

ELŻBIETA MUSKAT-TABAKOWSKA 

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3676-792X>

Jagiellonian University (Professor Emerita)

elzbieta.muskat-tabakowska@uj.edu.pl

## THE IMAGE OF GRAMMAR AND THE GRAMMAR OF IMAGE\*

### Abstract

The paper deals with the relation between verbal expressions and mental images. As claimed by cognitive linguists, “understanding a verbal message” requires that two kinds of mental imagery be evoked: rich images, which are encoded in individual lexemes, and schematic images, conventionally related to grammatical structures. Based upon this principle, an analysis of a Polish poem and its English translation is carried out, in order to demonstrate that a complicated interplay between the two kinds of mental imagery underlies the texts and accounts for their interpretation.

**Keywords:** (un)countability, mental imagery, visual perception, image schema, translation, metaphor

“All I do is reforge the printed word into images (...) all I do is fill the printed word with images”.

Tadeusz Śliwa, director of the TV show *Ucho prezesa*  
[“The boss’s ear”, a satirical show on current political events in Poland]

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## Preliminary remarks

Whenever relations between words and images are mentioned, what usually comes to mind first is the relation of the word to its visual context: an image construed as a reflection of a fragment of reality as registered in the process of sensory perception, or as a remaking of that reflection in the form of a photograph, a drawing, a sculpture, etc. In short, an image seen by the physical eye, *oculis corporis*. This is also the relation borne in mind whenever various types of co-existence of word and image are studied in the context of intersemiotic translation.

In light of contemporary reflection by art theorists, psychologists and linguists, it is banal to state that, in the perceptual process, the formation of images depends both on human biological capacities (i.e. nature), and on the set of values, norms and models accepted by a given community (i.e. nurture). It is similarly obvious to state that, due to the spatio-temporal conditions of the perception process, images seen with the physical eye are metonymic, and hence incomplete, reflecting only a handful of projective aspects, or fragmentary representations of given projections of objects perceived from given vantage points (cf. Arnheim 2014).

Philosophers and experts in literary theory, probably more often than scholars who represent other disciplines, ponder the relations between the word and mental imagery, or images seen with “the mind’s eye”, *oculis mentis*. In writings on literature, a variant of mental imagery is postulated, called “readers’ visualizations” (cf. e.g. Rembowska-Pluciennik 2009), i.e. images, also metonymic, which the mind produces spontaneously during the reading process. An image generated by a verbal description comes into being thanks to the working of the apparatus of visual perception and is therefore a visual image, although not in the common understanding of the term (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2009: 128): the word automatically creates the image, calls it into existence.

Linguists who specialize in so-called “cognitive” linguistics (an imprecise term), take this line of reasoning even further. Rejecting the assumption of the primacy of image over language, as well as the belief in the primacy of thought over image, they propose that perception and language are closely connected in a number of ways. While not claiming, of course, that “all meanings are based on space or visual perception” (Langacker 2008: 55), they assume that visual perception and the making of concepts,

or conceptualization, are governed by similar laws and, at the subsequent stage of the act of communication, lend linguistic shape to the emerging expression. The repertoire of a given language consists of conceptualizations which achieved permanence by means of frequent usage. Although the model of language in Langacker's theory is not a visual one, mental imagery plays a highly important role within it.

Thus, the immanent fusion of perception and conception (or *-ception*, to use a term coined by Leonard Talmy; Talmy 1996), underlies language as a system and, with regard to the plane of de Saussure's *parole*, it is a condition of both the formation and the reception of linguistic communication – any and every kind of linguistic communication. Within the cognitive linguistics framework, mental imagery is not just a feature of the language of poetry or, speaking more broadly, of literature, but the foundation of every single act of linguistic communication.

