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ARTICLE

Foregrounding in poetic discourse: between deviation and cognitive constraints

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Abstract

Foregrounding theory generally assumes that poetic language deviates from norms characterizing the ordinary use of language (e.g. at the phonological, grammatical, semantic or pragmatic levels) and that this deviation interferes with cognitive principles and processes that make communication possible. However, a neglected issue in foregrounding theory is whether any constraints exist, and if so, what characterizes them. The present article proposes that foregrounding theory should be complemented by a cognitive theory that specifies constraints on such deviations, on the basis of theoretical and empirical considerations. Due to the privileged status of figurative language among the foregrounding devices, this general argument is illustrated by a close analysis of two figurative types, similes and oxymora. The analysis examines their distribution in poetic discourse and investigates the psychological processes involved in the way people comprehend them. It is proposed that for each of these figures there is a set of existing structures that could equally instantiate them as a foregrounding device. However, poetic discourse, both cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, robustly favours the use of the cognitively simpler option. The implications of these empirical findings are discussed in the light of foregrounding theory.

Keywords: cognitive constraints; cognitive poetics; figurative language; oxymoron; simile

1 Introduction

Foregrounding theory generally assumes that poetic language deviates from norms characterizing the ordinary use of language (e.g. at the phonological, grammatical, semantic or pragmatic levels) and that this deviation interferes with cognitive principles and processes that make communication possible (e.g. Shklovsky, 1965; Short, 1973; van Peer, 1986; Miall and Kuiken, 1994). A crucial question that immediately comes to mind is: How far can the deviation go? Put differently, are there any constraints on the deviation – are the options to deviate from a certain norm unlimited, or are they constrained in some principled way?

As a brief illustration let us look at the case of metaphors, usually taken as a major foregrounding device. Metaphors consist of a mapping between two remote conceptual domains, so by their very nature they interfere with the ordinary categorization of our conceptual world. As far as foregrounding theory goes, however, any mapping from any source domain onto any target domain



should achieve the effect of deviation (achieved by the linkage between two remote conceptual domains). The question of interest, then, is whether there are systematic constraints on the metaphorical expressions used in various poems, across poetic texts, languages, historical periods and poetic schools. Clearly, this is but a brief example of a much wider question for any comprehensive study of foregrounding, and it applies to any level at which foregrounding devices are to be found: since there are several options for deviating from a given norm at any level of a text, are certain options used selectively and systematically across poetic texts?¹

Despite the obvious centrality of this question, it has received little attention in the literature on foregrounding. The goal of the present article is to address this issue by making the following argument: (1) certain layers of poetic texts selectively use certain deviations (foregrounding devices) by favouring certain types of deviations rather than others; (2) this selective use is determined by cognitive constraints – that is, the options that are selected more often than not are cognitively simpler than those that are less frequently used.

This proposal, then, should be regarded as complementing (rather than competing with) the standard foregrounding theory, which emphasizes the deviations characterizing poetic texts and their resulting interference with cognitive processes. I propose that foregrounding theory should be complemented by a cognitive theory that constrains the poet's freedom to deviate from accepted norms. To illustrate this general point, I focus on the use of figurative expressions in poetic discourse, mainly poetry. I do this because of the centrality of figurative language as a major foregrounding device. Leech (1965), for example, states, 'The obvious illustration of foregrounding comes from the semantic opposition of literal and figurative meaning: a literary metaphor is a semantic oddity which demands that a linguistic form should be given something other than its normal (literal) interpretation' (p. 154). Similarly, van Peer and Hakemulder (2006: 547) claim: 'Cases of neologism, live metaphor, or ungrammatical sentences, as well as archaisms, paradox, and oxymoron (the traditional tropes) are clear examples of deviation.' In particular, I focus on the use of two major types of figurative expressions, namely, similes and oxymora. This close examination of the two figurative types is, however, aimed at illustrating a more general point, namely, the need to complement foregrounding theory with a theory that specifies the cognitive constraints on the use of poetic structures in general.

