

## William Blake's 'A Poison Tree': A Linguistic Approach to Metaphor

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## 〈Abstract〉

In this paper I attempted to analyse the metaphoric utterances occurring in poetry from the linguistic point of view. Judging from the various definitions, I think that metaphor does not come from the deviant syntactic structures but from the semantic tension—the tension between tenor and vehicle arising from the co-presence of similitude and dissimilitude. Such tension is made possible by violating some of the grammatical rules.

The metaphoric sentences in Blake's poem 'A Poison Tree' will be analysed, and the elements of metaphor and the metaphoric processes will be examined and given linguistic interpretation.

Finally, the referential context will be reconstructed out of the clues provided by the metaphoric structures, and the validity of linguistic interpretation of metaphor will be examined.

## 隱喻의 言語學的 研究

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## 〈要 約〉

본 논문에서筆者는 隱喻의 言語學的 分析을 시도해 보았다. 은유에 관한 여러가지 정의를 종합해 볼때, 은유는 비문법적 文章構造보다는 意味의 緊張—tenor와 vehicle간의 意味의 類似性과 差異點에서 오는데서 생긴다는 것을 알 수 있다. 이러한 의미의 긴장은 文法規則의 일부를 어김으로서 가능하여 진다.

Blacke의 詩 'A Poison Tree'에서 은유의 構成要素를 찾아내고, 이에 언어학적 설명을 가하여 隱喻的 過程을 추적하여, 그 중에서 대표적인 substitution과 juxtaposition에서 오는 의미의 증대를 설명하였다.

같은 문장의 은유적 구조를 단서로 하여 이 詩의 referential context를 재구성하여 문학비평이론과 연결시키고 그 다당성을 설명하였다.

## I. The Definition of Metaphor

Metaphor is an essential attribute of the poetic language. This does not mean that in poetry alone metaphoric expressions can be found; they are ubiquitous in our daily use of language as well as in prose and poetry. We can trace the metaphoric origin in such words as 'daisy(day's eye)', 'nightfall(night falls)', and many others. However, they no longer have the tensive meanings which they had before. They are 'dead metaphors' in which the two constituent meanings have "come together so completely that one is left holding the field."<sup>(1)</sup> Every language is full of these

(1) W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), p.128.

dead metaphors, which can no longer arouse intense emotional response in the mind of the reader.

Metaphor is usually defined as an implicit comparison between two apparently dissimilar objects; unlike simile which is an explicit comparison, the likeness is not explicitly indicated by the word 'like' or 'as', but the difference between simile and metaphor is more a matter of semantic tension between tenor and vehicle than a matter of grammatical relationship between the two.<sup>(2)</sup> In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of metaphor, it is necessary to consider some of the concepts of metaphor defined by various critics.

(The two ways of metaphor) may be called by distinguishing names—"epiphor" and "diaphor"—the one standing for the outreach and extension of meaning through comparisons, the other for the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis.<sup>(3)</sup>

A metaphor is a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use. In a sense metaphor the word is occasioned and justified by a similarity or analogy between the object it is usually applied to and the new object. In an emotive metaphor the shift occurs through some similarity between the feelings the new situation and the normal situation arouse.<sup>(4)</sup>

(Metaphor is) the process and result of using a term (X) normally signifying an object or concept (A) in such a context that it must refer to another object or concept (B) which is distinct enough in characteristics from A to ensure that in that composite idea formed by the synthesis of the concepts A and B and now symbolized in the word X, the factors A and B retain their conceptual independence even while they merge in the unity symbolized by X.<sup>(5)</sup>

The comparison of two unlike entities presupposes the existence of resemblance, but what is more important in metaphor is the co-presence of similitude and dissimilitude, which contributes to the creation of the new semantic tension. The above definitions will provide the general scope for the analysis of literary metaphor and some clue to the linguistic approach to metaphor.