Verbal description of an object of perception is a particular case of demanding that the recipient of the message conduct an act of translation between the linguistic and the visual. The level of specificity of an image created by a verbal utterance depends on the specificity of the verbal description. The same demand is made of the recipients in the case of messages which are not specific and which are not, strictly speaking, descriptions. In order to understand those, one also has to resort to mental imagery, the only difference being that the emergent images are largely abstract representations of perceptual experience. In cognitive linguistics, such representations are called “image schemas”. According to the definition operative in psychology, image schemas are characterized by some features of “mental images” – or representations in a person's mind of an object, person or situation, based on imagination and something previously experienced – but at the same time they are “schematic”, that is to say abstract, devoid of the representations of characteristics which are typical of objects. In linguistic communication, images of high specificity – so-called rich images – constitute the meanings of lexical terms, while (and this is what sets the cognitive linguistics model apart from most models of language) grammatical structures evoke image schemas, devoid of details. Both aspects of mental imagery must conspire, therefore, if the final effect of “understanding the message” is to be achieved.

## Case study: a poem

What I would like to show in this paper is that the translation of word into image (lexical meaning) and/or into “imagining” (image schema) forms the very basis of the reception of any linguistic message, thus determining its interpretation. The reader may wonder why I chose a poem to illustrate my point – a poem being traditionally believed to be the prototypical (or even sole) domain of imagery. There are three reasons for my choice. Firstly, any search for the meanings of a linguistic message (a text) must involve quoting this message *in extenso*, which, in the case of big chunks of text, can be rather trying, both in strictly technical terms, and in terms of concern for the reader’s stamina. This, then, is my pragmatic reason. Secondly, while linguistic phenomena encountered in “poetic” and “non-poetic” texts are of the same nature, as mentioned above, there are easily observable quantitative differences between these two types of utterances (which are distinct, after all, although divided by a fuzzy border): “poetic” texts contain more unconventional imagery, or imagery which requires the reader “to strain his/her awareness”.<sup>1</sup> In unconventional images, the translation of the verbal into the visual is less automatic than in the case of conventional images. Thus, if I should succeed in demonstrating that what forms the basis of such non-automatic translation is imagery, which can be described by reference to conventionalized image schemas, it would be possible to assume, fairly safely, that it is imagery that also determines less demanding interpretations – those of messages known as everyday communication. That is my semantic reason. The third and last consideration is translation. If it proves possible to demonstrate that what is required to interpret a poem is an evocation of a given image schema, that schema would have to be deemed the ultimate vital part (the “dominant”, to use Stanisław Barańczak’s term) of that particular text in translation: an aspect whose recognition and transposition are *sine qua non* conditions of a successful translation. This is the reason dictated by my concern with the study of translation.

The text I chose to illustrate my argument is an untitled short verse by the Polish woman poet Mira Kuś (1996: 200–201) and its English translation by

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase in Polish, *natężenie świadomości*, is the title of a book of poems by Michał Zabłocki (Warsaw, 1996), borrowed because of its suitability to my argument.

Regina Grol. What additionally motivated my choice was the (misleading) simplicity of the linguistic shape of the poem.

\* \* \*

Kamień, który mnie zgniata  
przemieniam na słowa. Dlatego często  
w moim słowie jest twardość kamienia, a moja mowa  
jest gwałtowna i poszarpana.

Patrzę w ślad za moimi słowami.  
Na twoją twarz i ramiona. I zamiast lekka  
staję się pusta.

The linguistic units which constitute the poem can be grouped into two elementary grammatical categories postulated by the cognitive linguistics model, namely: things and relations. Within the category of things, there are three salient elements: *kamień* (“stone”; rock, stone),<sup>2</sup> *słowo* (“word”; word) and *mowa* (“speech”; speech). The meaning of the poem is founded upon the juxtaposition between the concepts of mass (substance) and of countability (of objects), realized on the morphological level as the juxtaposition of the singular and the plural. *Słowo* is a count noun, an object which can be counted [see *słowa* (words) in line 2, *słowami* (with words) in line 5], but at the same time it is conceptualized as an uncountable substance [*w moim słowie* (in my word) in line 3] characterized by hardness; it becomes *mowa* (“speech” in the uncountable sense). There is an analogous distinction regarding *kamień*, another of the three things, in Langacker’s terminology. *Kamień* (rock, stone), conceptualized in Polish either as a substance characterized by certain features (as in the phrase *posadzka z kamienia*, floor of stone), or as a countable piece of that substance (as in the phrase *potknął się o kamień*, he stumbled on a stone), is present in both meanings in this text: the mass crushing the woman speaking in the poem is splintered into single word-stones,<sup>3</sup> thus losing the uncountability, yet retaining its most basic (or profiled, in cognitive linguistics terms) feature, i.e. hardness.

