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## Paradoxical Metaphors in Poetic Song Discourse

### Metafory paradoksu w dyskursie poezji śpiewanej

#### Abstract

The paper focuses on highlighting the differences between recognition and interpretation of active conceptual metaphors indicating universal truth and specific author's metaphors grounded in his own life experience. It has been proven that due to their complexity, paradoxical nature, and the variability of language expressions metaphors are effectively used to deliver universal truth in poetic discourse, namely in bard song lyrics and singing poetry. The analysis is based on the material of Leonard Cohen's posthumous album "Thanks for The Dance". The well-known features of active metaphors such as clarity and communicative power are opposed to unique paradoxical and mirroring metaphors used by the author to impose multiple levels of metaphor recognition in poetics song discourses. The metaphorical coding of poetry is achieved through establishing an intercode agreement between the recipients and the poet.

**Key words:** *conceptual metaphors, Leonard Cohen, poetic discourse, song lyrics.*

#### Abstrakt

Artykuł koncentruje się na uwydatnieniu różnic między percepcją (identyfikacją) i interpretacją aktywnych metafor pojęciowych wskazujących na uniwersalne prawdy a indywidualnymi metaforami, które opierają się na doświadczeniu życio-

wym ich twórców. Udowodniono, że metafory, ze względu na swoją złożoność, paradoksalność i zmienność wyrażen językowych, skutecznie przekazują uniwersalne prawdy w dyskursie poetyckim, w tym m. in. w pieśniach bardów i poezji śpiewanej.

W artykule analizowany jest materiał językowy wyekscerpowany z tekstów piosenek, które pochodzą z pośmiertnego albumu Leonarda Cohena "Thanks for the Dance". Analiza pokazuje, że metafory aktywne, odznaczające się takimi cechami, jak klarowność i komunikatywność, przeciwstawiają się unikatowym metaforom paradoksalnym i lustrzanym, które wymagają wielowarstwowej percepcji. Metaforyczne kodowanie i dekodowanie poezji odbywa się przy tym w oparciu o umowę interkodową między poetą a odbiorcą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *metafory pojęciowe, Leonard Cohen, dyskurs poetycki, teksty piosenek.*

The ubiquitous nature of metaphors has always been the focus of researchers' attention. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) Apart from its undeniable theoretical value, studying the process of recognizing, understanding and interpreting metaphors in various types of discourse is of fundamental applied importance (Lakoff, 1990), since it offers numerous applications for language learners, translators, lexicographers, and public speakers. G. Steen argues that understanding metaphors in poetic song discourse differs essentially when done by researchers and by ordinary language users. (Steen, 2004) Metaphor recognition by ordinary language users (i.e. listeners or readers) strongly relies on socially accepted metaphorical patterns as well as established universal metaphors. The process on metaphor interpretation can be programmed by the authors (i.e. poets and singers) to modify the recipient's cognitive activity and direct it in the predetermined way. It is useful to know which factors facilitate metaphor recognition and which ones make the process complicated for language users, thus raising listeners' awareness of the beauty and overwhelming character of poetic metaphors.

In modern linguistic studies there have been made effective attempts to combine critical discourse analysis and conceptual metaphor analysis in order to find out the specific discourse properties affecting the process of metaphor recognition and interpretation. B. J. Charteris (2004) employed the main elements of Critical Discourse Analysis to the studying of conceptual metaphors and has proposed a new approach of Critical Metaphor Analysis. (Charteris, 2004) C. Shu-qin and G. Wen-cheng applied this method to the analysis of Emily Dickinson's poems. (Shu-qin, Wen-cheng, 2022) They claim that discourse analysis may help 'to analyze metaphors in politi-

cal discourses, government reports, business financial reports, news reports and so on, which can reveal the ideology behind metaphors'. (Shu-qin, Wen-cheng, 2022. p. 419)

