Mr Metaphor Man
A study of Bob Dylan's lyrics

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Abstract

This study was carried out in order to investigate the purpose of Bob Dylan's creative metaphors. Focus was on whether they were used for artistic effect or to simplify and concretize abstract concepts. Ten songs written in the last five decades were randomly selected and searched for occurrences of creative metaphors. The metaphors found were chronologically listed and discussed in terms of potential source and target domains in order to determine their purpose. The results showed rather clearly that Dylan's creative metaphors, regardless of whether the domains were abstract or concrete, seemed to complicate rather than simplify the interpretation of a line. There were a few instances where the creative metaphors could be interpreted as being explanatory; however, this was regarded as a secondary effect since it was clear that the primary purpose for Dylan's creative metaphors was to add an artistic touch. Moreover, this purpose did not seem to have changed in any way during the last five decades.

Keywords: creative, purpose, source, target, domain, abstract, concrete.
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1. Introduction

“I don’t call myself a poet because I don’t like the word. I’m a trapeze artist.”

The words are Bob Dylan’s, extracted from the Positively Tie Dream interview carried out by Nora Ephron and Susan Edmiston more than forty five-years ago (for a full transcription of the interview see Cott, 2007:49). Whether he would answer in the same way today is impossible to tell, but it is clear that Dylan has become very famous for his words. In the year 2000, he was rewarded the Polar Music Prize since his “ability to combine poetry, harmony and melody in a meaningful, often provocative context, has captivated millions in all age groups, and in most cultures and societies” (Polar Music Prize, 2011). Furthermore, according to his official website, he has released over 450 songs, and has most likely written several more, during the last five decades (SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT, 2011).

Dylan, like many poets and other songwriters, makes use of figurative language in his writing as well as in his casual speech. This includes words and expressions that go beyond their literal meaning and require the reader to use his or her imagination in order to make sense of what is said. Metaphor is a common kind of figurative language. An example of this can be found in the quote above. That is, Dylan does not literally fly around in the air wearing a cat suit; however, he seems to be as free and as fearless as a trapeze artist, not least when playing around with words. This word play commonly results in various kinds of creative, new, metaphors. Nevertheless, according to author Michael Gray, who is regarded as a leading authority on the life and work of Dylan, there have been no well-known previous studies made on this specific aspect of Dylan’s production (Michael Gray 2011, personal communication, 9 September). Consequently, the aim of the present paper is to provide a preliminary account of Dylan’s creative metaphors and their purposes, thereby, hopefully, contributing to a greater knowledge of this area of Bob Dylan’s written language.
2. Background

2.1 Metaphor

Etymologically the term metaphor derives from the Greek words meta = ‘with/after’ and phenrei = ‘bear, carry’ (Charteris-Black, 2004:19). Knowles and Moon (2006:3) define metaphor as “the use of language to refer to something other than what it is originally applied to, or what it ‘literally’ means, in order to suggest some resemblance or make a connection between two things”. Furthermore, they state that metaphor is pervasive in language and that there are two primary reasons for its importance. First, when words and word meanings are formed, metaphor is an essential process in that it lexicalizes meanings and concepts. This is the case in the sentence “the failure has hurt him deeply” where Knowles and Moon (2006:4) present hurt as a multi-sense word and a metaphor. In addition, they suggest that names of new devices, compound words and idioms commonly have metaphorical origins (2006:4). Computer virus, pigeonhole and miss the boat are all examples of this. Second, metaphor is important in relation to discourse “because of its functions – explaining, clarifying, describing, expressing, evaluating, entertaining” (Knowles & Moon, 2006:4). Consequently, metaphor enables the understanding of numerous expressions that would not make sense without its presence. For example, we are used to understanding the biological process of the human body’s reaction to infection through the metaphor of war, thus, we can understand expressions like “[...]the white blood cells which help fight off micro-organisms” (Knowles & Moon, 2006:5). In addition, Lindquist (2009:112) states that there are two main reasons for using metaphors. They are used either to explain something complicated or abstract by means of something clearer or concrete, or to express something ordinary in a more artistic and colorful manner. The “fight off” metaphor above is an example where something complicated becomes more straightforward, whereas “trapeze artist” mentioned in the previous section is a metaphor used for artistic effect.