2 The case of poetic simile

Similes are nominal comparisons composed of two nominal terms – the target and the source (traditionally labelled tenor and vehicle, respectively). Accordingly, in the simile *education is like a ladder*, 'education' is the target domain and 'ladder' the source domain. Similes have been studied extensively in various fields such as literary study (e.g. Fishelov, 1996), philosophy (e.g. Beardsley, 1981)

and cognitive psychology (Katz et al., 1985; Ortony et al., 1985; Glucksberg and Keysar, 1990; Chiappe and Kennedy, 1999).

A major observation made by many (psycho-)linguists (notably Ortony et al., 1985, elaborated by Glucksberg and Keysar, 1990 and Chiappe and Kennedy, 1999) studying non-poetic similes is that they are directional comparisons characterized by a robust preference for mapping more accessible (salient, typical, concrete) concepts into less accessible ones, rather than the other way around, as the previous *education is like a ladder* illustrates. Let us label a simile that follows this direction of mapping 'a canonical simile', and a simile that violates this structure, by using a mapping from less accessible to more accessible concepts, a 'non-canonical simile'. An example would be *a ladder is like education*.

To return to poetic discourse, it typically uses novel rather than conventional similes (Fishelov, 1996). As far as foregrounding theory goes, both canonical and non-canonical novel similes are foregrounding devices, since in both cases an unusual linkage is drawn between two remote conceptual domains, thus suggesting a novel view of the target concepts through the filter of the source concept. Thus, whether the simile in question is *emptiness is like a weight, heavy on the heart* or the inverse form, *a weight is like emptiness, heavy on the heart*, there is no difference in the 'foregrounding effect', in the two cases. One might even argue that if there were any differences in the foregrounding effect then the non-canonical simile would have a greater effect of this sort, since, in addition to its linking two disparate domains, it violates the standard direction of mapping in non-poetic metaphorical comparisons, thus presumably enhancing the foregrounding effect. Thus a weak version of foregrounding theory would predict no selective use of the two types of simile across poetic texts, while a strong version would predict a more frequent use of non-canonical similes.

Given that novel similes used in poetic discourse are a central example of a foregrounding device (due to the novel linkage they present between the target and source concepts), the two questions to be asked are whether poetic discourse uses one of the two simile types selectively, and, if so, how we can account for this selective use?

2.1 Field study of simile distribution in poetic discourse

As far as the first question goes, namely, whether there is a selective distribution of the two simile types, there is some evidence for the conclusion that canonical similes are much more frequently used in poetic discourse, across language, historical periods, poetic genres and poetic schools. Thus, in Shen (1995), I reported a large-scale field study conducted on similes extracted from modern Hebrew poetry. In this study a sample of 400 similes were excerpted from the poems of four periods of 20th-century Hebrew poetry, each represented by four of its most prominent poets. In order not to prejudice the analysis, not only were the 16 poets used in the study markedly different from one another in style, but the similes extracted from their poems were selected at random. This meant that

contextual factors – whether a particular poem, an individual poet, or a specific school of poets – is unlikely to affect any structural pattern arising from the study's results, and could thus be discounted when assessing these results.

The latter point was reinforced by the fact that the poetic characteristics of each of the four corpora examined, representing as they did successive periods in the history of Hebrew poetry, were markedly different from, even at odds with, one another. This reflects the continuous struggle between the poets of different generations. Thus, each generation of a given national poetic corpus tends to perceive its own poetic principles as a response to, or a reaction against, those of the previous generation, and consequently constructs an alternative poetics, as testified by the poetic manifestos, essays and articles written by either the poets themselves or their critics (cf. Martindale, this issue). It would therefore be plausible that the poetic tendencies prevailing in a given period are likely to be rejected by poets and critics in the subsequent period, and that their strategies will, in turn, be rejected by those of the next period, and so on. Consequently, if anything, one should expect writers of different periods to opt for different structural options rather than share the same patterns of preference across periods.

Thus, any general pattern of preference of one simile type over the other should be attributed to poetic discourse in general (and perhaps to non-poetic discourse as well), rather than to any specific contextual characteristics of a specific poem, poet, generation of poets or the like. (For similar considerations, see Ullmann's 1945 study of poetic synaesthesia, MacKay's 1986 study of poetic personification, and Shen, 1987.)

