

The Conceptual Image of Fate in the Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Poetic image is viewed as a cognitive structure which has two plains – conceptual and verbal. A conceptual plain of the image is understood as a discrete integrity. The idea of discreteness has been laid at the basis of the conceptual analyses of verbal poetic images in terms of idealised cognitive models, or image-schemas (Lakoff, 1987).

In order to understand the meanings of the words in a language we must first have knowledge of the conceptual structure, or semantic frames, which provide the background and motivation for their existence in the language and for their use in discourse. Lakoff has approached the subject of grammar and semantics in a way that appears to be more in accord with the biological and psychological facts than generative grammars are. He starts from actual data on categorisation and proposes that meaning results are the intrinsic workings of the body and the brain. He suggests that individual humans construct cognitive models that reflect concepts concerned with the interactions between the body-brain and the environment. It is this conceptual embodiment, he claims, that leads to the formulation of basic-level categories.

Cognitive models are created by human beings, and in this sense they are idealised – that is, they are abstractions. But they depend on the formation of images as the result of sensory experience and they also depend on kinaesthetic experience – the relation of the body to space. Lakoff suggests that the exercise of these functions leads to various image and kinaesthetic schemas. Schemas have properties that are reflected later in the use of metaphor and metonymy.

Thus, schematic frames are schematic representations of the situations involving various participants, props and other conceptual roles, each of which is a frame element. The lexical items are accounted for in relation to the frames, which motivate them.

So we can say that an image-schema is a mental pattern that:

- recurrently provides structured understanding of various experiences;
- is available for use in metaphor as a source domain to provide an understanding of yet other experiences.

A source domain is a concept that is metaphorically used to provide the means of understanding other concepts.

Various aspects of event structure, including notions like state, changes, processes, actions, causes, purposes and means, are characterised via metaphor in terms of space, motion and force. The general mapping that has been found by Lakoff (1987) goes as follows:

The Event Structure Metaphor:

- States are locations (bounded regions in space)
- Changes are movements (into or out of bounded regions)
- Causes are forces
- Actions are self-propelled movements

- Purposes are destinations
- Means are paths (to destinations)
- Difficulties are impediments to motion
- Expected progress is a travel schedule; a schedule is a virtual traveller
- External events are large, moving objects
- Long-term, purposeful activities are journeys

This mapping generalises over an extremely wide range of expressions for one or more aspects of event structure.

Abstract concepts are not defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead they are defined by clusters of metaphors. Each metaphor gives a partial definition. These partial definitions overlap in certain ways but in general they are inconsistent ontologies.

There is a class of metaphors that function to map one conventional mental image onto another, often with many concepts in the source domain mapped onto many corresponding concepts in the target domain.

Take, for instance, the phrase:

“...he endures his fate,
enveloped in the mist of death ”

(“The Fortunes of Men” [41-42])

Here the image of the man’s fate is mapped not only onto the image of his destiny, but also onto the image of his life path, that approaches its inevitable end. And the words “enveloped in the mist of death” underline the idea of doom, of impossibility to change fate and to avoid death.

Or take Beowulf’s words:

“...fate has swept all my kinsfolk off,
undaunted nobles, to their doom;
I must go after them”

(“Beowulf” [2814-2816])

There is a superimposition of the image of destiny onto the image of some life events or actions that affected people and made them doomed, that is led them to death.

So we can see that abstract concepts are defined by clusters of metaphors, each of which gives a partial definition. These partial definitions overlap in certain ways, but in general they are inconsistent ontologies.

Studying poems dealing with the image of fate, I found out that fate associates with doom:

“...wounded by the spear,
they fell as was fated”

(“Beowulf”[1074-1075])

“...they deprive the man fated for death of his life”

(“The Seafarer”[70])

And doom, or rather, death is personified in a relatively small number of ways: troops, warriors, dragons, devourers and destroyers like sea, ocean, fire. Why these? The overwhelming number seems to fit a single pattern: events (like death) are understood in terms of actions done by some agent. It is the agent that is personified.

This statement seems to be true to life, taking into consideration the meaning that Anglo-Saxons put into the concept of fate. For them the fate meant a destiny created by one's earlier actions, but not a helpless predestination. Wyrð was pictured as a web. The symbology was excellent. When a spider steps onto a thread, the vibration affects the entire web and that which was contained within the web, just as our actions affect our immediate world and the world of those around us, as well as the actions of others affect our lives.

So, events are actions. This general metaphor combines with other, independently existing metaphors for fate-doom and death:

“...fate has swept all
my kinsfolk off to their doom”
(“Beowulf”[2814-2815])

“...the cruel fire, the red fierce blaze,
shall devour the doomed man”
(“The Fates of Men”[44-45])

“...the sea has him in her clutches”
(“The Exeter Gnome”[106])

All these metaphors presuppose some transition, movement, departure from one world or state to the other.

Consequently, fate is departure. And departure is an event. If we understand this event as an action on the part of some causal agent – someone who brings about, or helps to bring about departure – then we can account for figures like warriors, dragons, seas and other devours and destroyers.

Destruction and devouring are actions in which an entity ceases to exist. The same is true of doom, which, in fact, is death. The overall “shape” of the event of death is similar in this respect to the overall “shapes” of the events of destruction and devouring. Moreover, there is a causal aspect to death: the passage of time will eventually result in death, as everybody is doomed to it.