2.1.1 Creative and conventional metaphors

Metaphor can be divided into creative metaphors and conventional metaphors. The latter, sometimes also referred to as dead metaphors, have become a natural part of the language.
Therefore, they often remain unnoticed or are not thought of as metaphors at all (Knowles & Moon, 2006:6). The “fight off” metaphor mentioned above is an example of a conventional metaphor as well as “running out” in “time is running out”. To be able to understand a creative metaphor on the other hand, it is necessary to “deconstruct” it in some way (Knowles & Moon 2006:5). The reason for this is that creative metaphors commonly are new and have been created in order to express a specific idea or feeling (Knowles & Moon 2006:5). As mentioned in the previous section, one of the two main purposes of metaphor is to express something common in a more artistic way, which is generally associated with new creative metaphors. In this paper the term creative metaphor is applied to the cases where it seems clear that Dylan has made an intentional choice to express himself in a less conventional way. For example, in “Like A Rolling Stone” Dylan chooses to refer to a motorcycle by means of the creative metaphor “chrome horse” (this particular metaphor will be discussed further in the results and discussion section).

2.1.2 Conceptual metaphors

In 1980 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published Metaphors We Live By, introducing a new revolutionary approach to the study of metaphor. In the book they claim that our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature and thus, metaphor is very much present in the way we speak, think and act in our everyday lives (1980:3). Given that this theory is correct, metaphor is significantly present in various ways in different situations. However, people are usually unaware of the conceptual system and simply think and act automatically in certain ways (1980:3). Language acts as a piece of evidence that has the possibility to prove how the conceptual system works (1980:3). Lakoff and Johnson present various examples to demonstrate how concepts can be metaphorical and structure an everyday activity.

Their first and very famous example of a conceptual metaphor is argument is war which may give rise to any number of linguistic metaphors. “Your claims are indefensible” and “His criticisms were right on target” are two of these (1980:4). According to Lakoff and Johnson the way we carry out arguments is specified by the way in which we carry out wars (1980:4). Even though in an argument the battle is verbal and not physical, it is still structured in a similar way with attack, defense, counterattack, etc. and thus, the argument is war metaphor is highly present in our culture (1980:4). In addition, Lakoff & Johnson emphasize that “the essence of
metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (1980:5). For example, even though argument and war are different things, the former is “partially structured, understood, performed and talked about in terms of war” (1980:5).

Going on, Lakoff & Johnson divide conceptual metaphors into three categories: structural, orientational and ontological metaphors. The argument is WAR mentioned above is an example of a structural metaphor, since it illustrates the case “where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another” (1980:14). Orientational metaphors, on the other hand, “organize a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” and are called this way since they usually involve spatial orientation (1980:14). HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN as in “I’m feeling up today” and “My spirits sank” is an example of an orientational metaphor. (1980:14-15). There are also ontological metaphors, which enable us to conceptualize and refer to things as physical objects even if they are abstract (1980:25). Lakoff & Johnson say that “once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them – and, by this means, reason about them” (1980:25). The ontological metaphor THE MIND IS AN ENTITY in the form of THE MIND IS A MACHINE is exemplified by the linguistic metaphor “My mind just isn’t operating today” (1980:27). In addition, there are extensions of ontological metaphors which belong to the general category personification. They make it possible to understand abstract phenomena in human terms (1980:34). “Life has cheated me” and “The fact argues against the standard theories” are examples of personification (1980:33).

Moving on, all conceptual metaphors, regardless of what category they belong to, consist of a source domain and a target domain and the relation between them is referred to as a mapping or correspondence (Lindquist, 2009:115). In the case of the THE MIND IS A MACHINE metaphor, MACHINE is the source and MIND is the target. That is, the typical features of a machine are mapped onto the mind (Lindquist, 2009:115).