From a linguistic point of view, the metaphor is a nonsense, but it is a constructive one in the case of a good metaphor. It is well-formed in structure but deviant in meaning. To be more exact, a metaphor is a deviant structure which violates a certain restriction on the selection of lexicon. Jakobson defined metaphor as "all substitutions of a figurative word for a literal one in any context."<sup>(6)</sup> Geoffrey Leech said: "A literary metaphor is a semantic oddity which demands that a linguistic form should be given something other than its normal (literal) interpretation."<sup>(7)</sup> Jakobson's view quoted above is somewhat naive and limited since he thought of metaphor as mere substitution—limited in the sense that substitution view cannot explain all the complex processes of extended metaphors. Leech regarded metaphor as a sort of "foregrounding" (i.e., deviation from linguistic norms), which is the prominent part on the background of the norms of language. He put equal emphasis upon both the background and the foreground, for the normal linguistic context provides important clues to the metaphoric interpretation. In his *Aspects* (1965), Noam Chomsky defined these deviant structures as ungrammatical, that is, as violating the selectional rules of subcategorization, and excluded them from the corpus of linguistic analysis.

- (1.1) a. \*John disappears his dog.  
b. Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

(2) Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1962), p. 71.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 72.

(4) I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 221.

(5) W. B. Stanford, *Greek Metaphor: Studies in Theory and Practice* p. 101. Re-cited from Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon*, p. 128.

(6) Robert Sholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p. 20.

(7) Geoffrey Leech, "This Bread I Break"—Language and Interpretation", *Linguistics and Literary Style*, ed. by Donald C. Freeman, p. 122.

Both sentences in (1.1) are ungrammatical in that they violate some grammatical rules of English, but they differ from each other in their degree of deviation. (1.1a) does not follow the so-called 'strict rules' and is, therefore, more deviant than (1.1b) which violates the 'selectional rules'. However, the sentence (1.1b) allows the possibility of metaphorical interpretation and is not completely nonsensical. The colourless green ideas sleeping furiously may be interpreted as "seeds in spring."<sup>(8)</sup> Though (1.1b) is ungrammatical, it is highly structured. Such constructively deviant structures are very useful as potential metaphors, but all of these deviant structures do not serve the purpose of good literary metaphors. Whether they are good metaphors or not must be determined in the whole structure of the poem in which they are used (in other words, it is a matter of the cohesion of foregrounding in Leech's terms), and metrical arrangement is a matter of stylistics. Anyway, linguistic analysis must include such examples as (1.1b) which was previously excluded from the corpus.

In the following chapters, I will analyze the metaphoric utterances included in Blake's "A Poison Tree" by using the linguistic contexts as clues to the literary interpretation of the metaphoric expressions. In so doing, I will explain the essential elements of metaphor, and then examine how the metaphoric structures contribute to the formation of the organic structure of the poem as a whole. Finally I will try to reconstruct the referential context out of the clues given by the preceding analysis.

## II. Analysis of Metaphor in the Poem "A Poison Tree"

A Poison Tree

William Blake

I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe.  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears.  
Night and Morning with my tears:  
And I sunned it with smiles.  
And soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.  
'Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine.  
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole.  
When the night had veild the pole;  
In the morning glad I see;  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

(From *Songs of Experience*)

### 1. Elements of Metaphor

If metaphor can be defined as a structure systematically deviant from the linguistic norms, it presupposes the existence of normal structures which do not violate any of the grammatical rules.

(8) Philip Petut, *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* (Univ. of California Press, 1977), p.102.

(However, it would be impossible and unnecessary for my present purpose to enumerate the rules exhaustively.) In the poem given above, there are six sentences which should be interpreted metaphorically:

- (2.1) a. I told my wrath (that-clause).  
 b. My wrath did grow.  
 c. I watered my wrath with my tears.  
 d. I sunned my wrath with smiles and soft deceitful wiles.  
 e. It grew (both day and night)  
 f. My wrath bore a bright apple.

These sentences are re-written regardless of the metrical patterns of the poem. The sentences (2.1b) and (2.1e) are identical; thus we have only five examples of metaphorical structures contained in the poem. In the sentence (2.1a), the lexical items which can occur in the context "I told my \_\_\_\_\_ (that-clause)" must have the features [+noun, +human]. If we substitute a normal lexical item for the 'foregrounded' one, the result would be:

- (2.2) I told my *friend (or father, mother, enemy, etc.)* .....

For the present we can suppose that all the metaphorically deviant sentences can be rewritten into normal ones.