<sup>2</sup> In order to make the discussion of the Polish text of the poem accessible to the English reader, Polish words will generally be followed, in brackets, first by their counterparts in the English version of the poem and then by their basic lexical equivalent(s), as listed by the PWN-Oxford Polish-English Dictionary (translator’s note AP).

<sup>3</sup> The WORDS ARE STONES metaphor is discussed below.

Apart from things, there are relations holding between them, conventionally expressed in the poem by verbs, prepositions and adjectives. The relation between *kamień* (conceptualized as a mass of substance characterized by certain features) and the speaker in the poem [schematically outlined by the pronouns *mnie* (me) and *moja* (my/mine), and verbs in the first person singular, *patrzę* (“look”; look) and *staję się* (“grow”; become)] is described by the verb *zgniata* (“crushes”; crush; squash; flatten), rather than the form of the verb with the *przy-* prefix, *przygniata* (cf. such commonly used expressions as *kamień przygniata serce*, literally, a stone crushes my heart; *ciężar mnie przygniata*, literally, a huge weight squashes me up), more frequently used with metaphorical extensions. Both prefixes, *z-* and *przy-*, have spatial meaning. While *przy-* means “direct contact with a surface” or “an action on the surface of an object” (Janowska, Pastuchowa 2005: 101–102), *z-* combines the adlative meaning of “receding downward” (but possibly also from any or all directions) with the perlative meaning of “encompassing with an action a certain fragment of space” (197). Thus, of the two, the construction “z+verb” implies a more definite, all-embracing action. It also distinctly signals the perfective aspect of the verb (200). The unbounded (uncountable) weight in the poem seems therefore more crushing than would be any described with the conventional expressions discussed above.

The poem’s speaker *przemienia* (“turns”; turns, transforms, transfigures) stone *na słowa* (“into words”). Here, again, being able to choose between the two preverbal prefixes *z-* and *prze-*, the poet uses *prze-*. Verbs formed with both prefixes express “a change in the object” but, unlike *zmieniam*, the verb *przemieniam* has perlative meaning, and the prefix *prze-* “weakens the action” (Janowska, Pastuchowa 2005: 92). So it does: where earlier there was uncountable stone, now there are countable words. The transformation, however, is somewhat superficial: the mass is fragmented into separate objects which retain the original characteristics of the mass – single words retain the hardness of stone. And, taken together, they still form the (uncountable) *mowa* (speech).

Relations between things are also built, in the cognitive linguistics model of language, by prepositions. In line 2 of the poem there appears *na* (on), a preposition with a basically spatial meaning. With a noun in the accusative – as in *na słowa* (“into words”, on words) – *na* evokes the adlative meaning ‘where to’, thus “referring to the image of a path” (Przybylska 2002: 303). In Polish, the phrase with *na* + *acc* is therefore dynamic, in contrast to a static construction with the preposition *na* (on) with a noun in the locative

case. The goal of an object's "undirected motion in space" (Przybylska 2002: 241, 303) is prototypically "the uppermost, horizontal, uncovered outer surface" (305); this schematic meaning is found in metaphorical extensions of this conceptualization (cf., e.g., *iść na zebranie*, literally, to go on a meeting; compare the English phrase "to go on a spree"). However, the verb *przemieniać* ("turn [into]"; turn, transform, transfigure), of key importance in the poem, just as often occurs in combination with the preposition *w* (in);<sup>4</sup> *w* (in) with the noun in the accusative also evokes the image of a path, yet with the motion usually directed into a closed space conceptualized as a container (see also below). *Przemiana x na y* (literally, transformation of *x on y*) is therefore less radical than *przemiana x w y* (literally, transformation of *x in y*). The Polish linguist Renata Przybylska explains the difference as follows: "(...) the phrase *w + acc* seems to denote a total transformation of the trajector, while *na + acc* is used when the transformation is incomplete, partial or superficial; **the transformation of the trajector involves only some selected features**, with its inherent structure left intact" (Przybylska 2002: 322; emphasis E.T.). In the poem under discussion, the selected transformed feature is uncountability; the hardness remains unchanged.