Conceptual metaphor theory, particularly the work of Lakoff and Johnson, has been very influential in integrating metaphor in to semantics and linguistics (Knowles & Moon, 2006:45), and even though it has been criticized by some linguists, among others Alice Deignan (2005), it is still generally accepted and used.
3. Aim and scope

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary account of Bob Dylan's creative use of metaphor, with focus on the purpose for such metaphors. In order to do this, a selection of his lyrics has been investigated and the following research questions have been asked:

- What is the prime purpose of Dylan's creative metaphors? Are they used only for artistic effect, or do they have a clear additional function of concretizing and simplifying abstract concepts?
- Has the purpose of Dylan's creative metaphors changed in any way during the last five decades?

The study focuses on creative metaphor only, excluding any conventional or dead metaphors. Among creative metaphors, it furthermore deals only with those that do not involve personification.

4. Design of the study

Ten of Bob Dylan's songs written in the 1960s-2000s, taken from *SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT* (2011) form the base of this paper. In order to achieve a fair representation of Dylan's production, two songs from each decade have been randomly selected. However, the results of this study are nevertheless limited by the fact that only a small part of Dylan's lyrics were included in the investigation and that some creative metaphors may have been unintentionally left out. Nonetheless, the ten selected songs were looked at closely in search of creative metaphors. This resulted in a number of metaphors which, based on the theories of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), were analyzed in terms of source and target domains in order to subsequently be able to determine their purpose. Considering that this was carried out on the basis of my personal interpretations, it is necessary to point out that the analysis is subjective. Moreover, there are no precise rights or wrongs when it comes to source and target domains and therefore the results might have turned out somewhat different in someone else’s hands.
5. Results and discussion

In this section the creative metaphors found in the ten different songs are chronologically listed and discussed in terms of potential source and target domains and purposes.

5.1 “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall”, 1962

The very title of the song “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall” contains one of Dylan’s many creative metaphors.¹

“A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall”
Source domain: the concept of a future unpleasant rain falling = concrete
Target domain: something bad is going to happen = abstract

Here Dylan seems to express his concerns about something bad that is going to happen by means of the concept of a future unpleasant rain falling down on us. That is, he lets the concrete hard rain represent the abstract idea of an upcoming negative event, thereby simplifying as well as achieving an artistic affect. The verb “fall” is likely to be used since rain naturally falls down from above, however, one might also be tricked in to thinking that the use of “fall” is connected to the general conceptual orientational metaphor HAPPY IS UP/BAD IS DOWN, considering that physical basis for well-being, such as happiness, life or control, are all perceived as up (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:16). This is not the case though, since it is the bad thing itself, that is, the rain, that falls and not the victim(s) of the rain.

There is a possibility that “wild wolves” below is simply intended to literally refer to the wild animals. However, considering the metaphorical structure of the rest of the song in general, and this verse in particular it is likely that it is intended as a creative metaphor.

¹ Hard is in itself a dead metaphor, however since this study is not concerned with dead metaphor it will not be further discussed.
"I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it"
Source domain: wolves = concrete
Target domain: danger = abstract

Here Dylan draws on the general belief of the characteristics of wolves by using them to express danger. Despite the fact that the concrete animals stand in for the abstract threat, the purpose should perhaps be considered to be poetic rather than explanatory, since the concept of danger is fairly comprehensible to most people. In addition, the use of wolves possibly complicates the line rather than simplifies it, since understanding what the wolves might be about requires some extra effort.

Dylan continues to describe what the person in "A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall" has seen by using another creative metaphor.

"I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it"
Source domain: the concept of a highway made of diamonds =concrete
Target domain: a wealthy life = abstract

There are two different mappings within this metaphor, namely between the concepts HIGHWAY and LIFE as well as between the concepts DIAMONDS and WEALTH. The former falls back on the general underlying conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:44). This is another case where Dylan uses a concrete object to express an abstract idea, although complicating the line instead of facilitating it. Therefore, his purpose with his metaphor possibly is to achieve artistic effect.