Spontaneous metaphor recognition is a metaphor processing operation that is affected by a number of factors, such as reading goal or mode, reader characteristics, and metaphor properties. (Steen, 1994) Thus, 'when readers adopt a literary reading mode, they recognize more metaphors than when they adopt a journalistic reading mode'. (Steen, 2004, p. 1296)

The singer-poet should make it clear, that the target metaphors constituting the basic cognitive framework of the poem possess such feature as clarity and the affective communicative power. G. Steen in his early fundamental work indicates that clarity and affect are only two of the many properties of metaphor, though they may be among the more important ones. (Steen, 1994) These two properties work effectively on ordinary recipients without their full awareness. At the same time, clarity and affect are metaphor properties that may be hard to analyze directly by the discourse linguists, since they involve judgments about denotative and connotative content that are difficult to control, especially in the case of critical discourse analysis, when the researcher is supposed to involve his own system of life values and ideologies.

For the successful identification and interpretation of metaphors the recipients (both ordinary language users and researchers) should deal with universal values and ideologies, based on universal cognitive mechanisms ("universal though"). Discourse analysis of universal metaphors offers a wide scope of valuable scientific questions, the answers to which may help to explain another practical issue – the reason of success of this or that piece of poetry among the audience, bringing world fame to their authors.

The question of language carrying universal truth as its inherent property was considered by J. Derrida, who noted that 'by way of analogy: the fact that universal thought, in all its domains, by all its pathways and despite all differences, should be receiving a formidable impulse from an anxiety about language – which can only be an anxiety of language, within language itself'. (Derrida, 1978, p. 3) By this statement, the author underlines the unique ability of natural language to carry universal truth and to translate it to recipient's mind no matter what linguistic form it might take. In this paper we propose a research idea that metaphorization could be effectively used in a poetic discourse as a means of delivering universal truth.

In cognitive linguistics, metaphors have traditionally been viewed as a tool for uncovering the interdependency of thought and language, as well as

an effective instrument for constructing cognition. (Hines, 1999, p. 145) J. Neisser points out the paradoxical features of metaphors, emphasizing on their para-verbal nature: 'Metaphors are a puzzling phenomenon of language. They resist easy paraphrase. They seem at once to make an assertion and not make one. They can apparently express knowledge or at least insight, but are not straightforwardly true or false. They are almost omnipresent in daily life, but they require skill, eloquence, and keen observation. (Neisser, 2003, p. 29)

Due to their complexity, paradoxical nature, and the variability of language expressions metaphors undeniably belong to one of the most powerful tools for delivering universal truth in poetic discourse, especially when it comes to bard song lyrics and singing poetry. The effect of music resonating the verbal expressions of metaphors and multiplying their pragmatic force has been used by singing poets to produce the synergy of meaning and form and to reach the recipient's mind. S. McClary suggests an idea that 'meaning is not inherent in music, but neither is it in language; both are activities that are kept afloat only because communities of people invest in them, agree collectively that their signs serve as valid currency'. (McClary, 1991, p. 21)

Leonard Cohen – a poet and novelist as well as a songwriter, who died in 2016 aged 82, was as much a literary figure as a musical one. Early in his career, his novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966) caused the Boston Globe to declare that "James Joyce is not dead. He is living in Montreal under the name of Cohen.". (*Leonard Cohen Obituary. TheGuardian.com*) Yet L. Cohen was determined to establish himself as a song writer, and released fourteen studio albums during his lifetime. The last album *Thanks for the Dance* was released posthumously by his son Adam Cohen in 2019. In this paper, we will analyze the set of metaphors used by L. Cohen in his last album to summarize his life and share his idea of universal truth with the help of metaphorical conceptualization.

*The Rolling Stone* magazine gave the album 4 stars, praising the album and saying it is 'a magnificent parting shot that's also that exceptionally rare thing – a posthumous work as alive, challenging, and essential as anything issued in the artist's lifetime'. (Hermes, 2019) It should be noted, that the fact of the poet addressing the audience after his death it a metaphor by itself. Thus, the pragmatic effect of a poet delivering universal truth addressing his audience after his death produced unprecedented feedback upon the listeners and affected recipients' intellectual potential.