The *w + acc* construction appears in line 5, in the idiomatic phrase *w ślad za* ("in the traces of"; to follow sb/sth). Like other combinations of the preposition *w* (in) with a noun in the accusative, discussed above, this phrase "refers to the image schema of a path" (Przybylska 2002: 241); in the poem, however, the prototypical motion in physical space (as in, e.g., *iść w ślad za przywódcą*, to follow the leader) is metaphorically extended to express the mainly abstract motion of "following something with one's eyes". In the next line, that abstract motion ends at its goal, the face and shoulders of the person schematically referred to with the pronoun *twoja* ("your"). Here, too, the phrase *na + acc* (*patrzę na*, literally, I look on) evokes the image of movement directed at a surface, without penetrating inside (compare and contrast with e.g. *patrzę w przyszłość*, literally, I look into the future).

Relations between things are also built by adjectives. The first two adjectives in the poem refer to *mowa* (speech) – uncountable, though comprised of countable words. Speech is described as *gwaltowna* ("impetuous"; violent) and *poszarpana* ("jagged"; torn up, jagged, cragged). This combination

<sup>4</sup> The Google search engine returns 99,700 records for the phrase *przemieniać na* and 102,000 records for *przemieniać w* [access: 17 January 2018].

emphasizes the co-existence of countability and uncountability, vital to the meaning of the whole poem: while the adjective *gwałtowna* (violent) can describe, in Polish, both countable objects (e.g. *gwałtowny człowiek*, a violent man), uncountable processes (e.g. *gwałtowny wzrost*, literally, violent growth) and abstract notions (e.g. *gwałtowne usposobienie*, violent temper), the epithet *poszarpany* in Polish prototypically evokes countability: *poszarpany* means “divided into a number of fragments”, but it can also mean “being torn in many places” (cf. *poszarpane ubranie*, ragged clothing); what the latter could mean in this context is that the even outline of the uncountable “speech” is destroyed. Violently splintered into word-stones, speech loses its integrity.

The other two adjectives are *lekki* (“lighter”; light) and *pusty* (“empty”; empty, vacant, blank). Owing to the preposition *zamiast* (“instead”; instead), each of them evokes its antonym, its mirror image of opposite meaning; according to a dictionary of Polish, *zamiast* points to “an object or action which was expected but did not occur (with the contrast underlined)” (WSJP). Being *lekki* (light) would be the (expected) effect of getting rid of the crushing weight of the stone. The adjective *pusty* (empty) means “having nothing inside” (WSJP): a prototypical lexical unit evoking the image schema of a CONTAINER.<sup>5</sup> I would like to claim that this is the schema responsible for the most obvious interpretation of the poem. Basic concepts are realized in the text in their conventional linguistic forms. What these forms express are conceptual models, or image schemas. In this poem, there are four of those.

The first – and most important – is the image schema of a CONTAINER, involving the binary opposition “inside-outside”, as well as the concepts of containing and surface. In the text under discussion, the container which is the word/speech contains the hardness of stone (“there’s hardness of stone in my words”). The speaker of the poem, the schematic I (*I*) and its equally schematic addressee (*you*) are also conceptualized as containers, in keeping with a human’s elementary self-image. The weight of the stone crushes the I – the stone is outside the I and its removal is expected to result in a feeling of lightness in the I. Word-stones fall **on** the surface of the *you*, rather than penetrate inside (which would be, supposedly, the desired effect). The key element of the CONTAINER schema is content: a container can be either empty or filled to any degree. In the last line of the poem, the I becomes *pusta* (empty): the container has been emptied of its contents (which follows

<sup>5</sup> Following the convention, the names of image schemas are put in capital letters.



from the semantics of the verb *stawać się* (“grow”; become). According to this logic, words must have been inside before: stone not only crushed the container from without, but also filled it from within. The speaker of the poem begins to understand that the weight burdening her exists simultaneously outside and inside her, and that it is irremovable; she “spat it out”, and still, even though now empty, she does not feel light.