The collected similes were analysed for their use of canonical vs. non-canonical similes. The results of the study were clear-cut: the number of canonical similes greatly exceeded the number of non-canonical ones. On average, about 85 percent of the similes were of the canonical type, while only about 15 percent were of the non-canonical type. There was not even a single poet, let alone a single era, in which non-canonical similes outnumbered canonical ones.

To determine whether these findings apply to the poetic corpora of other languages as well, a similar field study was conducted on two other poetic corpora, namely, on 19th- and 20th-century Russian and Arabic poetry (Shen, in preparation). The results in both cases produced the same striking pattern as before, whereby canonical similes by far outnumbered non-canonical ones. This supports the view that even the most creative use of figurative language, poetic discourse, is subject to cognitive constraints (for further details see Shen, 1997; Shen, 2002).

In sum, then, there is a robust pattern found in various poetic corpora, according to which canonical similes are much more frequently used than non-canonical ones, across languages, historical periods, genres and poetic schools. If novel simile is to be taken as a foregrounding device, as foregrounding theory (uncontroversially) claims, then we may conclude that poetic discourse makes a highly selective and constrained use of simile structure. As previously explained,

this finding is not predicted either by the weaker version of the foregrounding theory, which remains silent about a principled statistical preference of using one foregrounding option over the other, or by the stronger version, which makes the opposite prediction, that non-canonical similes outnumber canonical ones.

2.2 *Psychological studies of simile comprehension*

How can we account for the clear-cut preference for canonical over non-canonical similes? Recall that foregrounding theory makes the claim that foregrounding devices interfere with cognitive processes and create structures that are cognitively more complex. So a foregrounding theorist might argue that canonical similes are cognitively less simple structures than non-canonical ones, and that this is the explanation for their being more frequently used structures. To evaluate this possibility, empirical evidence is required that can either support or refute it.

Various pieces of empirical evidence, based on various comprehension experiments, suggest that, contrary to the possibility raised by some foregrounding theorists, canonical similes are cognitively simpler structures than their non-canonical counterparts on various psychological measures. Thus, Shen (1995) pointed out that canonical similes were judged as more natural and more meaningful than non-canonical ones. Shen (in preparation) found out that non-canonical similes took longer to interpret than canonical ones. In addition, the interpretations generated for non-canonical similes proved to be a great deal more heterogeneous than those provided for canonical ones – a clear indication that non-canonical similes are indeed much harder to interpret than canonical ones. Furthermore, Shen found that canonical similes are recalled more accurately than non-canonical ones. Similarly, Ortony et al. (1985) found that the degree of similarity between the terms used in canonical similes such as *libraries are like gold mines* or *rage is like a volcano*, was judged higher than that of non-canonical similes, such as *gold mines are like libraries* or *a volcano is like rage*. Furthermore, canonical similes were judged as more meaningful than non-canonical ones. This converging evidence strongly suggests that canonical similes, which are more frequently used in poetic discourse, are cognitively simpler and easier to comprehend than their non-canonical counterparts. Clearly, no version of foregrounding theory would predict such a pattern of results.

3 The case of poetic oxymoron

The next figurative type to investigate is the oxymoron, another figure that is given frequently as a foregrounding device (e.g. van Peer, 1986; van Peer and Hakemulder, 2006). An oxymoron is a figure of speech combining two apparently contradictory elements, thus producing an apparently incongruous (but actually often quite reasonable) statement. Shakespeare's *sweet sorrow* is one often-quoted oxymoron; and, indeed, not only Shakespeare, but poetic discourse in general,

makes frequent use of oxymora, as the following examples may suggest: *whistling silence*, *sunny coldness*, *living death* and so forth.