In his last collection of nine poems performed as songs or recitations, L. Cohen applies a unique metaphorization strategy of *mirroring conceptual metaphors*. The traditionally accepted in cognitive linguistics view on meta-

phorical projection as moving from source domain to target domain is substituted by a complete fusion of source and target domains in the existential conceptual metaphors involved in L. Cohen's poetry. The most outstanding mirroring metaphors are listed below:

DIVINE IS HUMAN,  
 PLEASURE IS PAIN,  
 OLD IS YOUNG,  
 FAITH IS BETRAYAL,  
 MOVING ON IS STAYING STILL,  
 VICTORY IS LOSS.

With his unique poetic style, L. Cohen presents these conceptual metaphors as universal truth, entwining his own life stories as examples. The listener can only understand the message of the song/poem having accepted this set of paradoxes imposed on him as metaphors. In the first song "*Happens To the Heart*" the concept of divine turning into human is exemplified by the following lines:

*I was always workin' steady but I never called it art  
 I got my shit together meeting Christ and reading Marx.*  
 or in:  
*I was selling holy trinkets, I was dressing kind of sharp  
 I let pussy in the kitchen and a panther in the yard.*

Metaphorical projections of *Christ* and *Marx* going together and complementing each other, as well as the possibility of selling holy trinkets and spending the received money on the pleasures of life produce mirroring mapping of two conceptual domains normally treated as opposites. If we apply propositional analysis to the examples represented above, we will get the following logical conceptual scheme:

P1 – "*got my shit together*" – survived;  
 P1 (Arg 1 + Arg 2) ("*meeting Christ*" + "*reading Marx*");  
 Survived ("*meeting Christ*" + "*reading Marx*").

This metaphorical projection indicates that for L. Cohen, to survive means to combine incombinable things, to merge with the opposites.

The next metaphorical example can schematically be presented as follows:

P1 ("*I was selling holy trinkets*") = doing forbidden things, manipulating with sacred things;

P1 = P2 (Arg1 + Arg 2 + Arg 3) (“*I was dressing kind of sharp*” + “*I let pussy in the kitchen*” + “*I let a panther in the yard*”).

The author brings about a provocative idea of getting all the pleasure of life at the cost of betraying one’s spiritual essence. Eventually, as the song goes by, he is advocating the concept of acceptance. By applying this conceptual strategy, L. Cohen creates a specific communicative environment where the concept of ACCEPTANCE dominated the recipient’s perception of the poem.

Another conceptual metaphor LIFE S NOT A FAIR GAME is exemplified in the following passage:

*In the prison of the gifted I was friendly with the guards  
So I never had to witness what happens to the heart.*

The previously activated strategy of acceptance dominates the perception of this metaphor, since the author describes the benefits of not playing by the rules:

P1 (“*I was in the prison the gifted*”) (Arg 1 + Arg 2 + Arg 3) (“*I was gifted*” + “*I was in the prison*” + “*The prison is for the gifted*”);  
P1 → P2;  
P2 (Arg 4 → Arg 5) (“*I never had to witness*” → “*what happens to the heart*”).

The conceptual metaphor LIFE S NOT A FAIR GAME is transformed here into a paradoxically mirroring metaphor GOOD IS BAD (BAD IS GOOD), which is very thought provoking and stirs the recipient’s mind.

While analyzing the argument structure of metaphors in L. Cohen’s poetry it is important to notice that the structural arguments of metaphors pertain to the metaphorical proposition as a whole. Each argument may function as a metaphor in itself (e.g. “*a prison for the gifted*”, “*to make friends with the prison guards*”). Still, the process of metaphorical design is so maturely verbalized by the poet, that the listeners travel from one level of metaphorization to another without being aware of it. In particular, this process has to do with the level hierarchy of metaphors at which metaphorical propositions are located in the text of the poem.