Reviewers of the first draft of this paper suggested the need for a stronger emphasis on the axiological aspect of those two adjectives, which is significant in the overall interpretation of the poem. Metaphorical extensions of the CONTAINER schema unquestionably have axiological value: the concepts expressed by the adjectives “light” and “empty” are positively and negatively charged, respectively: “light” is “good” and “empty” is “bad”. The speaker in the poem expects to feel light after the removal of the (outside and inside) weight, but instead of feeling light (or feeling positive relief from a burden), she feels empty (or experiences an “emotional void”, a negative lack of all feeling).

Another image schema contributing to the interpretation of the poem is that of SPACE. There are the elementary directions of space in the poem: UP-DOWN (evoked by *zgniata*, crushes) and FORWARD-BACKWARD (evoked by *w ślad za*, to follow sth/sb), structuring the mental imagery in spatial dimensions. The other two image schemas, namely the MOTION schema and the SINGULARITY/MULTIPLICITY binary, seem even more important in view of the reading of the poem. The former makes it possible for the reader to imagine the great mass weighing the I down (cf. part of the meaning of “downward” above); moreover, in the guise of the already discussed SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, it marks the trajectory of the word-stones from the I to the you. The latter schema underlies the metaphor serving as the leitmotiv of the poem, i.e. the simultaneous countability and uncountability of the word-stones/word-speech-stone, the divisibility and non-divisibility of stone-speech. A mass crushes and fills a person at the same time (more completely than would a multiplicity of single elements); shattered into pieces and thrown (impetuously, violently), it travels through space to land on the face and shoulders of the person sketched by the pronoun *your*.

The interpretation of the poem, then, is a resultant of several image schemas without which the process of understanding would not be complete. In this sense, an interplay of the schemas forms the dominant semantic feature of the text. If so, then the same image schemas should be generated in the reader’s mind by a translation (in this case, the translation into English).

## Case study: the poem in translation

The English translation of the poem, by Regina Grol, goes as follows (Kus 1996: 200–201):

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The stone which crushes me  
I turn into words. That's why often  
there's hardness of stone in my words, and my speech  
is impetuous and jagged.

I look at the traces of my words.  
At your face and arms. And instead of growing lighter  
I grow empty.

In the first two lines, the transformation of stone into words seems more radical than that in the original, owing to the preposition *into*, implying a thorough transformation of the trajector (penetration inside, see above). The completeness of the transformation is also suggested by the plural form of the noun word (*words*, line 3), which irreversibly shatters speech into countable elements, every one of each is characterized by the hardness of stone. *Speech* (conceptualized as substance) is *impetuous*: like the Polish adjective *gwaltowny* (“impetuous”, violent), it does not profile (un)countability. Neither does the adjective *jagged* (unlike the Polish *poszarpana*).

Line 5 contains the most striking deviation from the original text. The image is no longer dynamic: in the English version, the person denoted by the pronoun *I* simply watches the traces left by the words into which the stone crushing her was transformed. She also looks at the face and shoulders of the person described as *you*; possibly even with no connection to watching the traces. Lastly, in the penultimate line, the *I* describes what she feels: contrary to expectations (“instead”), the *I* does not become lighter, because although the word-stones left traces (and then vanished?), the outer burden has not diminished; the only stone that is gone is the one inside the person-container: *I grow empty*.

What is the effect of these changes in the structure of mental imagery in the English version of the poem? The *I* and the *you* are not conceptualized as CONTAINERS: it is unclear whether the word-stones crush the speaker in the poem or are lodged inside her. Neither is it clear what effect they have on the *you*; it cannot even be inferred if they have any direct (spatial) relation to him/her at all. SPACE has no direction: the action of the stone (*crushing*) does

not unequivocally evoke an image of a force working “down”; the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, marking the trajectory of the word-stones, is missing altogether. Motion is no longer as dynamic – the original adlative *w ślad za* (“at the traces of”, to follow sth/sb) is rendered as the locative *at*. Finally, the opposition inherent in the image schema SINGULARITY/MULTIPLICITY is blurred, as the transformation of the countable into the uncountable is radical and final, and the original blurriness of boundaries between what is singular and what is multiple disappears. To put it bluntly, Regina Grol writes her own poem. Which, incidentally, does not mean that it is inferior.

