



Revealing Depth: The Significance of the Holocaust Genre in Understanding Conceptual Metaphor through The Tattooist of Auschwitz and The Librarian of Auschwitz

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Received: 30 Oct 2024; Received in revised form: 29 Nov 2024; Accepted: 05 Dec 2024; Available online: 13 Dec 2024
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Abstract— Since the Holocaust genre held its significance in terms of literature and cultural memory, it served as a medium for preserving historical truth, which can also foster empathy and develop critical thinking skills among individuals. This study explores the significance of using the Holocaust genre to understand the conceptual metaphor through two notable works: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris and *The Librarian of Auschwitz* by Antonio Iturbe. Indeed, the use of these two novels could bridge the gap between historical events and the readers using Lakoff's *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*, offering new insight into the roles of metaphor in representing Holocaust survivors' experience during wartime, which underlines the concept related to survival, identity, moral ambiguity, atrocity, etc.



Keywords—The Holocaust genre, conceptual metaphor, Holocaust literature, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, *The Librarian of Auschwitz*

I. INTRODUCTION

Referring to the Holocaust, it was a tragic event related to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazis) during World War II, affecting the European Jews as the main target of the genocide. Those who survived often struggle with emotional trauma, causing unspeakable silence. Their stories were usually told in literature, which can portray their experience and trauma during wartime after they were unable to speak about it. In this case, the Holocaust genre as literature often contained a subject of historical truth and ethical representation, in which they were mostly highlighting the survivors in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

To bridge the gap between this unspeakable trauma and event, the concept and the role of metaphor served this purpose, particularly the conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff (1993) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980). This is because metaphor can unveil the inner thoughts and ideology of the speakers through metaphorical expression in the form of everyday language

use and enable an understanding of human beliefs, values, and culture (Lakoff, 1993). According to Kövecses (2017), Lakoff (1993), and Semino (2008), the concept of conceptual metaphor can be elucidated as the two domains in which one concept conveying an abstract idea in terms of another refers to the pattern of TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN or TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN. As a result, metaphor can serve as a tool to provide additional expressions and new vocabulary to fill the gap of the inability of ordinary language use to describe and represent the Holocaust event and survivors' trauma.

Correspondingly, the significance of the Holocaust genre in literature contributed to a deep understanding of conceptual metaphor will be explored by utilizing the two fictional works: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris and *The Librarian of Auschwitz* by Antonio Iturbe. These contemporary novels are used due to the smaller number of recent Holocaust fiction used as part of conceptual metaphor analysis. Indeed, it aims to

understand how conceptual metaphor can represent the portrayal of the Holocaust and the survivors' traumatized experience and how it can be further applied in real-life situations. Accordingly, this literature will be followed by the subjects of the Holocaust genre, conceptual metaphor theory, the implementation between the Holocaust literature and conceptual metaphor with some examples of the analysis, and the role of conceptual metaphor in Holocaust texts.

II. THE HOLOCAUST GENRE: THEME AND NARRATIVE

Since the Holocaust was often related to the genocidal event during World War II, shedding light on Jewish people, the Holocaust survivors are likely to testify in the form of literature to portray their life in the concentration camp and traumatized events during wartime. Particularly at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was the center of extermination for the Final Solution, it becomes the primary setting in most Holocaust literature to demonstrate unspeakable truth in the themes of life, death, suffering, trauma, survival, etc. (Hunter, 2005). In the Holocaust genre in literature discourse, according to Aarons (2014), Czaplinski (2013), and Hunter (2005), the Holocaust has appeared as a subject of ethical and historical representation that can be in the form of documentary, testimony, novel, film, etc. . One of the characteristics of the Holocaust genre, proposed by Aarons (2014), Hunter (2005), Levin (1982), and Young (2004), is that it contains a mixture of different literary genres, namely "the blurring of the traditional genre," which differentiates other genres of literature. . Accordingly, these can be defined as considering these differences as (a) a failure of form and structure and (b) a failure to utilize ordinary language to represent the adequate Holocaust event and its historical complexity (Aarons, 2014). . As a result, Levin (1982) argued that the Holocaust genre can hardly be classified as a specific type of genre regardless of the consideration of its authentic and aesthetic work.

Consequently, it resulted in a problematic issue since there was a tension between the ethics and aesthetics of the reproduction and generalization of the Holocaust context in terms of arts and literature (Aarons, 2014; Hunter, 2005; Young, 2004). This concern is quite a significant issue because some critics argued that the Holocaust aesthetic works fail to encapsulate the depiction of the reality of life and actual events, resulting in a mixed and ambiguous collection of historical facts (Hunter, 2005; Young, 2004). Accordingly, this problematic concern raises questions regarding the authenticity and accuracy of Holocaust literature.

