

A Metaphorical Perspective on Death and Grief in the Biblical Book of Job

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of death and grief from the perspective of conceptual metaphors in the biblical book of Job. It heightens the theory of conceptual metaphors as purported by Johnson and Lakoff that words are formed from our human cognitive systems which are functions of the world around us. This therefore implies that communication is not just the use of well-structured words and expressions by discourse participants, but the conscious employment of our cognitive systems which requires further our inferential systems to decode intentions in every utterance. This study aims to account for selected metaphorical expressions issued by participants during communication and to draw on their interpretive abilities in understanding speakers' intention for each selected utterance. A total of ten (10) utterances from ten verses have been selected for analysis with reference to themes such as death, evil, trouble, life, etc. The analysis puts forward that language users can unconsciously employ words during interactions which can result into lexical adjustments in the forms of broadening or narrowing. The study further implies that hearers are tasked with the responsibility of decoding utterances and telling whether words have been used literally or metaphorically because without this, meaning and interpretation can never be achieved.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor, Context, Communication, Non-literal Meaning, Afflictions,

Introduction

This study is an investigation into the construction of conceptual metaphors as used in the Biblical Book of Job. It gives an understanding that knowledge or meaning is the result of a well-formed or organised communicative activity where both speakers and hearers not only engage themselves but also their minds and the world as a whole in the construction and interpretation of meaning. The fact is established that an interactive activity is not a function of what speakers say alone or what meaning is interpreted by hearers; on a very large frame it deals with how speakers express the contents and intents of their minds and also all the processes that hearers get involved in basically to address the various meanings from the interaction. An interaction has more to do with meaning production and interpretation and less of when and where what is said. Communication is seen as a productive activity which involves the efficient response and contribution of both speakers and hearers. What makes it productive in essence is that there is a desired end or success of

the activity and this can be during or at the end. Speakers use words or expressions they are familiar with and go ahead to take for granted most times that hearers understand or have an idea about what has been said. This implies that hearers must navigate a labyrinth of processing and deducing meaning to understand the context and also interpret its meaning appropriately. Speakers just issue an utterance and leave meaning processing for hearers which is not a linguistic phenomenon but a cognitive process.

The cognitive processes which hearers employ for the interpretation of utterances or communicative intentions of speakers are understood through the Inferential Model of Linguistic Communication. This model accounts for the fact that as long as the connection between a speaker's communicative intention and a sentence is not one of conventional coding of the message into the sentence via its meaning, it is simply inferential. The only thing that makes a linguistic communication very successful is if the hearer is able to recognise the

speaker's communicative intentions. It works because the speaker and the hearer share a system of inferential strategies leading from the utterance of an expression to the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative intent (Akmajian, et al). The basic reason for resorting to the inferential strategies to determine speaker's intent is because both discourse participants possess a system of shared beliefs or assumptions or presumptions which are heavily relied on during interaction. Discussing the mutual-knowledge hypothesis as it aids utterance interpretation, Sperber and Wilson explained that:

The set of premises used in interpreting an utterance (apart from the premise that the utterance in question has been produced) constitutes what is generally known as the context. A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of course, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance. A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypothesis or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation (15-16).

Context is not linguistic but a psychological phenomenon that makes up the participants assumptions or beliefs about the world. This includes the past, present and even the future so long it relates to the understanding they possess. It holds true to mention that speakers automatically take for granted certain truths and information about an interaction which guide what they select to say and how they intend what they say to be interpreted. Speakers stand on the premise that they share the same contextual background or have mutual knowledge about their immediate environment or the world as a whole; therefore,

they elicit the appropriate interpretation to their utterances. However, this might not be seeing that an interaction is strictly based on a lot of assumptions. Hearers might find themselves with the task of identifying the real or intended meaning of the speaker and the success of every communicative activity is hinged on this fact.