### Some invaluable suggestions

Would it be possible, I wondered, to retain the original relations between the words and the mental images? Let me focus on some of the translator’s choices.

The verb *crush* does evoke the crushing schema (which, as was already mentioned, prototypically involves downward motion); nonetheless, perhaps it would be a good idea to search for a verb evoking the concept of heaviness, inherent in the Polish word *kamień* (rock, stone, in its uncountable sense), such as e.g. *oppress*. Using the singular form of *word* in line 3 would underscore the material sameness of the uncountable stone and the uncountable word. Translating *w ślad za* as, for instance, [*my gaze follows*] *in the wake of* [*my words*], would make it possible to keep intact the schematic image of following a path. Choosing the adjective *light* instead of its comparative form, *lighter*, would highlight the counterfactual perfective aspect: had the woman speaker become light (not *lighter*, mind!), the weight crushing her would have been completely gone and not merely decreased.

### Conclusions

The above analysis is not complete; nor does it claim to be the key, or even the best key, to the interpretation of the meanings of the poem. The interpretation I propose is, of course, not the only possible one. As each language is, by nature, metonymic, every instance of its use is metonymic as well; therefore, to state the obvious, every object and every phenomenon can be interpreted in a number of ways. In poetry, metonymy features more prominently than in

everyday communication; therefore, the number of possible interpretations is higher, too, with the proviso that some are more justified than others (as literary critics would eagerly tell anyone who asked). An analysis conducted from the linguistic perspective can validate the kind of interpretation which seems most probable, as rooted in the linguistic material constituting what the author actually said, rather than what they meant to say.

At the same time, an analysis of this kind can support claims made by the fathers and researchers of cognitive grammar. Claim number one, that content is symbolized by grammar to the same extent that it is symbolized by the lexicon, requires no substantiation: today it is simply irrefutable. Morphology (e.g. inflection) and syntax (e.g. the structure of prepositional phrases) reinforce lexical semantics in building up overall senses of linguistic messages. This was illustrated in this paper by the examples of the category of (un)countability and the combinations of prepositions with nouns in the accusative case. What still has to be highlighted is the role of image schemas underlying linguistic expressions in determining interpretation.

The poem by Mira Kuś is not rich in descriptive detail – as the above discussion has shown, things and relations holding between them are just roughly sketched, with the light shone only on those features which are indispensable for understanding the text. In cognitive linguistics terminology, all the lexical material used in the poem are linguistic forms belonging to the basic level of categorization; on the higher, specific level, there is only the metaphor WORDS ARE STONES, and it is a rather worn one (cf. e.g. the saying *Ślowo wylatuje ptakiem, a wraca kamieniem*, literally “the word flies out as a bird and comes back as a stone”). The beauty and the originality of the poem consist in something else: they depend on mental imagery, a network of image schemas evoked by particular linguistic forms and their combinations. And it is this network that is the poem’s “dominant”, one that the translator is obliged to render in another language.

Recognizing that network as the key element in the interpretation of the poem is not overly difficult: all that is required from the reader is attention. Whether or not the interrelated image schemas are retained – and they generally lend themselves easily to transportation into other languages, given their high degree of schematicity – seems decisive for assessing the translation. The English poem by Regina Grol is a skilful poetic text in its own right – it is not, however, an adequate translation of the poem by Mira Kuś. Suggesting alternative choices (as I did above) does not mean, of course, that I wish to defend the principle of formal equivalence, which (just as

the less controversial dynamic equivalence) is no longer very relevant in Translation Studies. All that my suggestions are meant to show is that the reading of mental imagery on a deep level can be an object of reflection on the nature of translation, as well as its worth.

I do realise that the last of my conclusions is arguably the most controversial. Let me quote Aristotle, then, for the extra confidence that leaning on an authority can inspire: the soul never thinks without an image.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the relation between word and image is the foundation of all linguistic communication.

Translated from Polish by Agnieszka Pokojaska

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* (transl. J.A. Smith), Book III, 431a. <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Aristotle/De-anima/de-anima3.htm> [access: 17 January 2018].