2.1 Examples of Holocaust genre in literature: *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *The Librarian of Auschwitz*

In contemporary Holocaust literature, many authors would claim the literary works are based on the true story of a Holocaust survivor who had experienced Auschwitz concentration camp (Iturbe, 2019; Morris, 2018). However, the authentic issue mentioned previously remained a significant concern because it appeared to blur the distinction between fiction and fact (Aarons, 1981; Foley, 1982; Scheiber, 2009). Especially *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, this novel has a prominent problem as it is reported to be inauthentic in terms of portraying prisoners' life experiences in the concentration camp (Witek-Malicka, 2018). As the novel is about the romantic story of the survivor named Lale, who is a tattooist working in Auschwitz, the novel fairly represents its reality while distorting historical facts, such as tattooing procedures and numbers, the camp atmosphere, and the sexual relationship amidst the atrocity (Witek-Malicka, 2018). Indeed, Morris argued that this work is not a historical documentary that would only rely on the facts rather than a piece of fiction, and she also included her imagination to enrich the narrative (Flood, 2018; Groot, 2010; Young, 2011). Similarly, in *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, the story of Dita, who is the librarian assistant living in the family camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, also lacks some historical evidence of certain events to ensure its accuracy, leading to ambiguity in terms of camp representation (Quealy-Gainer, 2017).

III. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Lakoff's (1993) Complementary Theory of Metaphor was further complemented by the contribution of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphor We Live By*. Due to this framework, the conceptual metaphor relies on the cross-domain of ordinary everyday language and human experience. (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This mechanism of generating conceptual metaphor was often operated at the unconscious level, resulting in the automatic use without users' explicit awareness (Gibbs, 1992; Kövecses, 2010, 2017; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Semino, 2008). Besides, to comprehend conceptual metaphors, the users also require an understanding of the cultural variation because different cultures may employ different conceptual meanings, leading to a variety of interpretations when interpreting the same metaphorical expression (Boroditsky, 2018; Buakhao, 2016). For instance, Western culture comprehends time in terms of moving entities from left to right. However, some cultures would rather conceptualize

time as a movement from front to back (Boroditsky, 2018; Buakhao, 2016).

Additionally, the conceptual metaphor can be formulated as the pattern of the relationship between the “target” and “source” domains in which one domain corresponds to another domain, as TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN or TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN (Kövecses, 2010, 2017; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Semino, 2008). In simpler terms, the concept of the target domain represents the abstract idea, while the source domain conveys a more concrete concept, which the target will align with the source domain, constituting a schematical reflection (Kövecses, 2004, 2010; Lakoff, 1993; Semino, 2008).

The example can be illustrated through LOVE IS A JOURNEY where LOVE represents the target domain, and JOURNEY represents the source domain. To comprehend and identify this correspondence, involved systematic mapping between the source and target domain, referred to the following sentence: “*We are not going anywhere*” (Kövecses, 2010, 2017; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Semino, 2008). In this case, the subject “we” signifies two people, while “not going anywhere” indicates the obstacle to reaching the destination of the journey, exemplifying the uncertain relationship or inability of two individuals to progress together (Kövecses, 2010).

IV. HOLOCAUST GENRE AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Since conceptual metaphors can reflect the reality of society and human life, this key concept is prevalent and utilized in various types of Holocaust genres in literature. Oster (2014) mentioned that the conceptual metaphor can capture the embodiment of the core of atrocity, especially the material substance and everyday presence of death-in-life, which facilitate the understanding of Holocaust survivors’ experience. Also, the conceptual metaphor can convey the pervasive sense of suffering and anti-Semitism endured by the Jewish people (Kahaky, 2015). Similar to Steinitz’s (2015) perspective, the conceptual metaphor can also serve to represent the unspeakable emotion or expression that the ordinary language is unable to convey the explanation for survivors’ trauma. In other words, this metaphor would serve as a tool for developing a new language for the survivors, as it can enable them to navigate life in the camp after the Nazis had alienated and stolen them from the normal world (Steinitz, 2015). Thus, with this ability of conceptual metaphor to depict the harsh and unbearable reality of the Holocaust, it potentially allowed the authors to universalize this experience to the readers as aiming to encourage them to relate their own

life with it and understand more of the Holocaust survivors (Kahaky, 2015; Oster, 2014; Steinitz, 2015).

V. EXAMPLE OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

By adopting the CMT framework, the following examples are the conceptual metaphors found in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *The Librarian of Auschwitz*. Taking the excerpt from Morris’s novel, the context is demonstrated as follows:

The next morning the two kind prisoners help Lale from the block and stand with him to await rollcall. How long has it been since I've stood like this? Numbers, numbers. Survival is always about your number. Being ticked off your kapo's list tells you that you are still alive. Lale's number is last on the list since he is the newest occupant of Block 31. He doesn't respond the first time it is called, has to be nudged. After a cup of old, weak coffee and a thin slice of stale bread, they are marched off toward their labor.