The process of recognizing and interpreting metaphors by the listeners may occur on both explicit and implicit levels. At the explicit level, a particular choice of language means clearly points out the metaphorical structure (“*a pussy in the kitchen and a panther in the yard*”). The implicit metaphorization deals with conceptual mapping, conceptual blending and ideological

presuppositions within the context of the poem. This is the case with the implicit metaphor WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HEART that is indicated in the title of the song and is discursively repeated almost in every stanza completing to the general metaphorical plane of the song:

- 1) *It failed my little fire but it spread a dying spark  
Go tell the young Messiah what happens to the heart;*
- 2) *It was nothing, it was business, but it left an ugly mark  
I've come here to revisit what happens to the heart;*
- 3) *Sure we played a stunning couple, but I never liked the part  
It ain't pretty, it ain't subtle, what happens to the heart;*
- 4) *May have broken every window, but the house, the house is dark,  
I care but very little what happens to the heart;*
- 5) *No fable here, no lesson, no singing meadowlark  
Just a filthy beggar guessing what happens to the heart.*

All the examples above indicate the activation of the implicit metaphor WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HEART IS LIFE. This particular metaphor functions both as implicit and explicit occurring in other multiple metaphors. These metaphorical clusters themselves may in turn be found in high-level or lower-level metaphors, too. That is why the argument defragmentation of metaphors is not always a good method for visualizing the metaphorical sequences of ideas since it lacks the visualization of the implicit level of metaphorization.

The content analysis and text interpretation of the represented above contexts of the conceptual metaphor WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HEART IS LIFE has demonstrated that the lexemes with negative connotation dominate in the immediate contextual environment, e.g. *a dying spark, an ugly mark, It ain't pretty, it ain't subtle, may have broken every window, the house is dark, no singing meadowlark, filthy beggar*. This eventually leads to the formation of another implicit conceptual metaphor – WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HEART IS PAIN. At a higher level of conceptualization these two metaphors merge into one – LIFE IS PAIN with its mirroring counterpart – PAIN IS LIFE. Taken in isolation, one of those mirroring metaphors may not have an effect on metaphor recognizability, but the combined effect of two mirroring metaphors may be what is needed to boost metaphor recognition and to maintain the main conceptual strategy of acceptance in the song. It is the systematic merge of mirroring metaphors that serves as a powerful tool for producing the pragmatic effect of paradoxicality in this particular song and in the whole album.

In the field of conceptual metaphor studies there have been made several attempts to systematize the set of the so-called 'active metaphors', live metaphors' or 'deliberate metaphors'. (Goddard, 2004) Active metaphors can be identified and recognized by the speakers of different languages. They rely on inner metalanguage of thinking, dealing with what Anna Wierzbicka called "semantic primes". Such metaphors are commonly used in poetry and artistic prose since they foster the metalinguistic awareness of the recipients and work in the cross-cultural domain.

Using or interpreting an active metaphor presupposes that the recipient is aware of the differences between the verbal arrangement of the utterances and their conceptual metaphorical meaning. Roughly speaking, the reader or the hearer feels that there is a difference between what the words say and what the speaker actually means.

C. Goddard offers four main criteria, which have been used either separately or together to make metaphors function as active:

- (a) dissonance or deviance between sentence meaning (literal meaning, etc.) and the speaker's intended or inferred meaning;
- (b) an implied statement of likeness (similarity, analogy, or comparison);
- (c) recognizability by the listener, linked with a 'colorful effect';
- (d) 'freshness' or novelty. (Goddard, 2004, p. 1213)

Having done the analysis of L. Cohen's song lyrics in his posthumous album "*Thanks for the Dance*" we suggest that paradoxicality should be added to the presented above list of criteria as a relevant facilitating device capable of making metaphors work as active. As a tool for metaphorical identification and interpretation, paradoxicality dominates the lyrics of another brilliant poem "*Thanks for the Dance*".