The next, perhaps more important, elements of metaphor are the 'primary subject' (tenor) and the 'subsidiary subject' (vehicle).

- (2.3) The dew is a tear, about to drop.

In the example (2.3) above, the primary subject is "the dew" and the subsidiary subject (or the vehicular image) is "a tear, about to drop." As I explained in Chapter 1, the two subjects (i. e., tenor and vehicle) must have certain semantic features in common; "the dew" is compared to "a tear, about to drop." Both have obvious resemblance.

In some cases, however, the subsidiary subject does not appear in the surface structure. Then, the normal structure underlying it will provide a clue to the hidden subsidiary subject.

- (2.4) a. I told my [+noun, -human].....  
 b. I told my wrath.....

The two sentences (2.4a) and (2.4b) are combined into (2.4b); the human feature of the hidden vehicle is transferred to the tenor, forming a new "composite idea"<sup>(9)</sup> symbolized in the word 'wrath'. In literary terms such metaphoric process is called 'personification'.

In the example (2.1b), the focal word is 'wrath', and here too the primary subject does not appear on the surface. The lexical items that can occur in the context 'my \_\_\_\_\_ did grow' must have the features [+noun, +animate]. The feature [-animate] of the underlying vehicle is transferred to the tenor 'wrath': the inanimate abstract concept 'wrath' is animated by the metaphoric process. The vehicle may be either plant or animal, but up to this level we cannot find the concrete vehicular image.

The last and most important element of metaphor (or rather the result of the metaphoric process) is what Stanford called "the composite idea" formed by the synthesis of the common features both tenor and vehicle have: it is the vehicular image. Though the common features are unified or

(9) See Stanford's definition of metaphor in Chapter 1.

fused in the vehicular image, they must "retain their conceptual independence."<sup>(10)</sup>

In the examples (2.1b), (2.1d) and (2.1e), the speaker of the poem reveals the vehicular image step by step. We can infer from the sentence (2.1c) that the vehicle of the metaphor must be a plant; it is a plant that can grow up by taking up water, and the water must have come down from above in the form of rain.

- (2.5) a. I watered my wrath with my tears.  
 b. I watered my wrath with my rains.  
 c. God watered his tree with his rains.

Combining the two sentences (2.5a) and (2.5b), we can get a third sentence: 'my rains are my tears'. In this metaphoric structure, the tenor of the metaphor is 'my rains', and the vehicle, 'my tears'. Now we can conjecture that the speaker 'I' is not an ordinary human being but a universal one, that is, the almighty God. The rain that falls on the animated 'wrath' is not ordinary rain; it is the tears God sheds in His sorrow. In the same manner, we can get the following set of sentences from the example (2.1d).

- (2.6) a. I sunned my wrath with my smiles.  
 b. I sunned my wrath with my sunlight.  
 c. God provided his tree with sunlight.

Finally the sentence (2.1f) shows that the vehicular image is an apple tree which is the predominant image of the poem. At first, the tenor 'wrath' is personified and animated, and in the third stanza of the poem it is compared to an 'apple-tree'. Meanwhile the rain-tear, and sunlight-smile comparisons help us to understand the tree-wrath metaphor. Between the the tenor(wrath) and the vehicle(an apple tree) there is no obvious resemblance. Even though metaphor presupposes the existence of some sort of similitude between tenor and vehicle, the similitude need not be obvious. It is the genius of poets to find intuitively the likeness between apparently different concepts or objects.

As we have seen in the analysis of the metaphor contained in Blake's poem "A Poison Tree", the four basic elements of metaphor are: the normal sentence structure, tenor(the primary subject), vehicle(the subsidiary subject), and the vehicular image. The linguistic norms serve as clues to the literary interpretation of metaphoric structures. And through the process of metaphoric transformatins the poet can obtain various potential metaphors with which he can build up the organic structure of his poem, arranging the lines into the suitable metrical patterns he has in mind.

## 2. The Metaphoric Processes

Though the poet may be born with the ability to perceive intuitively the likeness of seemingly unlike entities, I suppose we can trace the metaphoric process from the foregrounded to the the normal structure of each poetic utterance which contains metaphor.

