

Blending, Iconicity, and Concrete Poetry

This paper will examine the connection between visual and verbal communication in concrete poetry, using the work of Canadian poet, bpNichol, as a starting point (1985, 1990). This type of poetry is often multimodal and uses both visual and verbal cues to construct meaning; the poems employ the materiality of both the page and language through manipulations and evocations of space, arrangement, typography, artistry, and spelling. For example, one very brief poem consists simply of the phrase *em ty* in the middle of an otherwise blank page. The removal of the letter 'p' makes the word more impactful as it becomes visually what it is semantically. Also, the word's spatial arrangement on an almost blank page emphasizes the standard typographic conventions whereby pages are filled with print. Therefore, this poetic mode adds meaning through the visuality of its words and spaces, and ascribes meaning to the often ignored materiality of the written word and the page on which it resides.

To examine this seemingly simplistic mode of poetry, I will use Hiraga's iconicity and blending framework (2005), extended from Sweetser and Fauconnier's (1996) and Fauconnier's and Turner's mental spaces and blending model (1998, 2002), with its insights into iconicity and metaphor. I will employ and enhance it to examine how these visual/verbal constructs foreground and redefine the nature of form/meaning blends involved in all written communication. I will look at the ways in which concrete poetry manipulates and employs both imagic and diagrammatic iconicities, as well as image schematic concepts, negative spaces, metonymy, and framing. Examples will range from crossword-puzzle style graphic arrangements exploiting the potential verticality of writing, through manipulation of the page space, to typographic choices which help metonymically evoke iconic images. Returning to the example above, the form mimetically correlates with meaning via what Hiraga calls imagic iconicity. However, the evocation of the container schema also extends the meaning potential through diagrammatic iconicity, since the form of the word participates in constructing its meaning; furthermore, this same image schematic concept applies to the seeming emptiness of the page, so that the very presence of the word negates its meaning (the word's form and meaning evoke emptiness, but the form 'fills the page'). Analyzing the blends constructed by this simple poem reveals a layering of iconic, metonymic, and metaphorical mappings which jointly prompt a complex interpretation.

I will examine several stylistically different poems to reveal the complexity of their misleadingly simplistic form and propose a framework which puts this literary form in a broader linguistic context. I will also try to show how the framework may be extended to link concrete poetry to other multimodal forms of expression, such as advertising, comics, or graphic novels. I want to argue further that experimental forms of poetry have much to offer to the broadly conceived cognitive linguistic inquiry into construction of meaning. At the same time, such studies may open new avenues for investigation of literary forms.

References:

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