In their famous book (*Metaphors We Live By*) that expounded on the theory of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (4) assert that our conceptual system plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. The way we use words simply structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. The structure of our communication and relationship is made successful through language, since it is an inherent feature of our conceptual system. They surely have a meeting point that might be oblivious to us. The results of this are the very specific ways we have structured our expressions to show that they are in tandem with our experiences around the world. This does not only affect our conceptual system in terms of thought processing, but also how through our construction of meaning we understand several ways of viewing the world and the people around us. Simply put, we understand the world and our relationships through metaphors. Renton (3) implying that metaphors are constructed on the basis of very colourful analogies put forward that we daily talk of “missing the bus”, of “being in the same boat” as someone else, of “not having a crystal ball”, people always “getting a feather in their cap”, and “building bridges”. These are successful especially during communication because of how enriched our conceptual systems have been.

This study is aimed at investigating the use of conceptual metaphor by discourse participants in the biblical book of Job. The following objectives will further guide the researcher in achieving the aim:

- i. What are the classifications of conceptual metaphor as employed in selected utterances?

- ii. What guides discourse participants to interpretation of metaphors during interaction?
- iii. What are the different portrayals of life, death, and grief in selected utterances?

The Biblical Book of Job

The Book of Job deals with the issue of human suffering and the desire to situate the problem to a particular cause or action. The man Job was said to be wealthy, happy, and a man who loved God and eschewed evil. To ascertain his righteous devotion to God, He (God) grants the devil the permission to cause Job great affliction – losing all his wealth and children in a day – and see if he will deny or curse God to His face. Besides these losses, Job became very ill having his body covered with sore boils. Then Job and his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – engage in series of speeches as they tell him to simply acknowledge the wickedness that has resulted to God's punishment on him grossly, he also tries to explain his innocence and righteous ways before God which means that he does not deserve the affliction and suffering. These speeches or dialogues are highly poetic.

Theoretical Perspective

In cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, or cognitive metaphor, refers to the understanding of one idea in terms of another. A conceptual domain can be any mental organization of human experience. The regularity with which different languages employ the same metaphors, often perceptually based, has led to the hypothesis that the mapping between conceptual domains corresponds to neural mappings in the brain. This theory has gained wide attention, although some researchers question its empirical accuracy.

This idea, and a detailed examination of the underlying processes, was first extensively explored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their work *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980. Their theory of Conceptual Metaphor is of what concepts are, especially abstract ones. It considers how they are structured and how this structure is

acquired through cross-domain mappings (Bundgaard, 1). Since then, the field of metaphor studies within the larger discipline of cognitive linguistics has increasingly developed, with several annual academic conferences, scholarly societies, and research labs contributing to the subject area.

Lakoff and Johnson (7) made a very important claim that metaphor is not just a matter of language (of mere words), but that human thought processes are largely metaphorical. They simply mean that human conceptual system is defined and structured metaphorically. The way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor because we think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. These make it implicit that we are much less aware of what goes on in our conceptual system. Therefore the best proof to handle this is in the light of communication with language. Every use of metaphor during communication is considered highly ingenious. The use of metaphor therefore, presupposes an interaction between a speaker's cognitive abilities and the world as a whole which sheds light on the two conceptual domains of “source” and “target” where one is understood in terms of the other. Every communicative activity is basically reflective of the world either in full or in fragments. This explains why participants use their knowledge of the world to speak metaphorically. When a person, an object, or an idea is perceived, we tend to put them in relation to the context and to our own experiences. That is, we often use the knowledge and experience we have to understand the phenomenon that seem very new to us.