In this section of “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall” it seems that Dylan is describing the misery of black people who have been injured and badly treated. The four different creative metaphors (each of which will be individually discussed below) are closely connected to each other and are therefore presented together.
“I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin’
I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin’
I saw a white ladder all covered with water
I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken”

“I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin’”
Source domain: branch = concrete
Target domain: a person = concrete

If one interpret “branch” as the branch of a tree, it should have sap or water dripping instead of blood, which is restricted to humans and animals (Oxford University Press, 2011). Moreover, considering the other four creative metaphors of this section (see below) it seems likely that “branch” represents a person rather than an animal. In other words, “blood” makes up the mapping between the source and the target domain. Dylan’s purpose with this creative metaphor is possibly artistic since he replaces one concrete object with another and turns the line more complex.

“I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin’”
Source domain: the conception of bleeding hammers = concrete
Target domain: = the conception of hammers with lots of blood on them = concrete

The use of “their” indicates that the men in this line are inherently associated with hammers. Considering the over-all context of the song these men are likely to be judges. Moving on, the fact that hammers cannot bleed favours the interpretation that they have much blood on them rather than that they are bleeding. Therefore, the target domain of this creative metaphor is THE CONCEPTION OF HAMMERS WITH LOTS OF BLOOD ON THEM. In addition, THE CONCEPTION OF SOMETHING HAVING BLOOD IN IT is a conventional source domain generally associated with the target domain HAVING CAUSED SOMEONE’S DEATH. In other words, the hammers have caused death. If the hammers stand in for verdict, the full conception here would be JUDGES WHOSE VERDICTS HAVE CAUSED DEATH, i.e. ‘death penalty judges’.
Dylan’s purpose with the creative metaphor seems to be artistic since his use of the concrete source and target domains appears to complicate interpretation.

“I saw a white ladder all covered with water”
Source domain: ladder = concrete
Target domain: ribcage = concrete

Dylan continues to refer to misery by mentioning an obvious sign of death and decay, namely, a piece of remaining bone. The mapping is based on the similarity in physical appearance of a ladder and a ribcage, that is, of two concrete objects. However, the mapping does not appear to be very straightforward and is possibly complicating the interpretation of the line. Thus, this is yet another case where Dylan seemingly uses a creative metaphor in order to add another dimension to his lyrics rather than to simplify an abstract concept.

“I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken”
Source domain: the concept of tongues that were broken by someone or something = concrete
Target domain: being forced/scared into silence = abstract

In this line, “broken” does not necessarily refer to being out of function but could also refer to being broken by someone. That is, the ten thousand talkers have possibly been forced or scared into silence, thereby, their tongues, although still intact, do not speak anymore. In other words, the expression could be interpreted as a creative metaphor where the concrete conception of someone physically ruining people’s ability to speak stands in for the abstract situation of forcing or scaring people into silence. Despite using a concrete source domain Dylan is possibly complicating the line rather than simplifying it and thus, his purpose here seems to be to achieve literary effect.

If one assumes that Dylan is not talking about an actual dog, this is, in similarity with the “black branch” metaphor discussed above, a creative metaphor where he seems to be referring to a black person by means of another concrete object
"I met a white man who walked a black dog"
Source domain: black dog = concrete
Target domain: black person = concrete

Both the source and target domains are concrete and the mapping between DOG and PERSON seems fairly straightforward. Nonetheless, by using the source domain DOG Dylan probably complicates the interpretation of the line rather than facilitates it since it is not necessarily self-evident to everyone what DOG represents. Thus, his purpose with this creative metaphor possibly is artistic rather than explanatory.

As regards the potential target domain this creative metaphor is provided with two different interpretations.