In this context, the conceptual metaphor is referred to as IDENTITY IS A NUMBER AND ENUMERATION. In this context and actual event, prisoners will receive the tattooed number when first registered in the camp. These numbers will be used to represent the prisoners' names in every activity. Since they represented the name and individual's identity, it would imply the dehumanizing process of reducing individuals to mere numerical representations, meaning to strip them of their identities and treat them as units within a system.

Moreover, the death can be indicated through the conceptual metaphor, DEATH IS A BURDEN, as referred to the following context:

Lale rests the legs he's been carrying on the ground and looks for the first time at the dead man's face. His compassion returns and he bows his head at this tragic end to yet another life. He gives an apologetic glance to the other man carrying the body and hurries to follow the guard. The other inmates of Block 31 all stare after him.

In this context, death is depicted from the act of “carrying” legs and looking at the dead man, which corresponds to the concept of shared burden. In this case, the burden is referred to as “returned compassion” and “the bowing head,” signifying that it is an emotional and psychological weight or gravity associated with death. Similar to the metaphorical meaning of carry in this context, it reflects the prisoners' daily activities they must do without rejecting because there will be dead prisoners every day. This experience could add more weight to those

who are alive since they are aware of the never-ending number of deaths. Also, the apologetic glance is considered a shared burden of death among prisoners.

On the other hand, the conceptual metaphor found in *The Librarian of Auschwitz* can be illustrated based on the context as follows:

Dita looks up, and her face, hands, and dress are spotted with tiny gray flakes that disintegrate between her fingers. The inhabitants of Block 31 come outside to see what's going on.

In this context, the conceptual metaphor is DEATH IS A POLLUTANT. The tiny gray flake is depicted as the ash, which simultaneously symbolizes the death domain. In terms of ash, it is an invasive, clinging substance that contaminates Dita's body. Also, ash disintegrates means clinging to surfaces and then dissolving, as well as the connotation of decay and destruction. In other words, this context reflects that seeing the ash indicates an awareness of the death of their friends, as it can refer to the underlined texts, "Come outside to see what's going on."

Another conceptual metaphor representing the character's life is SILENCE IS A SURVIVAL, based on the context:

Nobody sleeps in the family camp. Nobody speaks; nobody moves. In Dita's hut, when someone anxiously asks, "What's happening? What will happen to them?" in a loud voice, the other women, irritated, quickly tell her to be quiet and demand total silence. They have to keep listening, so they know exactly what's happening, or maybe they want complete silence so the SS officers won't hear them, won't notice them, and will let them stay alive on the filthy bunks – at least for a little longer.

In this context, the underlined texts signify silence, which corresponds to the active strategy for self-preservation. This is also the essential key strategy to survive and stay alive in the camp by avoiding catching the attention of the SS officers. It is because the prisoners are likely to encounter life-threatening torture if the Nazi officers pay attention to them. Indeed, the officers usually torture them without reason and do so for the sake of their pleasure.

VI. THE COMPARISON OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR BETWEEN TWO NOVELS

On the one hand, both novels shared similar themes of conceptual metaphors. The themes could be demonstrated directly through the protagonists of these novels, which portrayed life experiences and horrible events inside Auschwitz. For instance, both novels reveal the themes involving the prisoners' lives and identities, the survival strategy, the death, the suffering and torment, the

Nazis' authority, the camp environment, and the relationship between partner and mother-daughter. In the broader perspective, although both novels depicted the atrocity and hazards in Auschwitz, both protagonists retain their hope to survive. These reflections from both novels can indirectly foster empathy among readers in a way that they would likely feel for those victims and respect them as human beings.

On the other hand, these novels were likely to have their unique specificity. In *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, the conceptual metaphors mainly portray romantic relationships and the tattooist's duty, while *The Librarian of Auschwitz* would rather emphasize the role of the librarian assistant, the books, lives in the family camp, and school operation. Due to the different main themes of the novels, the same conceptual metaphors could be interpreted in different interpretations since the contexts are completely different.

VII. THE ROLE OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN HOLOCAUST TEXTS

According to Webber (2011), conceptual metaphor has the power to point out the truth. Exploring the roles of conceptual metaphor in Holocaust texts can provide the approaches that are significant for understanding the thought, language, and worldview, especially the facts of atrocity that can likely relate to their experience (Boroditsky, 2018; Buakhao & Deocampo, 2017; Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Webber, 2011). Also, comprehending the atrocity and trauma through real historical events can be essentially a tool to cultivate students' empathy, critical thinking, and a nuanced appreciation towards life through the way metaphor can shape their understanding of the past and hope for the future.