Thus, the overall shape of the event of death has an entity that over time ceases to exist as the result of some cause.

Metaphorical mappings do not occur isolated from one another. They are sometimes organised in hierarchical structures, in which “lower” mappings in the hierarchy inherit the structure of the “higher” mappings.(Lakoff, 1987)

We have already ascertained that fate is a departure and doom is a departure. Departure always presupposes movement. So we can say that fate is a movement and doom is a movement. We have although cleared out that fate is a life path or, strictly speaking, a life. If fate is a movement than life is also a movement.

We can depict this hierarchically:

Level 1: A purposeful life is a movement.

Level 2: Fate is a movement.

Level 3: Death is a movement.

Target Domain: Events.

Source Domain: Space.

- States are locations (bounded regions in space).
- Changes are movements (into or out of bounded regions).
- Causes are forces.
- Actions are self-propelled movements.
- Purposes are destinations.
- Means are paths to destinations.
- Difficulties are impediments to motion.
- Expected progress is a travel schedule; a schedule is a virtual traveller, who reaches pre-arranged destinations at pre-arranged times.
- External events are large, moving objects.
- Long-term, purposeful activities are movements.

In the Event Structure Metaphor purposes are destinations and a purposeful action is self-propelled motion toward a destination. In pagan culture life was assumed to be purposeful, that is Anglo-Saxons were expected to have goals in life. They were: to accomplish feats and to win glory. A purposeful life is a long-term, purposeful activity, and hence a movement. Goals in life are destinations on the movement. The actions one takes in life are self-propelled movements, and the totality of one's actions form a path one moves along. Choosing a means to achieve a goal is choosing a path to a destination. Difficulties in life are impediments to motion. External events are large moving objects that can impede motion toward one's life goals. One's expected progress through life is charted in terms of a life schedule, which is conceptualised as a virtual traveller that one is expected to keep up with.

In short, the metaphor "A purposeful life is a movement" makes use of all the structures of the Event Structure Metaphor, since events in a life conceptualised as purposeful are subcases of events in general.

A Purposeful Life is a Movement.

Target Domain: Life.

Source Domain: Space.

The person leading a life is a traveller.

Inherits Event Structure Metaphor, with:

- Events = Significant Life Events.
- Purposes = Life Goals.

Thus, in the texts of Old English poetry we can come across the phrases like:

“...his soul departed from his body
to journey to the doom of righteous men.”
(“Beowulf” [2819-2820])

“Scots and seafarers
sank doomed; the field grew slippery
with the blood of men when the sun,
the famous light, glided over the earth,
in the morning, the bright candle of God,
the eternal Lord, until that noble creation
sank to rest.”

(“The Battle of Brunanburh” [11-17])

“There arose no little fame to Sigemund
after his death-day,
since he, hardy in battle, had killed the dragon.”
(“Beowulf” [884-886])

So, the “Fate is a movement” metaphor inherits the structure of the “Life is a movement” metaphor.

Fate is a movement:

Target Domain: Fate.

Source Domain: Space.

The doomed men are travellers.

Inherits the “Life is a movement” metaphor.

Death is another aspect of life that can be conceptualised as a movement. Death presupposes some transition from one state, from one form of existence to another, and departure from one world to the other.

So the metaphor “Death is a movement” also inherits the structure of the “Life is a movement” metaphor.

Bede in his famous “Death-Song” names death “the necessary journey”:

“Before the necessary journey, no one
Is wiser than he should be,
Who considers before his going hence
What may be judged of his soul for good and evil
After the day of his death.”

(“Bede’s Death-Song”)

We can find similar motives in other Old English poems, too:

“Always, south or north, they find some one
skilled in lays, bountiful in gifts,
who wishes to exalt his fame among his retinue,

and do heroic deeds, until all passes away,
light and life together; he gains praise
and has enduring glory under the heavens.”

(“Widsith” [138-143])

“Then at the fated hour Scyld,
very brave, passed hence into the Lord’s protection.”

(“Beowulf” [26-28])

This inheritance hierarchy accounts for a range of generalisations.

First, there are generalisations about the lexical items. Take the word “fate”. Its central meaning is destiny. But it can be used in a metaphorical sense to speak of one’s life, of a life path, or of doom.

The hierarchy allows one to state a general principle that fate is extended lexically via the submetaphor of the Event Structure metaphor that “Long-term Purposeful Activities Are Movements”. All its other uses are automatically generated via the inheritance hierarchy. Thus, separate senses for each level of the hierarchy are not needed.

The second generalisation is inferential in character. The understanding of difficulties as impediments to travel occurs not only in events in general, but also in a purposeful life, in fate relationship, and in death. The inheritance hierarchy guarantees that this understanding of difficulties in life, in fate is a consequence of such an understanding of difficulties in events in general.

The hierarchy also allows us to characterise lexical items whose meanings are more restricted. Thus, passage into the Lord’s protection or the necessary journey refers only to death, not to fate relationship or to life in general. Such hierarchical organisation is a very prominent feature of the metaphor system of English and other languages. So far we have found out that the metaphors higher up in the hierarchy tend to be more wide spread than those mappings at lower levels. Thus, the Event Structure Metaphor is very widespread (and may even be universal), while the metaphors for life, fate and death are much more restricted culturally.