Shen (1987) distinguished between two types of oxymoron – direct and indirect. The distinction is based on the sense relation obtaining between the two terms comprising the oxymoron. Examples of direct oxymora are: *sound silence*, *wet dryness*, *hot coldness* and *living death*. These cases are characterized by the fact that the head noun and the modifier represent direct antonyms. Typically, direct antonyms are two lexical items that represent two opposite poles on a certain dimension, as in *hot* and *cold* (where the relevant dimension is ‘heat’), or *wet* and *dry* (where the relevant dimension is ‘wetness’) and so forth. In other cases (e.g. *man* and *woman*) the two antonyms represent two opposite values with respect to a distinguishing feature (*man* and *woman* differ with respect to the value of the feature ‘+/- male’; see Clark, 1970; Lyons, 1977). In each of the aforementioned direct oxymora (*sound silence*, *wet dryness*, *hot coldness* and *living death*), then, the oxymoron’s two terms are antonyms according to the above definition: *sound – silence*, *wet – dry[ness]* and so forth. (The present analysis ignores the difference in syntactic category between nouns (e.g. *dryness*) and adjectives (e.g. *dry*) and focuses on the semantic or sense relation between the two oxymoron’s two terms; in this regard there is no relevant semantic difference between *dry* and *dryness* and both are regarded as antonyms of *wet*.)

Consider, now, the indirect oxymoron, illustrated by examples such as *whistling silence*, *watery dryness* and *sunny coldness*. Intuitively, the oxymora’s two terms in each of these cases are not direct antonyms: *whistle* is not the direct opposite of *silence*, as *water[y]* is not the direct opposite of *dry[ness]*, and *sun[ny]* is not the direct opposite of *coldness*. In order to define in a more precise way the indirect antonymy relation in those cases, we should consider another type of sense relation – *hyponymy*: hyponymy is the relationship that obtains between specific and general lexical items, such that the former is ‘included’ in the latter. For example, *whistle* is a hyponym (or type) of *sound*, *water* is the hyponym of *wet* (since *water* is a member in the set of wet entities), *sun* is the hyponym of *hot* (*sun* is a member in the set of hot entities).

Given the sense relation of hyponymy, we may define the indirect oxymoron as follows: an indirect oxymoron is an oxymoron in which *one of its terms represents the hyponym of the antonym of the other term*: in *whistling silence*, *whistle[ing]* represents the hyponym of *sound*, which is the antonym of the head noun of the oxymoron in question – *silence*; (see Shen, 1987 for elaboration).

3.1 Field studies of oxymoron distribution in poetic discourse

Having established the distinction between the two types of oxymoron, we may turn to the first question to be asked: does poetic discourse make differential use of the two types of oxymora? Several field studies investigated this question. They were basically modelled after those reported for similes. There were three major corpora from which the oxymora were excerpted: modern Hebrew poetry,

modern Arabic poetry, and modern Russian poetry. The Hebrew corpus included about 100 oxymora from the writings of 10 major poets belonging to two distinct major eras in modern Hebrew poetry, namely the revival era (roughly, the early 19th century) represented by poets such as Chaim Nachman Byalik, David Fogel and Yaakov Steinberg; and the modernist era (roughly the 1940s and 1950s), represented by poets such as Nathan Alterman and Alexander Pen. As in the simile case, these two eras are considered by most historians of Hebrew poetry to differ radically from one another in their poetic characteristics.

The modern Russian corpus included some 341 oxymora excerpted from several distinct periods in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries. The corpus included poets of the 'Pushkin era' (such as Batiushkov, Baratinsky and Lermontov), the second half of the 19th century (represented by poets such as Fet and Tiutchev) and others (for a fuller report see Shen, in preparation). There is great diversity among these periods, not only because they represent different historical periods, but also because they represent different poetic schools. Some of the poets evince the influence of romantic poetry (e.g. Lermontov) or neoclassical poetry (Batiushkov and Baratinsky), while others reflect symbolism in Russian poetry (e.g. Blok) and social poetry (e.g. Mayakovsky).

The Arabic corpus included only 35 oxymora – excerpted mainly from various poets of the post-Romantic era (the second half of the 20th century) – an era of great significance in modern Arab poetry (including poets such as Nazhar Kabani, Adonis, Salim Barakat and Mahmud Darwish). The analysis used the same methodology that was applied to the Hebrew and Russian corpora.