Although some critics would mention that empathy is difficult to teach and be taught, there would probably be an approach that can fill this gap, as Webber (2011, p. 23) argued that conceptual metaphor has the potential for "empathy as a crucial condition for ethical behavior." Due to this significant role, empathy skills can be examined through the dehumanizing conceptual metaphor used by the Nazis and Holocaust survivors so that students can develop their profound and psychological understanding of the concept of "stepping into other shoes" of the victims, underlying the genocide, atrocity, and human rights. In this essence, conceptual metaphor can help readers recognize the power of language as a weapon to marginalize and oppress, leading to physical violence (Musolff, 2007). Therefore, the themes in the Holocaust genre are the key to developing a deeper

empathetic understanding and inspiring greater compassion and a commitment to protecting human rights.

Regarding the role of enriching critical thinking skills, the Holocaust genre employed survivors' resistance, resilience, and moral triumph, reasserting the dignity, strength, and humanity of the victims along with the opponent's language (Musolff, 2007). For example, the analysis of the conceptual metaphor from the previous example, SILENCE IS SURVIVAL, can denote how the Holocaust survivors maintain their lives to survive. This concept demonstrated the survival strategy amidst the horror and hazardous situations, which simultaneously and indirectly indicated the candle flame of hope to be alive. Within the analysis of conceptual metaphor, readers can also develop the systematic function of the language and its potential to be used in certain circumstances in society for shared appreciation of human dignity. Additionally, it can encourage them to investigate and assume worth learning the language use and power dynamics of the way they shape individuals' understanding, thoughts, history, and vision of the future (Kansteiner, 2004).

VIII. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

8.1 Theoretical implication

The significance of theoretical implications would underscore the literary studies, cognitive science, and historical studies; however, this article will mainly emphasize the literature and cognitive linguistics. For the literary study, the study of conceptual metaphor using Holocaust genre literature can demonstrate how the Holocaust narratives shape the learners' understanding of the themes of dehumanization, human rights, dignity, and resilience. The learners could also learn the systematic cross-domain mapping of conceptual metaphor representations as they conveyed historical facts and unspeakable truths.

Within the cognitive linguistics aspect, the use of conceptual metaphors can illustrate how survivors' trauma developed the metaphorical formation. Due to the difference in reality in the camp itself and the outside world, this can also refer to the context of the survivors who developed and formed the language and metaphor used in the camp to represent their emotions. As for the roles of conceptual metaphor in Holocaust texts, it could illustrate how the survivors' unspeakable and collective memory operated through conceptual metaphor and its structure as well as demonstrate how their experience can be comprehended in the abstract in terms of the concrete concepts.

8.1 Practical implication

According to the educational context, the instructors can teach the historical context and event by choosing the Holocaust literature through the collection of conceptual metaphors and its metaphorical framework, involving cross-domain mapping and interpretation. This can lead to the development of emotional intelligence through metaphor analysis while it can build the critical thinking skills of the learners. Correspondingly, it then led to the implication of contemporary relevance that the instructors can use the current events of the Holocaust to be the setting for the learner. In 2024, the events that are relevant to the Holocaust can be demonstrated through the wars involving the genocide between different countries, such as Israel and Palestine or Russia and Ukraine. Using a conceptual metaphor framework, the learners could understand the pattern of dehumanization and Holocaust metaphors within this current discourse while they can cultivate empathy towards people and society.

IX. CONCLUSION

With the Holocaust context to understand the conceptual metaphor, this genre was capable of illuminating the function of conceptual metaphor while simultaneously demonstrating insight into the interpretation of unspeakable historical facts about the events. However, it is essential to consider that Holocaust literature can only capture some fragments of reality. With this limitation, it can lead to challenges for interpretation in which the readers were recommended to have historical background about such events. Additionally, this study's implication can also contribute to the understanding of current situations and traumatic experiences in other cases, not only the Holocaust, reminding us how conceptual metaphors can shape individuals' understanding and vision of the world. Also, the significant role of this would be beneficial since it can develop empathetic engagement and critical thinking skills. As for further research, a variety of Holocaust literature in this genre and other historical works can be utilized and examined using the conceptual metaphor framework to encapsulate the portrayal of historical events and understanding survivors' traumatized experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to Professor Joseph Foley for his invaluable guidance, and to my friends and family for their invaluable assistance in completing this research project. Eloquent Thanks to Assumption University of Thailand for the tremendous support availed during the research

process, including facilities and resources that have been extremely beneficial and indispensable to this study.

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