Philip Wheelwright suggested the two ways of metaphor which are "epiphor" and "diaphor". He attempted to explain the process in terms of the "semantic motion—the double imaginative act of outreaching and combining."<sup>(11)</sup> The epiphoric process is a kind of meaning transference, and the semantic motion is usually from the concrete to the vaguer or more abstract image or

(10) See Standford's definition.

(11) Wheelwright, *op. cit.*, p.72.

idea, that is, from the vehicle to the tenor of metaphor. In case of the diaphoric process, the transference of meaning proceeds from particular ideas or images to a new complex image comprised of the common semantic features of both tenor and vehicle. The new image in this case would be something like the 'new composite idea' Stanford mentioned in his definition. Wheelwright said that the production of new meaning would be possible only by juxtaposition:

"in this combination of elements, and by their combination alone, the writer manages to convey what is not expressed by either of the parts."<sup>(12)</sup>

William Wordsworth had a similar idea about the metaphoric process. In his *Preface* to the *Poems*(1815), he accounted for his own way of creating poetic images. He divided the process into three stages —abstracting, conferring, and mutual modification.<sup>(13)</sup> The first two stages, that is, abstracting and conferring corresponds to Wheelwright's epiphoric process, and the mutual modification is similar to the combination of constituent elements consisting in the particular objects or concepts.

Both Wheelwright and Wordsworth thought of the process as either semantic movement or the combination of semantic features. But on the syntactic level the two processes can be explained in terms of substitution and apposition(or juxtaposition). Both way will result in the creation of a new composite idea or image.

#### (1) Substitution

The simple substitution of a word in the normal sentence can produce a metaphorical structure (i.e., a potential metaphor), but the adequacy of the created metaphor will depend upon the organic relation of it with the other elements of the poem as a whole. By replacing the noun 'mother' with another deviant noun 'wrath' in the sentence 'I told my mother', we can produce the metaphoric structure (2.1a).

However, we cannot expect that we will be able to analyze all the complex or extended metaphors by means of such simple process. Sometimes we will have to apply this practice more than once to the same sentence in order to obtain the desired effect, as was the case with the example (2.5).

The following lines or stanzas are examples of simple substitution taken from William Blake's poems. The italicized parts are foregrounded, from which we can proceed to reconstruct normal sentences.

Welcome stranger to this place,  
Where *joy* doth sit on every bough...  
(Song 1st by a Shepherd)

*Truth* is a lantern to our path.

*Innocence* doth like a Rose,  
Blooms on every Maidens cheek;  
(Ibid.)

But *my Rose* turned away with jealousy:  
And her thorns were my only delight.  
(My Pretty Rose Tree)

(12) *Ibid.*, p.78.

(13) T. Hutchinson(ed.), *Wordsworth: Poetical Works* (Oxford, 1969), p.754.

Ah *Sun'Flower!* weary of time.  
 Who countest the steps of *the Sun.*  
 (Ah! Sun-Flower)

When *the green woods* laugh, with the voice of joy  
 And *the dimpling stream* runs laughing by,  
 When *the air* does laugh with our merry wit,  
 And *the green hill* laughs with the noise of it.  
 (Laughing Song)

In the examples above, some of the italicized parts (abstract concepts) are allegorical, and others are either animated or personified. Note that these are only flowers picked from their stems, and therefore they will wither soon. I only took them from their context so as to exemplify my argument. They must always be restored to their original contexts to get the full meaning of the metaphors.

## (2) Juxtaposition

We can also produce a metaphor simply by juxtaposing two or more noun phrases without using any conjunction. The general effect of such process would be that the two are semantically in contrast; What matters is not the fact that the two elements are put side by side, but that the semantic features of the two constituent elements are coalesced with a new meaning created by the synthesis. Stanford's definition of metaphor quoted in Chapter I put a special emphasis upon the diaphoric synthesis of disparate elements.

An example of this kind can be found in the poem "A Poison Tree":

And I sunned it with smiles.  
 And soft deceitful wiles.

The two noun phrases "smiles" and "soft deceitful wiles" are put together, but since the conjunction "And" intervenes it cannot serve as a good example. If we delete the two and's in each line, the diaphoric synthesis would be much more effective:

I sunned it with smiles,  
 Soft deceitful wiles.