*Thanks for the dance. I'm sorry you're tired, the evening has  
hardly begun*

*Thanks for the dance. Try to look inspired, One-two-three, one-  
two-three, one.*

The paradoxical mirroring metaphor TIRED IS INSPIRED immediately activates metaphorical recognition and metaphoric thinking. Both *tired* and *inspired* are embodied categories that are universally and meta-lingually understandable. Their combination in the immediate context brings about an act of imagination, mediated by the contingent form of human body-mind experience. In this case, we deal with a special form of metaphoric cognition, i.e. an example of the productive interplay between intentional imagery and the body scheme. Normally, tired people do not look inspired and vice versa. However, this com-

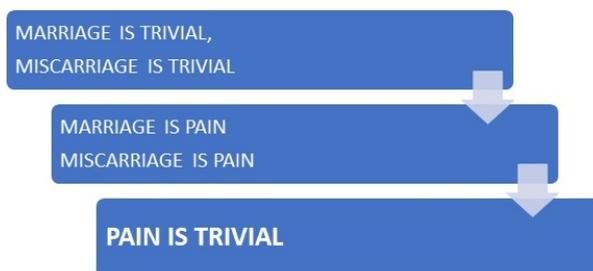
bination of incompatible experiences creates a powerful metaphorical effect leading the recipient into the anticipated world of poetic paradoxes.

The remarkable feature of *“Thanks for the Dance”* is the ekphrastic repetition of the phrase *One-two-three, one-two-three, one*, which creates the waltz-type rhythm in the poem, not to mention the soundtrack itself, which sounds as an intentionally simple waltz.

The second stanza of the poem evokes even more paradoxes. The two obvious conceptual metaphors hurting the recipient’s feelings are: 1) MARRIAGE IS TRIVIAL, 2) MISCARRIAGE IS TRIVIAL:

*Thanks for the dance. I hear that we’re married, one-two-three,  
one-two-three, one  
Thanks for the dance. And the baby you carried, It was almost  
a daughter or a son.*

The verbal description of a marriage does not normally take the form of *I hear that we’re married*. The author intentionally involves this paradoxical style of talking about important things with the artificial lightness to bring the recipient into a deeper layer of metaphorization. At this deeper layer the two above mentioned metaphors are transformed into hidden metaphors: 1) MARRIAGE IS PAIN and 2) MISCARRIAGE IS PAIN. These new metaphors are based on L. Cohen’s own personal tragedies and can be understood only by a limited number of audience familiar with his personal life. This cascade of metaphors (scheme 1.) merges with the previous ones producing one new complex metaphor – PAIN IS TRIVIAL that is not so obvious but due to its paradoxical nature still affects the perception of the entire poem.



Scheme 1: The cascade of conceptual metaphors

Apparently, the main active and easily recognizable metaphor that recipients may identify in *“Thanks for the Dance”* coincides with the central

metaphor of the whole album running under the same title: LIFE IS A DANCE. However, apart from the obvious artistic and esthetic parallels, this metaphor is meant to facilitate the main communicative strategy of the author – the strategy of acceptance.

In the poetic discourse of Leonard Cohen, two basic properties of active metaphors – clarity and affective impact – may lose their urgency under the strong impact of paradoxicality. In the song, the author depicts a set of interpersonal, affective lifestyle features, including lack of empathy (*I'm sorry you're tired but try to look inspired*) egocentricity (*I was so I, and you were so you*), grandiosity (*There is a rose in your hair, Your shoulders are bare, You've been wearing this costume forever*), shallow emotions (*So turn up the music, Pour out the wine, Stop at the surface, The surface is fine, We don't need to go any deeper*), irresponsibility (*I hear that we're married*). All these metaphorical phrases indicate various ways of violating social and interpersonal norms. The author calls for acceptance illustrating his intention by a line from another song “*A Night of Santiago*”:

*You were born to judge the world  
Forgive me, but I wasn't.*

Clarity and affectiveness as the basic properties of active metaphors may be hard to analyze within the discourse of L. Cohen's paradoxical metaphors, since they involve judgments about universally *good* and *bad* content that are difficult to control in paradoxical cognition. The multi-layer perception of Cohen's poetry may require an in-depth consideration of the facts from his professional and personal life. This way the beauty of his metaphorical coding will be accessed through determining intercoder agreement between the recipients and the poet. Thus, an ordinary listener will indicate and interpret the generally acceptable set of active metaphors. Whereas, the prepared recipient will involve the additional levels of analysis and will arrive at 'non-active' subjective, extremely personal but no less beautiful conceptual metaphors.

Out of all songs from the album, “*Moving On*” is the most emotional and full of passionate and bitter personal flashbacks dating back to the poet's life on the Hydra Island in Greece. It is said to be dedicated to his lover Marianne Ihlen who had died couple of months before Leonard Cohen passed away in November 2016. It should be noted, that unlike most of the songs from this album, “*Moving On*” is the least metaphorical, the least paradoxical maturely decorated by the set beautiful stylistic metaphors:

*- As for the world, the job, the war  
I ditched them all to love you more.*

– *Queen of lilac, Queen of blue*  
*Who's moving on, who's kidding who.*

However, in this song the author activates one of the most powerful active paradoxical metaphors LIFE IS AN ILLUSION by repeating an emotionally striking line *as if there ever was a you*:

– *And now you're gone, now you're gone*  
*As if there ever was a you*  
*Who broke the heart and made it new*  
*Who's moving on, who's kidding who...*  
 – *And now you're gone, now you're gone*  
*As if there ever was a you*  
*Queen of lilac, Queen of blue*  
*Who's moving on, who's kidding who...*  
 – *And now you're gone, now you're gone*  
*As if there ever was a you*  
*Who held me dying, pulled me through*  
*Who's moving on, who's kidding who*

This line is contextually entangled to another rhetoric question *Who's moving on, who's kidding who* evoking a universal existential metaphor LOVE IS ETERNITY. Thus, the conceptual layout of the song is represented by the following syllogism: *life is an illusion, but love is eternal* which is not paradoxical still might serve as a conceptual summary to the whole album.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize on the idea that conceptual metaphors are grounded in complex and systematic correlations of concepts within human understanding. Some universal correlations are triggered by universal metaphors based on similarities of structural or content properties of target and source domains. These are, by far, active working metaphors easily perceived and interpreted by the recipients.

In artistic poetic discourse of Leonard Cohen metaphor recognition and interpretation turn into a multi-level process of metaphorical mapping, clustering, merging and mirroring. These complicated cognitive procedures work differently in prepared and non-prepared recipients. L. Cohen's song lyrics are in many ways instances of self-confession discursively designed to please even the most neutral listeners. For a prepared reader/listener the author offers a deep-scale metaphorical journey, full of paradoxes, contradic-

tions but eventually leading to acceptance of life with all its beauty and troubles. Subsequently, the process of recognizing metaphors in a prepared recipient extends beyond the traditional conceptual metaphor analysis and involves many subjective additional features often based of paradoxicality.

Paradoxical metaphors are not merely conceptual matters aimed at combining the opposites, but also powerful persuasive devices. According to the result of the proposed analysis, we have concluded that paradoxical metaphors are not arbitrary. They are carefully chosen and programmed by the author in order to shake the recipient's mind, stir the process of understanding and foster the acceptance of reality. Paradoxical metaphors are also ideologically loaded, they employ ontological values, mix them, switch them causing the effect of confusion which eventually leads to acceptance. The only exception is the concept of LOVE, which, regardless its paradoxical nature, for Leonard Cohen always remains the main existential value. The use of paradoxical metaphors has become a recognizable feature of Leonard Cohen's poetic discourse creating his unique system of emerging metaphorical concepts in his eternally beautiful poems.

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