"I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbow"
Source domain: rainbow = concrete
Target domain: happiness/the effect of drug use = abstract/abstract

The most obvious interpretation of this creative metaphor is perhaps that rainbow represents something positive, such as happiness, where the classic characteristics of a rainbow, for example beauty and bright colours, make up the mapping. Given that this is Dylan’s intention, his choice of the concrete phenomenon in place of the abstract concept results in an artistic phrasing. However, considering the apocalyptic tone of the rest of the song one can assume that also this line has a negative message, referring to the effects of taking hallucinogens. In that case, the mapping would be partly the same, relating to the initial positive effects of drug use. However, regardless of which interpretation we settle for the purpose of the metaphor nevertheless seems to remain unchanged. Again, creating a certain poetic effect seems to be Dylan’s main objective here since he uses a quite vague source domain.

This line could be interpreted as being completely literal or as a creative metaphor.
“I’ll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest”
Source domain: the conception of walking to the depths of a deep dark forest = concrete
Target domain: facing life’s miseries = abstract

If it is intended as a poetic touch, Dylan relies on the mapping between WALK TO and FACE, and between THE DEPTHS OF A DEEP DARK FOREST and MISERIES. Again, considering that the use of the source domain possibly complicates the interpretation of the line, Dylan’s purpose seems to be to achieve literary effect rather than to concretize the abstract target domain. This creative metaphor possibly draws on the general conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:4).

Although the phrase in italics could be intended literally, it is probably more likely that it is a creative metaphor where Dylan highlights the general idea that people who are poor usually do not have anything to carry around

“Where the people are many and their hands are all empty”
Source domain: the conception of empty hands = concrete
Target domain: poverty = abstract

This is a fairly straightforward metaphor where Dylan uses the concrete EMPTY HANDS to represent abstract POVERTY. However, despite simplifying the abstract target domain by means of a concrete target domain, his primary purpose is possibly to achieve a more vivid language.

This is the last of the many creative metaphors that can be found in “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall”.

“Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters”
Source domain: pellets = concrete
Target domain: pollution = abstract
If one assumes that people in general are more familiar with the term \textit{pollution} than with the phrase “poisonous pellets”, Dylan is, again, complicating rather than simplifying interpretation, by concretizing the abstract concept of pollution. Therefore, his purpose with this creative metaphor is probably artistic rather than explanatory.

5.2 “Like a Rolling Stone”, 1965

This is perhaps one of Dylan’s most straightforward creative metaphors.

“You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat”
Source domain: a horse made of chrome = concrete.
Target domain: motor cycle = concrete

It seems that Dylan simply replaces motorcycle with another concrete object with similar qualities, presumably in order to sound more poetic.

In comparison with the former example, this creative metaphor seems to be much more complex.

“Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat”
Source domain: the conception of carrying a Siamese cat on the shoulder = concrete
Target domain: being elegant/loyal = abstract

There are two different mappings involved here. The first one is between CARRYING (SOMETHING) ON YOUR SHOULDER and BEING, whereas the second one is between SIAMESE CAT and ELEGANT or LOYAL where Dylan draws on the classic qualities of the animal (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011). In both mappings Dylan concretizes abstract concepts. Despite this he creates a complicating rather than a simplifying effect and seems to have an artistic purpose with this creative metaphor.

This appears to be yet another of Dylan’s creative metaphors which is difficult to interpret.
“You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used”
Source domain: Napoleon Bonaparte in rags = concrete
Target domain: a person going from success to misery = concrete

If by “Napoleon” Dylan is talking about Napoleon Bonaparte and not a random person named Napoleon, he could possibly be alluding to the fact that Bonaparte was a successful emperor who ended his life imprisoned and in exile (BBC, 2011). Then there would be one mapping between NAPOLEON and SUCCESS and one between MISERY and IN RAGS. These are quite vague mappings though, which probably means that Dylan is looking to be reasonably mysterious. Furthermore, there are only concrete domains involved and this possibly indicates that his purpose is to achieve literary effect.

5.3 “Forever Young”, 1973

The first metaphor of this song may perhaps appear to be conventional; however Dylan is using it in a new creative way.