Thus the semantic tension between the two juxtaposed phrases are intensified. Though the speaker "I" smiles, behind his smiles there lurks "soft deceitful wiles." The following are also examples of simple juxtaposition.

Sweet sleep Angle mild,  
 Hover o'er my happy child.  
 (A Cradle Song)

Thou his image ever see,  
 Heavenly face that smiles on thee.  
 (Ibid.)

The juxtaposed noun phrases "Sweet sleep" and "Angle mild" are diaphorically combined into one coalescent image 'sleep-Angel', which is again epiphorically compared to a butterfly or the like that can 'hover'. Here the two processes 'substitution' and 'juxtaposition' work together, as is usually the case with complex metaphors. The two different epiphors serve as vehicles for the single tenor 'a butterfly', and the diaphor lies in the juxtaposition of the two vehicular images. However, the juxtaposed elements in each of the examples above are more similar or analogous in meaning than

they are in contrast; therefore, it is questionable whether or not they can be called 'diaphors' in the true sense of the word used by Wheelwright.

The difference between epiphor and diaphor consists in the tension of the constituent semantic features rather than in the grammatical relationship of the two noun phrases. A single metaphor produced by the diaphoric process tends to teem with ample, though ambiguous, associations of ideas, and so it is almost impossible to explicate all the elements of semantic features implied in it.

### III. Reconstruction of Referential Context

I borrowed the term from Jakobson's communication theory:<sup>(14)</sup> by 'referential context' I mean the objects or ideas outside of the poem itself. Geoffrey Leech also applied the concept to the construction of fictional context in his analysis of Dylan Thomas's "This Bread I Break". In the poetic utterance, the actual speaker-hearer context is unimportant or sometimes irrelevant, and so the referential context must be inferred from the poetic message itself.

My analysis of the metaphorical sentences in the preceding chapter provides clues to the reconstruction of the referential context of the poem. In the example (2.5) the speaker 'I' means God, for it is God that can control the rainfall. We can also infer from the noun phrase "an apple bright" that the tree of wrath—the central image of the poem—refers to the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" of the Bible. God planted various trees in the Garden of Eden, and in the middle of the garden He planted the forbidden tree (Genesis, II, 8-9). If the speaker 'I' is God Almighty, who are 'my friend' and 'my foe' then? It is not certain whether they are an angel and Satan. In the Bible Satan in the form of a serpent tempted Eve into eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree, but in the poem "A Poison Tree" it is the serpent (i.e., 'the foe') himself who stole and ate the apple and lay dead—"stretched beneath the tree", at which sight the speaker 'I' was glad; God planted the 'tree of wrath', which he watered with his tears and sunned with his smiles and "soft deceitful wiles". His smiles are also "soft deceitful wiles" because he knows that one who eats the apple must die but does not let it be known to 'the foe'. In the Bible God said that "in the day you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis, II, 17) But the truth was, as the serpent said, that when somebody eat of it his eyes will be open, and he will be like God, knowing good and evil. In a sense, it was God as well as the serpent that beguiled man (that is, Adam and Eve). It is in this sense that God is deceitful.

Blake represented the contrary states of innocence and experience in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The innocent man does not know the darker side of existence, and believes in the literal sense of the Bible. He believes in the God of Love. On the contrary, the experienced man understands the Bible in his own way; he knows good as well as evil. To the man of experience, God is not the God of Love, but the God of Wrath—the angry God who does not show mercy to the creature that aroused his anger.

Blake's "A Poison Tree" is a composite of metaphorical structures, the analysis of which can reveal an organizing principle of poetry as heterocosm. But we must note that metaphor is not all there is in a poem; it is only one of the many aspects through which we can look into the poetic structure. The analysis of the metaphorical structures by means of linguistic norms and systematic deviation of them will be, as we have seen, of great help to the critical interpretation of literary works, but it is only a beginning of the critical evaluation of them.

(14) Robert Sholes, *op. cit.*, pp.24-25.



Finally, the question how we can analyse the more complicated and extended metaphors in terms of linguistic models remains to be answered henceforth. And I think the linguistic approach to metaphor will be able to solve the knotty problem of explicating the basic distinction between prose and poetry.

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