Each of the above poetic corpora was analysed for the number of direct vs. indirect oxymora that it employs. The main finding was straightforward. The indirect oxymoron was much more frequently used than the direct one, in all three corpora. Thus, the number of indirect oxymora found was 83 percent for the Hebrew corpora, 73 percent for the Russian corpora and 60 percent for the Arabic corpora. In fact, not only was the total number of indirect oxymora greater than the number of direct ones, an analysis of the various eras represented in each national corpus, as well as each of the poets, revealed that there was not a single era, or even a single poet, for which the direct oxymora outnumbered the indirect ones.

To support these conclusions I also examined 34 well-known samples collected from four literary dictionaries (Shipley, 1970; Preminger, 1975; Cuddon, 1977), and Leech's (1969) *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. These samples are introduced by the authors as the most typical samples of oxymora used in poetry; moreover, as is the case of the Hebrew oxymora, the samples were not restricted to a specific poet, school or period. These characteristics of the corpus reduce the risk of drawing too general conclusions from a small set of data. The general tendencies revealed in the Hebrew corpus are found also in the small corpus of English samples.

This finding challenges foregrounding theory. In general, the indirect oxymoron was much more frequently used than the direct oxymoron: the use of

the indirect type ranged between 70 and 87 percent, while the use of the direct type ranged between 13 and 20 percent. Arguably, both types of oxymoron may equally be conceived of as instantiations of the same foregrounding device, given that each introduces a novel combination of two incongruous or antithetical terms. How, then, would foregrounding theory account for the finding that the indirect type is much more frequently used in poetic discourse? To the best of my knowledge there is no principled discussion of a case where a certain instantiation of a certain foregrounding device is more frequently used than another one.

A hypothetical foregrounding theorist, however, might propose that the indirect oxymoron, namely, the type of oxymoron that is more frequently used is cognitively more complex and harder to comprehend. This possibility would be compatible with the notion that the poetic use of language interferes with cognitive processes, yielding cognitively more complicated structures. In contrast, the cognitive constraints account I propose here makes the opposite prediction, namely, that indirect oxymora are cognitively simpler structures than direct ones.

The rationale underlying this account is as follows. An oxymoron is (typically) a metaphorical noun phrase in which there is a head noun and a modifier (typically an adjective), as in *watery dryness*. Interpreting such constructions is based on the attribution of features of the modifier to the head noun connotations (see Beardsley, 1981). For example, the reader of the metaphorical expression *green thought*, involves the attribution of certain connotations of the modifier *green*, e.g. 'unripe', to the head noun, yielding the interpretation: 'unripe thought' (see Reinhart, 1976; Estes, 2003).

Let us consider the difference between the interpretation of direct (e.g. *wet dryness*) vs. indirect (e.g. *watery dryness*) oxymora with respect to the attribution process of properties of the modifier to the head noun. As previously explained, the two terms comprising a direct oxymoron (e.g. *wet* and *dry[ness]*), in the oxymoron *wet dryness* differ *only* in the opposing values they represent on the same dimension ('wetness'). On all other dimensions these two terms are identical (see Shen, 1987). Arguably, an attempt on the part of the reader to search among the features or connotations of the modifying adjective (*wet*) to select those features that could be attributed to the head noun (*dryness*), would yield only one candidate, namely, the opposite value on the dimension along which the two terms differ (e.g. *wetness*). It would, then, seem quite difficult to generate a sensible meaning to the oxymoron in question given the poverty of candidates for attribution.

In contrast, the modifier of the indirect oxymoron provides several features that, in principle, can be attributed to the head noun. Consider the corresponding indirect oxymoron, namely, *watery dryness*. The difference between (the direct oxymoron) *wet dryness* and (its corresponding indirect type) *watery dryness* resides in their respective modifying adjectives, namely *watery* (in the indirect type) vs. *wet* (in the direct type), while the head noun (*dryness*) remains constant. Clearly, *watery* provides a larger set of features (than that of *wet*) that are candidates for attribution to the head noun, since, in addition to the feature

'wetness' (which is shared by both adjectives even if they represent two opposing values on that), it also consists of additional features such as 'transparency', 'smooth', 'flowing' that can be considered for attribution.

The argument then, is that, all other things being equal, the indirect oxymoron is easier to assign meaning to than its direct counterpart, because the modifier of the indirect oxymoron is richer in features that can be considered for attribution.