“May you build a ladder to the stars”
Source domain: the concept of building a ladder to the stars = concrete
Target domain: striving for success = abstract

The component mappings between BUILDING and STRIVING and between STARS and SUCCESS presumably make this creative metaphor fairly easy to understand. Dylan replaces the abstract target domain with a concrete source domain. Nevertheless, his purpose seems to be to achieve a more vivid language rather than to concretize the abstract concept, since this is in itself not very complicated. This creative metaphor can be connected to the orientational conceptual metaphor HIGH STATUS IS UP (Lakoff & Johnson, 1983:16).

This creative metaphor consists of only one word.
“May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift”
Source domain: foundation = concrete
Target domain: self-esteem = abstract

Dylan’s use of this expression implies that there should probably be a conceptual metaphor A PERSON IS A BUILDING since the mapping between the concrete source domain FOUNDATION and the abstract target domain SELF-ESTEEM is based on the fact that the foundation of a building keeps it steady whereas self-esteem does same for a person. Dylan concertizes the abstract target domain, however, in doing so he does not seem to facilitate the interpretation of the line. Therefore, the purpose of this creative metaphor seems to be poetic rather than explanatory.

5.4 “Changing Of The Guards”, 1978

This is another case where the very title of the song seems to contain a creative metaphor.

“Changing Of The Guards”
Source domain: guard = concrete
Target domain: order = abstract

It may be that by “guards” Dylan intends people who are hired to retain order and nothing else. However, there is also a possibility that he uses the typical characteristic of the guards to express order as in for example the system of the world. In that case this would be another instance where Dylan, despite using a concrete source domain and an abstract target domain, possibly has an artistic rather than explanatory purpose. The reason for this is that his use of the source domain does not seem to make the interpretation of the line any easier.

In this creative metaphor Dylan mentions “Eden”, possibly adding religious dimension to the song.
"But Eden is burning, either brace yourself for elimination
Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards’"

Source domain: the conception of Eden burning = concrete
Target domain: the conception of the world being destroyed = abstract

Here there is one mapping between EDEN and THE WORLD and one between BURNING and BEING DESTROYED. Dylan concretizes the abstract target domain, however since the conception of Eden is not necessarily familiar to everyone Dylan’s primary purpose seems to be to achieve literary effect rather than to simplify.

5.5 “Sweetheart Like You”, 1983

It may be that Dylan uses one of his favourite instruments in order to convey the message of this creative metaphor.²

“Got to be an important person to be in here, honey
Got to have done some evil deed
Got to have your own harem when you come in the door
Got to play your harp until your lips bleed³

Source domain: the conception of playing a harp until the lips start bleeding = concrete
Target domain: communicate as much as possible in order to survive = abstract

The main mapping here is between PLAY (YOUR) HARP and COMMUNICATE. The abstract target domain is concretized, however it is probably not self-evident what the concrete source domain represents. Therefore, Dylan’s purpose is possibly to turn the language more vivid rather than to simplify the abstract concept.

² "Harp' is probably short for mouth harp, i.e. harmonica.
5.6 “Man In The Long Black Coat”, 1989

The first metaphor of this song is made up by a verb.

“But people don’t live or die, people just float”
Source domain: the concept of floating = concrete
Target domain: exist = concrete

By “float” Dylan possibly intends the state right between swimming and drowning. In other words, the people in the song are not living nor dying, they just exist. Therefore, the mapping of this creative metaphor is between FLOAT and EXIST. Both of the domains are abstract which could indicate that Dylan’s primary purpose here is artistic. In addition, the concept of existing may be as well known to most people as the concept of floating, and in that case there would be no need for Dylan to simplify it.

In this line Dylan probably alludes to the song “Smoke on the Water” from 1972 (Deep Purple Overseas, 2011), however, contrary to Deep Purple he uses the expression in a metaphorical way.

“There’s smoke on the water, it’s been there since June”
Source domain: smoke = concrete
Target domain: sorrow = abstract

It seems that by “smoke” Dylan is referring to the sorrow that the person in the song is feeling after the death of a woman in June. The mapping between SMOKE and SORROW is possibly based on the fact that smoke is poisonous whereas sorrow may feel like a poison, affecting a person’s life in a negative way. Moreover, it could also be that Dylan draws on the fact that smoke, in similarity with sorrow, may make it difficult to see things clearly. The abstract target domain SORROW is concretized, nevertheless, by the use of SMOKE the interpretation of the line seems to become more complicated. Considering this, Dylan’s purpose with this creative metaphor appears to achieve a poetic effect.
5.7 “Dignity”, 1991

“Dignity” perhaps contains one of Dylan’s most obscure creative metaphors.