Metaphor, according to Taverniers (1), refers to a kind of movement from one thing to another. In a more general way, it is “a way of expression, in language or any other semiotic system, in which one 'meaning' or 'thing' is described as or looked upon in terms of another 'meaning' or 'thing'”. Metaphor is a verbal transference; a variation in the expression of meanings which involves a non-literal use of a word. Very specifically, a metaphor

explains the irregularity of content that consists on employing a word differently from its proper or basic sense and related to its terms of similarity (Romero and Soria (2) citing Halliday). More to the notion of movement from one thing to another is the idea that metaphor is the use of words to convey a non-literal sense. It is known as meaning variation and irregularity of content because the semantic contents or properties of words used are not reflected in the intended meaning of the expression. These also account for the fact that the words used and the metaphorical sense have a feature of resemblance; that is, the meaning of one is similar to the sense of another. Speaking further, they (Romero and Soria) believe that a metaphorical expression is a case of non-literal or an improper use, they must be used in the right context that can allow the hearer correctly interpret what type of linguistic entity they are facing. This gives rise to the problem of deciding how easy it is for metaphors to be identified by hearers.

In beginning the discourse of metaphor, Searle (76) asked questions such as: why do we use expressions metaphorically instead of saying exactly and literally what we mean? How do metaphorical utterances work? He also states that literalness is a vehicle for non-literalness because sentence or expression meaning is the link to speaker's utterance meaning. More to this is that metaphor is compared to analogy in the sense that "analogical mapping is a process of establishing a structural alignment between two represented situations and then projecting inferences" (Gentner et al 200). They simply argue that creating a metaphor involves an alignment which is a one-to-one correspondence between the mapped elements in the base and target. This still represents the use of the right words in the right context which will therefore, create a well-constructed metaphor. Lakoff (6), speaking on the contemporary theory of metaphor, said metaphors are not mere words or expressions but ontological mappings across a target domain from a source domain. The fact that it is a fixed part of our conceptual system makes it primarily of thought and reason; and secondarily

of language. Still basic to the theory of metaphor is the notion of using lexical concepts to convey metaphorical meaning which directly motivates language change. Stressing further, Evans put forward that an increasing number of scholars have proposed that it is language use that creates the motivating contexts for language change. The shades of meaning in language use are better accounted for by assuming that inferences which emerge in specific contexts of use give rise to form-function re-analysis; meaning that a form comes to be associated with a new meaning. When inferences are employed in certain communication contexts, it leads to a new lexical concept. This is when a new sense is associated with a lexical form: a conceptual content arising from a linguistic content.

Understanding how a metaphor works can be on the basis of knowing the literal/non-literal distinction in language use. The use of language basically is to perform certain actions through the transfer of words and expressions during communication. This means that in the basic sense words and expressions are intended to pass information or bring about the performance of an action in a way that will be construed by the hearer. The literal use of language explains the fact that words or expressions mean exactly what or how they are represented; this is without any connotation or reliance on the context. Israel relates literal meaning to commonsense asserting that it is a sort of first and simple principle of meaning that is direct, original, unembellished and unadorned, as opposed to all varieties of figure or derivation (147). This means that literal meaning resides in the words themselves that is the semantic contents of the linguistic forms represented in the words, the sounds and the ideas they convey. Griffiths believed that explicating meaning is in diverse stages and the first is that the meaning of words is literal. He stressed that they are abstracted from contexts of use, and they can be re-used in many different situations, rather than only in re-enactments of the original contexts in which we met them (80). In consonance with this notion is

the idea that “Words do not have nonliteral meanings but they can be used in nonliteral ways” (Bach 249 quoted in Börjesson 2). These are simply to state that literal meanings are conventional and context independent. Therefore, accounting for literal meaning is most basic and salient for understanding meaning in its entirety which begins with a language user's familiarity with the semantic components of words and expressions.

Non-literal meaning is simply non-conventional and context-dependent. This means that it does not arise from the basic, ordinary, natural, direct or conventional meanings of expressions; and most factual is that it depends on the context of use for its meaning. However the case, it is traditionally assumed that the interpretation process of a non-literal expression begins first from the literal meaning, whereas any potential non-literal meanings are processed immediately on the condition that the literal interpretation does not fit the context of use (Börjesson 2). The emergence of the non-literal meaning resides in the presence of a specific context where a literal interpretation is impossible to achieve. This is also to state that non-literal meanings do not emerge from the linguistic components of words. According to Giora, non-literal meaning is activated only if there is a mismatch of literal meaning with context or when it has been possibly rejected as the intended meaning (919-920).