Thus the predictions made by the hypothetical foregrounding theorist and the present cognitive constraints account seem to be competing. This is true, however, only to the extent that the hypothetical view is indeed hypothetical, because by and large foregrounding theory has remained silent about this phenomenon. As already mentioned in the introductory section, the cognitive constraints account is viewed here as complementing rather than competing with the standard foregrounding theory.

3.2 *Psychological studies of oxymoron comprehension*

Let us briefly consider various pieces of empirical evidence bearing on this issue. Gibbs and Kearney (1994) found that reading times for direct oxymora were significantly longer than indirect ones, suggesting that the latter are easier to process. Furthermore, in accord with the above rationale, Gibbs and Kearney also found that indirect oxymora are much more productive than direct ones. They composed a set of direct and indirect oxymora. The terms comprising each of these oxymora (e.g. *wet* and *dryness*) were presented to the subjects *separately*, and the subjects were asked to generate associations for each such term; in the second phase the subjects were presented with the entire phrase of the original oxymora (e.g. *watery dryness*). Subjects' responses were analysed for the number of 'emergent associations', namely, those associations that were added for the entire phrase of the original oxymoron (but were not initially generated for each of its component in separation). It was found that the indirect oxymora generated more emergent associations than the direct ones. This finding is compatible with the present account, which assumes that, all other things being equal, an indirect oxymoron (e.g. *watery dryness*) is richer in associations than its direct counterpart (*wet dryness*). This may suggest that the former is easier to interpret, since its two terms can be linked or related in more ways than the latter, thus facilitating the interpretation process. Indeed, the finding of the reading time experiment supports this account, as will the experiment to be reported later.

Another study (Shen and Balaban, 2005) used an interpretation-generation task. A set of direct oxymora was composed (e.g. *wet dryness*, *hot coldness*), and their indirect counterparts (e.g. *watery dryness*, *sunny coldness*). Two booklets were composed. The first booklet consisted of five direct (e.g. *wet dryness*) and five indirect (e.g. *sunny coldness*) oxymora in Hebrew. The second booklet was a mirror image of the first one (e.g. *watery dryness*, and *hot coldness*). Subjects were asked to generate a short (one-line) interpretation for each of the expressions. Let us illustrate some of the responses generated by the subjects.

For instance, one of the subjects who read the (indirect) oxymoron *watery dryness*, generated the interpretation: 'A kind of dryness that resides in water, like a bubble'; another subject responded: 'Dryness that floods over one.' Or take typical responses of subjects who read the direct counterpart of the previous oxymoron (i.e. *wet dryness*). One of the subjects wrote: 'An interesting remark of a boring person'; another subject responded: 'Oxymoron – the dryness acquires characteristics with which it is not usually associated.' To use another illustration, consider the following responses (generated by two different subjects) to the (indirect) oxymoron *sunny coldness*: 'When a wintry beam of light touches me on a cold bright day', and 'A coldness in strong sunlight'. Among the responses produced for *hot coldness* (the direct counterpart of the previous indirect oxymoron), one subject generated the interpretation: 'A feeling expressing artificial coldness, under which masses of emotions are hidden.' Another subject wrote: 'A metaphor for people who are detached and non-communicative, but some of their communication channels are warm.'

The responses generated by the subjects were analyzed for the interpretation strategies they employed; we assumed that using certain interpretation strategies would indicate difficulty in assigning an interpretation to the oxymoron in question. In particular we focused on the distinction between two types of responses – *internal* and *external*. Internal responses were considered responses that consisted of referent(s) belonging to the same (literal) domain to which (at least) one of the oxymoron's terms belong. For example, the oxymoron *sunny coldness* generated the internal response: 'When a wintry beam of light touches me on a cold bright day.' Note that the response makes explicit reference to concepts highly associated with the (literal) domains represented in the original oxymoron, namely, the domain of coldness and that of the sun. Another example is the response generated by the oxymoron *watery dryness*: 'Dryness that floods over one.' Here, too, the two domains of the stimuli, namely dryness and water, are represented in the response.