“Someone showed me a picture and I just laughed
Dignity never been photographed
_I went into the red, went into the black_
Into the valley of dry bone dreams”
Source domain: the conception of going into the red, the black and the valley of dry bone dreams
  = abstract
Target domain: come across blood, death and hopelessness = abstract

Here both the source and target domains are abstract and Dylan possibly relies on four component mappings. The first one is between GOING INTO and COMING ACROSS and the second is between RED and BLOOD. In addition, the third mapping is between BLACK and DEATH, and the final one is between THE VALLEY OF DRY BONE DREAMS and HOPELESSNESS. The latter refers to the state of mind of people whose dreams have all been torn and Dylan may perhaps be alluding to the Bible where “the valley of dry bones” is mentioned (Biblica, 2011). There are no concrete concepts involved in this creative metaphor. Moreover, it is seemingly rather difficult to interpret the significance of the domains. Therefore, Dylan’s purpose appears to be to achieve literary effect.

In comparison with the former, this creative metaphor is perhaps slightly more straightforward.

“So many roads, so much at stake
So many dead ends, I’m at the edge of the lake
Sometimes I wonder what it’s gonna take
To find dignity”
Source domain: being at the edge of a lake = concrete
Target domain: being frustrated = abstract
It is not impossible that the person in this line is actually standing or sitting at the edge of a lake. However, considering the rest of the song, and the succeeding line especially, it is perhaps more likely that Dylan is saying that the person is frustrated after having been looking for dignity without any luck for a long time and thus, considers giving up. In that case, the mapping would be based on the lake being a possible way out of the frustration. Dylan replaces the abstract target domain with a concrete source domain, but nevertheless his purpose seems to be artistic rather than explanatory since there possibly still is some uncertainty regarding the interpretation of the source domain.

5.8 “Standing In The Doorway”, 1997

This is the only creative metaphor which was found in “Standing In The Doorway”.

“You left me standing in the doorway crying
Blues wrapped around my head”
Source domain: the conception of having something wrapped around the head = concrete
Target domain: the conception of feeling detached and distanced by sadness = abstract

A person who has something wrapped around his or her head probably cannot see or hear very well. Hence, he or she is ‘absorbed’ by this thing and cut off from his or her surroundings. In appears that Dylan maps this conception onto the conception of being detached by emotion. That is to say, the person in this line is absorbed by the feeling of “blues”, i.e. sadness. The source domain involved here is concrete whereas the target domain is abstract. Nevertheless, considering the complexity of this creative metaphor, Dylan’s primary purpose seems to be to add a poetic touch rather than to concretize the abstract concept.

5.9 “Cry A While”, 2001

Depending on how one chooses to interpret the following line it consists of either one or two creative metaphors. Both options will be individually discussed below.
“I’m on the fringes of the night, fighting back tears that I can’t control”

Source domain: fringes = concrete
Target domain: the small hours = abstract

If “night” is intended literally, “fringes” falls back on the conceptual metaphor of viewing the night as a physical object with a centre and a periphery (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:27). In other words, the person in the song is presumably saying that he or she is trying to fight back his or her tears in the small hours of the night. Dylan replaces the abstract target domain THE SMALL HOURS with the concrete source domain FRINGES, however in doing so he seems to be complicating the interpretation of the line rather than simplifying. Therefore, his purpose with his creative metaphor seems to be artistic.