Context is very fundamental in understanding the meaning of an utterance and not necessarily the comprehension of the literal representations. Coulson and Oakley asserted that interpreting meaning beyond the literal sense requires the recruitment of extra linguistic information which includes background knowledge, knowledge of conceptual metaphors, and local contextual information (1511). This concerns how participants understand or coordinate with each other in comprehending meaning. This is somewhat, in relation to the theory of common ground. Discourse participants respond to issues

based on their common knowledge or mutual knowledge. The knowledge that participants share during interaction is what helps them in making out meaning in context.

Methodology

With reference to the basic thrust of the book of Job, ten (10) verses have been selected to represent issues such as death, evil/trouble, life, hope, prosperity, and suffering. For each of the verses selected, a particular metaphor(s) has been identified and interpretation given with relevance to the common grounds shared by participants that have aided successful interaction. The conceptual metaphors (henceforth CMs) chosen have been classified into two categories: CMs based on trouble/evil and based on life.

Data Analysis and Discussion

CMs based on Trouble and Evil

But now when trouble strikes, you lose heart. You are terrified when it touches you (4:5)

Discourse participants here have full details of all the events that have taken place which have resulted to the very long series of talks and speeches centering on very difficult issues such as trouble and evil as expressed in the verse above. The speaker expresses the fact that trouble performs the functions that a person does with their hands by saying that 'it touches you'. From the verbs 'strikes' and 'touches' we can say that:

TROUBLE IS PERSON.

This CM gives us the understanding that the source domain is a person and the target is the sense of trouble. It is used to stress the lethal blow of evil in the form of afflictions that have befallen the listener. Trouble is represented as a person in physical combat with another (the referent) and was able to subdue him because of the deathly strike in the case that was permitted by God. The effect has left the referent terrified and lose their heart.

The next utterance in this category classified trouble as a seed that can be planted and cultivated on a farmland. The meaning of this metaphor is

best understood from the natural law that whatever one sows the same they shall reap. Literally, when a farmer plants yam seedlings it cannot produce corn or coconut, but yam tubers. Therefore, a person will reap evil because they have planted evil. From the verse: *My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same* (4:8), we can understand that:

EVIL/TROUBLE IS SEED

The meaning of this metaphor is clearly understood or is a shared knowledge by participants owing to the fact that it is widely known that most of the troubles that people encounter are results of certain things they had done in the past. In the case of Job, his friends are convinced that he must have done something to stir the anger of God which is the reason for his many afflictions. From this CM we can also deduce that since EVIL or TROUBLE IS A SEED, then THE HEART OR MIND IS A SOIL and THOUGHTS ARE FARM TOOLS.

These give us a better knowledge of what it means to plant trouble and cultivate evil.

Another representation of suffering is the use of the word 'terror' in the following verse: *The sound of terror rings in their ears, and even on good days the fear the attack of the destroyer* (15:12). Here the speaker makes reference to the deeds of the wicked and the obvious results that befall them. Since the discourse bothers on issues of wickedness and its consequences, Job's friends indirectly refer to him as a wicked person. The gravity of a man's evil – they suppose – is in proportion to the consequences that he will encounter. In this case the gravity of the consequences is likened to the loudness of a bell directly in the ears of the wicked man as represented in the CM:

TERROR IS A BELL

The loud and disturbing sound of a bell is likened to the persistent attacks of evil on an unrighteous person. The ringing of a bell is to signal an event

that everyone who hears it is familiar with, but in this case it is understood as a means of inflicting pain to a particular kind of person. The friends of Job employ every means possible especially with words to make him realize why his afflictions are necessary.

