Analysis of Tennyson's Poems from the Perspective of Iconicity

Wen Li

Henan University Foreign Language School, Kaifeng 475000 , Henan China

Abstract: As one of the most outstanding poets of the Victorian period, Tennyson's poems are beautiful and orderly in terms of rhyme, rich in terms of content and emotion. This paper selects some of Tennyson's poems, and attempts to analyze them from the perspective of iconicity of image, diagram and metaphor respectively to explore Tennyson's unique poetic linguistic form and his deep inner thoughts and emotions. The study shows that it is feasible to study Tennyson's poetry based on the iconicity theory of cognitive linguistics, which further expands the theoretical scope of the study of Tennyson's poetry.

Keywords: Iconicity; Tennyson; Poetry

Foreword

Alfred Tennyson is one of representative poets in 19th century in England. When it comes to the features of form of his poetry, the prominent point is that he pays attention to the beauty of form. Therefore, he is good at using alliteration and onomatopoeia and his poems are soft, beautiful and expressive to read. Every word in his poetry is choose with precision. Also, he uses many appropriate metaphors in his poems to increase the artistic appeal and vividness of poetry.

In recent years, with the rise of cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics, research on poetry based on cognitive science and experiential philosophy has opened up a new way for the interpretation, appreciation and creation of poetry. Tang Jingchun(2013)[1] studied Tennyson's Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal and The Oak from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory to appreciate the beauty of images in these two poems. Chen Sihan(2014)[2] explored Tennyson's The Oak still based on the conceptual metaphor theory to have a better understanding of image and beauty in the poem. Lin Wenyun(2016)[3] made a research on Tennyson's Break, break, break based on the theories of Iconicity to explore how this theory functions in terms of the construction of poem's beauty in sound, form and image, which can further help readers to understand the deep meaning and aesthetic value. However, Lin Wenyun only analyzes one of Tennyson's poems. Song Xiaoli(2018)[4] used figure-ground theory to research Crossing the Bar to explain the form, meaning, images and death theme etc.

This paper endeavors to analyze some of Tennyson's poems to equip the readers with the awareness of iconicity and an enhanced appreciation of and a greater insight into the poets' uncanny craft of creativity from the perspective of Iconicity theory.

1. Iconicity Theory

Iconicity has attracted wide concern from linguists at home since Xu Guozhang firstly translated iconicity into 象似性 in 1988. Shen Jiaxuan, Du Wenli, Zhang Min and Yan Chensong have published papers respectively to discuss about it. Wang Yin(1999)[5] once proposed that iconicity of linguistic signs refers to the phenomenon that linguistic signs' sound, form or structure bears resemblance to the signified. Furthermore, Wang Yin also made a conclusion on linguists' research on iconicity between the signifier and the signified in terms of three aspects: phonology, morphology and structure.

1.1 Definitions of Iconicity

As for the definition of iconicity, views on it vary from scholar to scholar. From a broad view, iconicity is equivalent with 'motivation'. According to Wang Yin(1999)[5], iconicity of language signs refers to a kind of linguistic phenomenon in which there exists resemblance between their sounds, or forms or structures and the signified. Haiman(1985)[6] believed that the forms of language are always related to the conceptual structures they intend to reveal. Croft(2000:171)[7] asserted that iconicity is "the parallelism between

the relations among parts in the structure of what is signified and relations among parts in linguistic structure." In a word, iconicity refers to the similarity or analogy between form and meaning. It holds that the relation between from and meaning is motivated to a large extent.

1.2 Classification of Iconicity

According to Peirce(1940)[8], there are three types of signs: icon, index and symbol. As for icon, the form of icon is similar to the object it refers to. And the index has some connection with the object it refers to such as causality or adjacency in time or space. The symbol is associated with the object that it refers to by social convention.

As for icon, Peirce further brings about three types of icons: imagic icons, diagrammatic icons and metaphorical icons. Based on this classifications of icons, there are imagic iconicity, diagrammatic iconicity and metaphorical iconicity.

Imagic iconicity concerns similarity between a linguistic sign and the object described in terms of property. Auditory iconicity is a typical imagic iconicity. It involves sound iconicity and sound symbolism.

Diagrammatic iconicity refers to the similarity between the structure of signs and that of the meaning. It is always shown in syntactic iconicity. Many scholars distinguished three types of iconicity in terms of diagrammatic iconicity: iconicity of sequence, iconicity of distance and iconicity of quantity.

According to metaphorical iconicity, conceptual domain can be understood by another conceptual domain. Shu Dingfang(2000) [9] said that metaphor is the soul of poetry. Hiraga(1994)[10] divided metaphorical iconicity into three types: grammatical metaphors, conventional metaphors and poetic metaphors. This paper will focus poetic metaphors in Tennyson's poems. Lakoff and Turner(1989) [11] have discussed the difference between conventionalized metaphors and poetic metaphors. They thought that poetic metaphors can be seen as the novel extension of conventional metaphors.