I’m on the fringes of the night, fighting back tears that I can’t control”

Source domain: the concept of being on the fringes of something = abstract
Source domain: night = abstract
Target domain: depression = abstract

If, contrary to the above interpretation, “night” is metaphorical, the mapping between the source domain NIGHT and the target domain DEPRESSION is possibly based on the on the idea that both night and depression are dark concepts. Furthermore, this changes the interpretation of “fringes of”, which in that case has a completely different target domain, namely BEING ON THE VERGE OF SOMETHING. In other words, Dylan seems to be saying that the person in the song is on the verge of depression. All of the domains involved in these two creative metaphors are abstract. In addition, the source domains seem to complicate the interpretation of the line rather than to simplify it and thus, Dylan’s purpose here is possibly to achieve literary effect.

5.10 “When The Deal Goes Down”, 2006

In the very title of this song Dylan seemingly uses the conventional metaphor a deal goes down in a new creative way.
“When the deal goes down”
Source domain: the conception of a deal going down = abstract
Target domain: death = abstract

The mapping of this creative metaphor is possibly based on the sense of finalization presented in both the source and the target domain, i.e. finalizing a deal and finalizing life respectively. It could be that Dylan chose to revive this particular metaphor since it contains the word “down”, which, in his new creative way of using it, possibly falls back on the orientational conceptual metaphor SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN (Lakoff & Johnson, 1983:15). Either way, both of the domains involved in the creative metaphor are abstract, and the source domain does not seem to facilitate the interpretation of the line. Hence, Dylan’s purpose here seems to be artistic.

By using this creative metaphor Dylan seems to be making another biblical reference.

“We all wear the same thorny crown”
Source domain: (Jesus) wearing a thorny crown = concrete
Target domain: being mocked in a painful way = abstract

Here it seems that Dylan is indirectly referring to Jesus, mapping his painful experience onto the people in this song. His primary purpose is probably to be poetic rather than to simplify, nevertheless, by concretizing as well as referring to an incident familiar to many people, Dylan seems to create a fairly clear creative metaphor.

6. Conclusion

Bob Dylan may not like to call himself a poet but there is little doubt that he is. In order to be able to make sense of his creative metaphors it is necessary to deconstruct them in some way and this is commonly an interesting challenge. Contrary to the preconceived assumption that concretizing would lead to simplification, and thus indicate an explanatory purpose, it seems that Dylan’s creative metaphors generally always complicate the interpretation of a line. This occurs regardless of the nature of the source and the target domain in relation to each other, which
supports the conclusion that their primary purpose is to create an artistic effect rather than to simplify things. There are a few instances where Dylan, by using a concrete source domain, concretizes abstract concepts and perhaps achieves a certain simplifying effect. However, this is reasonably best considered either as a kind of bonus or side effect, rather than as a primary purpose. That is, the essential purpose for his creative metaphors nevertheless seems to be to create an artistic effect, since many of the concretizations actually complicate rather than simplify interpretation.

So far the results of this paper have been concluded in terms of the first research question. That is to say, the primary purpose for Dylan's creative metaphors seems to be artistic. As regards the second research question, whether this purpose has changed in any way during the last five decades, it seems that it is not possible to discern any differences. The ten songs analyzed in this paper indicate that the number of creative metaphors varies from song to song and that these metaphors are furthermore, idiosyncratic in terms of complexity, however, their primary purpose does not seem to change over the years.

Although this paper has dealt with only a small part of Bob Dylan's lyrics, it has, by providing a small peak into his creative world of metaphors, hopefully raised a new kind of interest for his songs. Previously, they have perhaps been subject to mostly literary studies, which is a pity since there are interesting linguistic aspects to be considered as well. Furthermore, as far as the results of this study can tell, Dylan has a clear purpose when it comes to using creative metaphors. What these metaphors may possibly stand for though, is, in the end, a matter of personal interpretation. In 1965 Dylan was asked if he knew what his songs are about and answered: "Sure I do. Some are about four minutes, some are about five and some, believe it or not, are about 11 or 12." (Telegraph Media Group Limited, 2011). Whether this quote should be considered an artistic comment, a simplification or even a metaphor at all, is up to the reader to decide. Either way, Dylan's oral production, such as for example interviews and concerts, potentially constitutes another future field of linguistic study.
References


Internet sources