In furtherance to this description of his crises comes yet another representation of evil thus: *They conceive trouble and give birth to evil. Their womb produces deceit* (15:35). This helps us deduce the following CMs:

TROUBLE IS A FOETUS

THE MIND IS A WOMB

When a woman conceives it becomes a foetus but later develops and she gives birth to a baby. Her conception takes place in her womb; these are very tangible things or features of a human being. The senses of these body parts are translated to abstract concepts such as trouble, evil, and deceit. Hence the understanding that the mind serves as the womb that conceives trouble and in due time follows the process of giving birth to a baby which also amounts to producing evil and deceit.

Another point of representation employed in the description of the evil that the wicked encounters is in 18:13 which says: *Disease eats their skin; death devours their limbs*. The means of non-literality used here goes farther to be more critical and deadly than previous representations especially since it involves disease and death consuming and devouring. Physically, we see or read about boils and sores that the devil inflicted on Job as part of his trials which made him sit on the dust and scratch his body with broken pottery. His friends describe his affliction as deadly as possible, and we can deduce the following CMs:

DISEASE IS HUMAN

SKIN IS FOOD

Naturally, when one is infected with a skin disease they lose parts of their skin to that infection. Therefore, the most common way of describing that terrible situation is using the verb 'eat'. The

word 'devour' is employed to mean violent eating such as when a predator pounces on a prey or when a very hungry person hurriedly eats a meal. These senses have been transferred to help us understand how disease eats one's skin and how death devours one's limbs.

CMs Relating to Life

The metaphors to be discussed in this section are issues relating to life such as time, hope, instructions, etc. These are very significant issues with relevance to the afflictions of Job referred to as 'the wicked' or 'unrighteous'. The first here refers to life or one's time on earth using days as in: *My days fly faster than a weaver's shuttle. They end without hope (7:6)*. The use of the word 'fly' denotes the movement of a bird or an aircraft but in this case it is 'my days fly' which connotes the movement or passing of one's time on earth. We can distinguish between walking or running and flying as the movement of the latter is greater than the former; hence, we get an understanding of what Job meant to mean his life is ending rapidly. We can deduce from this utterance that:

LIFE/TIME IS A BIRD

Job referring to his afflictions likened the ebbing of his life to the flight of a bird, possibly an eagle that is the king of all birds. Fly here also means that his time is counted differently than that of others because of his many sufferings.

In response to Job's utterance about his life, he gets the expression thus: *The same happen to all who forget God. The hopes of the godless evaporate (8:13)*. The most important feature of human existence that keeps life on in spite of any hardship is hope. But for the godless – those who forget God – they have none left because they are doomed for destruction already. Evaporation is considered the process of becoming vapour, and vapour is the suspension of particles of some substance in the air. To properly describe the fate or inevitable or destructive end of a godless person, the choice of a word such as 'evaporate' is required since it deals with what cannot be found in the air. Hence the

CM:

HOPE IS VAPOUR

The succeeding verse also corroborates the notion expressed in the previous, still referring to how worthless the life of a godless person will always end especially when they begin to suffer terrible circumstances. The verse says: *Their confidence hangs by a thread. They are leaning on a spider's web (8:14)*. Since the hopes of the godless evaporate it portrays the state of their confidence as being lost or thin. It also follows to say that it is nothing that can be trusted especially with the use of the expressions 'thread' and 'spider's web'. A thread can hold nothing more than a needle so it has no assurance of sustaining one's confidence. The same sense of a thread also applies to the strength of a web. A spider's web is meant only for insects not for something as great as hope or confidence; it cannot be trusted to carry anything bigger or greater than an insect. A person can only lean on something that is stronger than them such as a wall or a pillar. Therefore, it can be deduced that:

A WEB IS A WALL/PILLAR

THE STRENGTH OF THE WICKED IS A THREAD

In 15:32 it also speaks of another fate that befalls the unrighteous; it says thus: *Like trees, they will be cut down in the prime of life; their branches will never be green again*. When a tree is cut down it ceases to grow and since the leaves and branches have been severed from their source of nutrient, they die almost immediately. The basis for their growth and sustenance is their attachment to the root which constantly draws nutrients from the soil. Since this is in relation to the life of a person it simply means that:

MAN IS A TREE

With very specific reference to the expression 'prime' to mean first or early, it means that the life of a man is cut down or ended at a very early or young age – when it is assumed that they have more years to spend on earth. It is common knowledge that as a tree, when a young person dies

it is termed premature death. This also implies that when one dies at an old age it will be said that they died at a ripe age but there is weeping and lots of wailing when one dies young – in their prime. More so, there is utmost pleasure and satisfaction in eating a fruit that is ripe than one that is unripe or premature. Prosperity here is also likened to the greenness or verdancy of the branches and leaves which is the appearance or sign of a flourishing plant. When a tree or vegetation is very green, there is every sign of life present but when a man (as a tree) is cut down in their prime it puts an end to flourishing, prosperity, success or life as a whole; nothing good is expected any longer from that man. So we can also say:

SUCCESS IS BRANCHES/GREEN LEAVES

This next verse to be considered – 22:22 – is an admonition to Job from his friends to make him have a contrite heart so that things can turn out better for him. It says: *Listen to his instructions, and store them in your heart.* The word 'store' can be used both as a noun and a verb, which points to the same sense. It denotes a house or building where certain goods are kept; it also refers to the action of keeping goods in a building, or simply the act of storing something. The things to be stored here are instructions – intangible things, and the place to store them is the heart. These give us the understanding that:

INSTRUCTION IS A SEED/GOOD

THE HEART IS A STORE/WAREHOUSE

Job's friends said this as a means of making him trace his steps back to God. They simply imply that he is being afflicted because he has neither followed or listened to the instructions of God nor stored them in his heart. Therefore, it is by storing God's instructions in his heart that his life will not be cut down in its prime.

Conclusion

The above analysis has given us accounts of the use of figurative or metaphorical expressions as employed by interactants. It has simply attested that no word can mean the same thing twice. This is

basically the function of context as it assigns meanings to words or expressions that have been used in interaction. The sense of 'evil' or 'trouble' has been assigned several forms of meaning or description to help us understand the richness of language during contextual use. Such forms as evident in the analysis are: evil as a person, as a seed, as a bell, as a foetus, as a house, and as a spider. These mean that evil or trouble can breathe as well as see its prey as a person; it can be planted, grown and nurtured as well as harvested in its due season; it can be heard either loudly as a bell or mildly as a gentle whisper; it can be conceived for a short or long period then delivered at just the right time to begin manifestation to maturity when put in the right environment, and so on. These concepts have been employed unconsciously by interactants to account for instances of lexical adjustments by both narrowing and broadening.

The second part of the analysis also interpreted life to mean the following: time, days, money, bird, and a tree. All the years that a person spends on earth can be calculated in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks and months. Life can be squandered and saved or treasured as money; it can run or move faster as with the flight of a bird or an aircraft. It can also be planted and grown to become a tree with its roots deep and firm in the ground, also with other parts such as branches, leaves and fruits to show its productivity and life. It can also wither as a result of lack of nutrients from the soil which will eventually lead to death or used for a worthless purpose.

These lexically adjusted concepts do not only suggest that meanings in the target domains can be narrowed or loosened but that even concepts in the source domains can also be adjusted. Such cases include the following: TERROR IS A BELL, TROUBLE IS A SPIDER, TROUBLE IS A FOETUS, TERROR IS A HOUSE, and EVIL IS A SEED. The target domains share sameness in their sense as stated in the CMs above. It is very natural that people eagerly expect a tree to produce fruits for their nourishment but not when the seed that

has been planted is evil in the heart or mind as the metaphorical soil for its growth.

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