh / that it was for the beste. (Franklin’s Tale, 846)
And for he saugh / that vnder heigh degree Was vertu hid. (Clerk’s Tale, 423)
And whan I saugh / he wolde neuere fine To reden on this cursed book al nyght. (The Prolouge of the Wife of Bath, 788)

As shown in (1), Chaucer repeatedly employed the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor. The metaphor seems experientially based since sight is the basic and most reliable source of knowledge. We tend to believe what we see as we trust our sight to verify information and spot potential deception.
The metaphor *UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING* is apparently not a metaphor in Aristotelian understanding. The actions of seeing and understanding do not show even vague similarity. Seeing is a purely physical process involving light, lenses and reflections. Understanding, on the other hand, is a complex procedure being part of human cognition. It encompasses acquiring data and comprehending its signification. Both activities are supposed to extend our knowledge, yet sight narrows the selection of available means of collecting data material down to simply visual input. The further steps appear to be the same: processing the information in the brain. Both verbs, however, accentuate different stages of the process: seeing highlights the data acquisition, whilst understanding their analyses. Therefore, the structure of perception is reflected in the structure of apprehending. We can *see the problem*, *look into the situation* or *view arguments*. Nonetheless, the aforementioned metaphor cannot be treated as a mere projection of major properties of seeing onto the domain of understanding. It is grasped naturally, with no awareness of its non-literal nature, which is symptomatic of well entrenched metaphors. The whole relation might be explained by one of the basic metaphors, i.e. a thing is what it has salient properties of (Turner 1987: 16–21).

The linguistic realisation of understanding is seeing, namely *see* + *that* clause structure survived in a semantically unchanged form. Its widespread use attests the entrenchment of the metaphor in the language, although it is worthy of note that the very same structure can be also the implementation of *KNOWING IS SEEING* metaphor.

An eye is not only an organ of primary rank while applying the sense of seeing. It is also one of the most prominent parts of the human body, the one which catches our attention at the very first contact. It is so not solely for the reason that the eyes are positioned at the front of the head, but also because we believe they give us the insight into one’s feelings. As human beings we are perfectly aware man is an extremely deceitful creature, no wonder we want to detect any warning sign of a lie or deceit in the bud.

The next set of examples come from *The Knight’s Tale*:

(2) (a) He was war / as he **caste his eye** aside. (896)
    He **cast his eye** / vpon Emelya. (1077)
    **Hir eyen caste** she / ful lowe adoun. (2080)
    And she agayn / **hym caste a freendlich eye**. (2679)
    But on his lady yet **caste he his eye**. (2806)

(b) And as a leon / **he his lookyng caste**. (2168)
    (...) y-turned thee the dys That **hast the sighte of hire**. (1237)
Examples provided under (2) instantiate Chaucer’s application of a very typical metaphor connected with the domain of seeing. However, there is a basic difference between cast an eye and cast / have a glance, look or sight. The latter involve abstract nouns for concepts not having their matter, and thus, incapable of being cast, as the activity of throwing involves having an item in your hand, taking a swipe and pushing it in the air in a previously planned direction. As sight, glance or look have no physical form which could be thrown, what can be observed in such phrases is a process of ontological metaphorisation (Kövecses 2002: 34–35). It assigns abstract concepts with a physical being and thus, in this particular case, enables the procedure of being cast.

As it comes to caste one’s / an eye the process is only seemingly different. Undeniably, an eye has its form and weight and contrary to abstract concepts, it can be visualized, touched or measured. Yet the scene of literal thrusting an eye would be genuinely blood-curdling, worthy The Saw 6 3D version, not the masterpiece of poetry. Therefore, what we encounter here is the metonymy AN EYE FOR SIGHT (an object for the function of the object), which demonstrates that in both groups Chaucer used the same metaphor vehicle, yet supplemented in (2a) with the metonymisation of eye.

What seems noteworthy, the metonymy AN EYE FOR SIGHT is frequently employed by Chaucer. Such phrases are instances of metonymy and metaphor operating jointly, which gave Chaucer a powerful tool to describe the scene vividly, yet with a great economy of words. To be able to express much without overusing words appears an important criterion in language at all times.

Let us review another fragment from The Knight’s Tale:

(3) That feeld hath eyen / and the wode hath eres. (1522)

First of all, to be able to own an organ of sensory perception one must be a living creature whose organism allows the use of senses. Any number of eyes located on the surface of the field or ears attached to the trunk of a tree will turn out to be absolutely of no avail unless the metonymy PART FOR WHOLE, i.e. part of a body for a person, can be deciphered. Eyes and ears are organs responsible for gathering data from the surrounding world. Neither the wood nor the field would be able to process the data, and thus there must be people hiding among the trees or in the grain, in this case Palamon hidden in the bushes spying on unaware, yet distrustful Arcite.

(4) Veld haued hege [eye], and wude haued heare – Campus habet lumen et habet nemus auris acumen. (1225 in Englische Studien (1902) XXXI. 8)

The phrase was first recorded at the beginning of the 13th century as a rural proverb (4). With the development of cities it was shifted into a more
urban context, replacing both field and woods with walls. Both expressions continue nowadays, though each enjoys a different frequency. For some reason being stealthily watched appears to have ceased to be considered a problem, which resulted in quite a low incidence of applications (only 1 instance obtained from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (5); no other analysed corpora contained the phrase).