In contrast, external responses were considered those that did not contain any literal reference to any of the oxymoron's terms. They include: (1) Metaphorical interpretations of the oxymoron's two terms. Those were cases where both concepts comprising the oxymoron were represented metaphorically in the subjects' response, as in 'an interesting remark of a boring person' as a response to the oxymoron – *wet dryness*. (2) Meta-theoretical comments; typical examples are 'This is an oxymoron', and 'These are two contradictory terms'. (3) The third type of external responses reflected difficulty in assigning meaning to the oxymoron, as in 'It's too difficult an expression', and 'no such thing'.

Our assumption, based on what we know about strategies used normally in interpreting conceptual combinations (e.g. Murphy, 1990) was that the default strategy would be to generate internal responses. Thus a reader of a metaphorical expression (e.g. *green thought*) normally attempts to maintain one term (typically the head noun, e.g. *thought*) in its literal sense and generate a metaphorical interpretation of the modifier (e.g. *green*), rather than interpret both terms

metaphorically (see also Beardsley, 1981). We therefore assumed that the use of external response would indicate a difficulty to assign an interpretation to the oxymoron. Hence, the use of internal/external responses was therefore taken as indicative of ease/difficulty of meaning assignment, respectively.

Given the employment of internal/external as a measure of ease/difficulty of interpretation generation for a given oxymoron, the cognitive account we have previously introduced (according to which indirect oxymora are easier to interpret) predicts that indirect oxymora will generate more internal and fewer external responses than direct ones. And, indeed, the results fully confirmed this prediction (for details see Shen and Balaban, 2005). I take this finding to support the claim that the indirect oxymoron is easier to assign meaning to than its direct counterpart.

Taken together, then, the various pieces of evidence support the present, cognitive account that suggests that the oxymora used in poetic discourse are highly limited by cognitive constraints. In contrast, the finding is incompatible with that version of foregrounding theory that predicts that indirect oxymora, which are more frequently used in poetic discourse, are more difficult to comprehend than direct ones.

4 General discussion

Foregrounding theory assumes that various norms characterizing non-poetic discourse are broken in poetic discourse, thus interfering with normal cognitive principles and processes. However, a neglected issue in foregrounding theory is whether constraints do exist and what characterizes them. The present article proposes that foregrounding theory should be complemented by a cognitive theory that specifies the constraints on the breaking of norms on the basis of theoretical and empirical considerations.

Given the privileged status of figurative language among the foregrounding devices, the general argument above was illustrated by an analysis of two figurative types, simile and oxymoron, for their distribution in poetic discourse, and the psychological processes involved in the way people process them. The argument was that for each of these cases, two structures exist (e.g. the canonical and non-canonical simile, the direct and indirect oxymoron) that can, in principle, equally instantiate the same foregrounding device. Poetic discourse, however, both cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, as well as cross-historically, robustly favours using that option that is cognitively simpler. Elsewhere (Shen, 1997), the same argument was applied to other figurative types, namely, synaesthetic metaphor, zeugma and relational analogy.

The basic assumption underlying the present proposal is that some of the structural regularities characterizing the poetic usage of figures of speech reflects a compromise between the aesthetic goals of creativity and novelty (represented by the use of novel figurative expressions), on the one hand, and conformity to

cognitive constraints that supports communicability, on the other. In sum, then, a comprehensive foregrounding theory should take into consideration both the 'violence against cognitive processes' (to paraphrase the Russian Formalist view; see Tsur, 1992) and the notion that this violence is itself limited by cognitive constraints.

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Note

- 1 It has been observed that foregrounding devices are structured and organized systematically in discourse, relative to the dominant level, in that similar features may recur, such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors, and one set of features will dominate the others, a phenomenon that was termed 'the dominant' (see Mukařovský, 1970). This systematicity, however, is not sufficient to account for the selective use of certain options of deviations rather than others – *across* different poetic texts. Note that the notion of dominance typically applies to a given poetic text, and refers to a layer or element in the text that provides a structure and systematicity to other elements or layers of that text. Therefore, it does not apply to generalizations outside a given text, generalizations that cut across various texts with respect to the use of a specific foregrounding device.

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