2. Interpretation of Tennyson's Poems from the Perspective of Iconicity

This section will interpret some poems written by Tennyson in terms of the imagic iconicity, diagrammatic iconicity and metaphorical iconicity.

2.1 Imagic Iconicity

In Tennyson's poems, the poet uses a large number of onomatopoeia words and sound symbolism. This paper chooses some of his poems to analyze how imagic iconicity functions in Tennyson's poems .

Onomatopoeia can be attested in Tennyson's poems. For example, in Leonine Elegiacs, the poet uses 'babble' to imitate the sound of flowing rivulets, which enables the text to be more vivid. In doing this, readers seem to be personally on the scene. Besides, 'coos' is used by Tennyson here to imitate the sound of 'wood-dove'. It also easily strikes a responsive chord in the hearts of readers who have heard the sound of doves.

This poem Claribel A Melody was created by Tennyson at the age of teenage. He uses 'boometh', 'hummeth' and 'babbling' these three onomatopoeic words to enrich the musical beauty. After reading the second stanza, readers seem to hear the sound of beetle, bee and runnel.

Sound symbolism can be found in The Eagle. In this poem, Tennyson employs several words with 'c' pronounced by /k/ , which highlights the sharpness of the claws and stiffness of the stones because of the fact that /k/ is a short and forceful plosive sound. In addition, /ɔ:/, a long vowel, in 'falls' signifies the process of an eagle flying down from the cliff swiftly like a light, which also expresses the fierceness and agility of this eagle.

In poetry, the poets tend to mimic the shape in real world through the organization and order of texts, which makes the themes of poetry more prominent. That's how imagic iconicity functions in poetic language.

In The Oak , the organization of words evokes image of oak tree in readers' mind. This kind of order of words not only echoes the title of this poem to make the whole text more complete and coherent but also makes great contribution to the presentation of metaphor LIFE IS OAK TREE.

2.2 Diagrammatic Iconicity

Several Tennyson's poems will be interpreted in terms of sequence of iconicity, symmetry of iconicity, and quantity of iconicty, which will be discussed in the following part one by one.

Iconicity of sequence can be divided into temporal iconicity and spatial iconicity. Let's interpret The Oak again but from the perspective of temporal iconicity.

The poet depicts different kinds of situation of the oak tree according to the change of seasons. That is to say, in this poem, the order in which syntactic elements are arranged reflects the order in which the actual state they represent in the REAL world.

Then, let's consider spatial iconicity in Tennyson's poems. Here this paper chooses Choric Song as an example.

In this stanza, the poet describes a beautiful natural scenery. According to the way that humans perceive the space, Tennyson depicts the process of leaves falling based on the spatial order which is from up to down.

Next is symmetry iconicity. According to Wang Yin(2007)[12], human being's language is influenced by cognition, and cognition is guided and affected by their interaction with the real world. Since there are a large amount of symmetric phenomena in the real world, it's natural that there exist many symmetry structures in people's languages.

In the poem Break, break, break, Tennyson adopts repetition of three breaks to reflect the solemn and stirring scene of the waves lapping the stones, which expresses solitude and sadness from his heart. The appearance of 'O Sea' in the second line and the fourth line conveys a message that the close relationship between Tennyson and his friend exists for ever. Meanwhile, the first stanza and the fourth stanza echos with each other, which not only forms symmetric structure further but achieves the beauty of symmetry and makes the whole poem become more coherent.

According to Hiraga(1994)[13], there exists iconic relationship between the quantity of forms and the quantity of meanings the linguistic forms want to convey. In poetry, repetition of words and sentences is the most common way to achieve quantity iconicity. Consider this poem, The Miller's Daughter. Tennyson uses "so dear" twice to convey this young man's adoration for the miller's daughter.

2.3 Metaphorical Iconicity

As for poetic metaphors, Hu Zhuanglin(2003)[14] mentions several typical characters in poetic metaphors such as originality, the truth hidden under the impossibility, etc.

In Cross the Bar this poem, Tennyson regards death as a sea travel and the boundless sea as his destination. So the poetic metaphor is DEATH IS A TRIP HOME. People come from the nature and go back to nature after their death. In this poem, Tennyson leads readers to use the source domain TRIP HOME to understand the target domain DEATH. Thus, from the point of Tennyson, death is not terrible but a wonderful and anticipated journey home. The poet does not fear or escape from death. On the contrary, he seems to have a longing for it.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, it is proved that iconicity plays a crucial role in interpreting poetic texts. And it is feasible to analyze Tennyson's poetry based on the theory of iconicity. What's more, iconicity theory facilitate readers the understanding and appreciation of poetry in a cognitive, dynamic and emotive way. Additionally, this paper also provides a new perspective for readers to appreciate Tennyson's poems. Also it illustrates a point that human mind intends to put similar things together and language is motivated to a large extent but not arbitrary completely.

The paper holds that cognitive study of Tennyson's poems is far from enough and scholars can try to study his poems from the perspective of Conceptual Blending Theory and other cognitive theories.

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