(5) The very **walls have eyes** and hands as well as ears. (Jones, J. B. *Freaks and Fortune or, The History of Adventures of Ned Lorn*, 1854)

As regards **walls have ears** the phrase appears to have widened its meaning. With the experience of totalitarian regimes and the nightmare of World War II, people are especially eager to protect the personal sphere of their lives. Nonetheless while pondering if the walls have ears / eyes we do not mean a person who is physically doing the eavesdropping or the watching. And even if we do, they would not have to be in the close vicinity. In the time of technological revolution a range of bugging devices can be used against an unsuspecting subject of the surveillance.

Sight is a powerful sense. Not only does it help us to protect ourselves from the enemies or even plan the attack against them, but also happens to be a weapon itself. The love of Arcite for Emily gives her the power over the enchanted man, the power that may decide about his life or death. The **SEEING IS KILLING** metaphor (6) definitely cannot be referred to as an uncommon one. We wonder what could happen if eyes could kill, why somebody looks daggers at us or is dressed to kill. No wonder, Emily, although not a basilisk, is conceptualised as owning murderous weapons enchanted in her sight.

(6) Ye **sleen me / with youre eyen** Emelye (*Knight’s Tale*, 1567)

Eyes are treated in (6) as weapons, of equal effectiveness to a sword or a knife. The **SEEING IS KILLING** metaphor shows how important what we see is and how deeply it can influence our feelings. As not only does eyesight provide information to be processed, but also it affects our emotions like love, dislike, jealousy.

Although, as already mentioned, **SEEING IS KILLING** is a relatively common metaphor, its realisation quoted in (6) seems a one-shot poetic phrase since neither historic nor contemporary usages are comprised in the analysed corpora, the Internet included.

A similar application of the metaphor might be seen in (7).

(7) (...) for **Enuye / blyndeth the herte** of man (*Parson’s Tale*, 677)

As the heart is typically associated with emotions, especially a romantic affection, the organ proves not to have been chosen randomly. It represents
the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy (where the heart represents its owner) and thus highlights the emotional nature of a human being. Besides, metonymy provides the bases for metaphor operation. Thus herte, a person in love, is treated in the sentence as a patient who is prone to being blind to reality (strong emotion is Blinding) and thus unable to think clearly, evaluate the situation logically or draw rational conclusions, as sight is connected with thinking uninfluenced by emotions (thinking unemotionally is seeing clearly). Not only emotions represented by herte but also envy are the subject of ontological metaphor. The feeling of envy is treated as a poisonous substance which may affect our perception of reality with the power commensurate with the intensity of poisonous jealousy. The heart that cannot see is also unable to discern the truth from deception, reality from a veneer, love from hatred. It develops a disease as apparently not only love is a disease, but also envy is a sickness as well.

Last but not least, Chaucer applies also synaesthetic devices.

(8) Look eek / what seint Peter seith Actuum. (Parson’s Tale, 598)
Whan þat he saugh / þat al the peple lough. (Pardoner’s Tale, 961)

In (8), vision is described in terms of auditory stimuli. What Chaucer depicts is definitely not the harmony of sights, but the explosion of sounds: the outburst of laughter or wise words of a holy man. The verbs laugh and say evoke the domain of hearing, yet in this case to be perceived through the organs of seeing. The intersense transfer seems to have its solid grounding in the biological determinants. Sight and hearing undeniably constitute the most basic senses, which contribute to our knowledge of the world. They are the most accessible and trustworthy sources of information. What is more, the data acquired from each of them can be immediately verified by means of the other. Therefore, not surprisingly the synaesthesia indicating hearing < vision (sounds put in terms of vision) is not an uncommon phenomenon in language.

Other kinds of synaesthetic metaphors, though undoubtedly less frequent, are also quite well grounded in the linguistic system. Item (9) below represents a sight < taste relation.

(9) (...) right as the Basilicok sleeth folk by the venym of his sighte. (Parson’s Tale, 854)

As defined by the OED, venom is a “poisonous fluid” secreted by snakes or spiders in order to kill a prey or at least disarm an enemy. Therefore, the poison usually injected through the predator’s fangs (situated in the oral cavity, which is characteristic of the sense of taste) here is contained in the murderous sight.
4. Conclusions

The approach to metaphor has come through revolutionary changes. For a long time it was recognised as elaborate or intricate and, hence, available, both with regard to producing and understanding, only to the most sophisticated brains of humanity. All an average man could do was to admire and make every possible effort to comprehend the elevated with his her down-to-earth brain. The function of this stylistic device became thus limited to a mere embellishment, something we can perfectly live without. Our language was believed not to be severely impaired with the loss of metaphor imagery, since everything, all shades of meaning, may as well be expressed by the literal usage of words (Kövecses 2002: vii-viii). However, metaphor has proved to be an inherent part of our daily thinking and reasoning about the world. Not only does it facilitate expressing our thoughts, but also enables one to understand the life as it is, providing abstract concepts with a structure, matter and / or experiential basis.

Although such understanding of metaphor is relatively novel, it proves to have been ever present in human speech and thinking. Being the record of Mediaeval English, delineating different registers of language to represent the tongues of various social strata, *The Canterbury Tales* provides a large number of such instances. Though some are unquestionably of more poetic nature, all of them might be explained as motivated by cognitive metaphor and thus showing conceptual associations between the source and the target. What is more, the vast majority of expressions survived in Modern English in a practically unchanged form.

Therefore, it might be concluded that it was not metaphor that changed over the centuries, but rather the way of conceiving it. The processes involved are still the same, yet our knowledge on metaphor’s conceptual nature makes us aware of it being independent of the artistic ambitions of a speaker.

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