

## **THE STYLISTIC PATTERN OF ALLUSION: A COGNITIVE APPROACH**

**PhD Anita Naciscione**

*Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia*

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the benefits of a cognitive stylistic approach to the study of the stylistic pattern of allusion, and examine its essential features in creative instantiations.

The empirical material for this research has been chosen from a self-composed corpus of actual cases of creative use of allusion in the media, drawn from analytical articles, political speeches in the House of Commons, debates in the EU, BBC news, and cartoons.

The theoretical points are illustrated by case studies of the creative use of allusion in verbal and visual discourse, seeking an understanding of each specific case within a particular context. Semantic and stylistic analyses along with in-depth investigation of the empirical material allow me to draw conclusions about the creative use of allusion. Identifying allusion not only calls for insights into cognitive stylistics but also cognitive psychology, namely, understanding of the role of cognitive faculties of the mind: perception, recognition, comprehension, imagination, long-term memory and associative thinking, which are central to drawing inferences.

Cognitive stylistic studies of the material reveal that allusion is not merely an implied reference to historical, mythological, cultural, social and political phenomena and events. First and foremost, allusion proves to be a stylistic pattern of both thought and language. Its creative use in discourse results in novel expression of thought.

**Keywords:** *cognitive stylistics, stylistic pattern, allusion, cognitive faculties, verbal and visual discourse.*

## Introduction

In this paper, the stylistic pattern<sup>1</sup> of allusion is studied within the cognitive stylistic framework. The advancement of cognitive stylistics has been an endeavour to bring together two distinct interdisciplinary fields of study, namely, cognitive linguistics and stylistics. Hence, cognitive stylistics is inherently interdisciplinary.

Cognitive linguistics seeks to provide explanatory theoretical foundations for conceptual systems in the study of the brain, the mind and language [Lakoff and Johnson (1980) 2003: 270; Gibbs (1994) 2002] and to substantiate a crucially important premise, which underlies all cognitive linguistic thinking, “Metaphor resides in thought, not just words” [Lakoff and Turner 1989: 2]. Major advances have taken place in further cognitive research, exploring the diversity of expression of metaphorical thought, including the relationship between language, culture and cognition from the theoretical standpoint of cognitive linguistics [Kövecses 2005].

Traditionally, stylistics is concerned with the study of creativity in the use of language [Simpson 2004: 3], while cognitive stylistics forms an integral part of cognitive linguistics, exploring figurative language and the construction of figurative meaning in discourse. Cognitive stylistics, in comparison to conventional stylistics, views stylistic techniques (metaphor, metonymy, pun, allusion, personification, instantial replacement and others) not only as patterns of language but first and foremost as patterns of thought. In the cognitive stylistic framework, a stylistic technique is regarded as a structure of thought and a cognitive inference tool, applicable in creative figurative thought instantiations [Naciscione 2014, 2020: 274].

In this paper, theoretical conclusions are drawn, applying the key tenets of both cognitive linguistics about the significance of the inextricable interrelation between thought and language, on the one hand and, on the other, insights from a cognitive stylistic perspective.

When dealing with the empirical material, I have relied on the method of identifying figurative meaning in discourse [Naciscione 2001: 33–46, 2010: 43–55], which is a procedure for identifying novel thought in stylistic use. In identification, the stages – recognition > verification > comprehension > interpretation – form integral parts of a unified cognitive process. The procedures enable me not only to identify empirical material for research but also to select and analyse stylistic use of

<sup>1</sup> A stylistic pattern is a structure of thought and language that may be reproduced in diverse new stylistic contexts. Stylistic patterns form part of the mental lexicon of the language user, held in long-term memory. Pattern, whether metaphor, metonymy, pun, hyperbole, personification, or allusion, operates as a cognitive mechanism and a mental stylistic technique, applicable in new figurative thought representations. Patterns are used to construct meaning [Naciscione 2010, 2020].

allusion in discourse. I have used the research method of interpretative case studies to cope with more intricate textual and visual representations.

I have also relied on the method of critical metaphor analysis [Charteris-Black 2004, 2014], which focuses on levels of metaphor analysis. Importantly, the method underscores the role of social cognition [Charteris-Black 2014: 153–157] and the need for analysis of the broader social context. Thus, the method is concerned with increasing our awareness of the social aspects in language use. I fully agree that the study of social factors is essential in discourse analysis; however, historical, political and cultural aspects may also prove to be fundamental to analysis of a novel form and meaning of expression.

I believe that one method cannot meet the stylistic and cognitive challenges that emerge when exploring multifaceted verbal and visual discourses. In cognitive stylistics, one of the main research methods remains meticulous semantic and stylistic analysis of actual cases of instantiation<sup>1</sup> of allusion in discourses, and their stylistic effects in creating novel meanings.

### The stylistic pattern of allusion

The stylistic pattern of allusion can boast a great diversity of expression in actual use. Moreover, the empirical material reveals not only variety but also complexity of verbal and visual instantiations of this pattern.

Allusion is a broad notion with a long history. It is not a novel stylistic pattern. In Ancient Greece, allusion was seen as a rhetorical device, serving to convey an indirect reference in literature, especially poetry, or the art of oratory.

The English language has preserved innumerable allusions going back to the Bible as part of its word stock. For instance, in the Old Testament, *The Garden of Eden* is the biblical earthly paradise created by God to be inhabited by His first human creations – Adam and Eve. As a case of allusion, *The Garden of Eden* is a phraseological unit that has acquired stability and a generalised, metaphorical meaning. In use, e.g., *Truly, this place feels like the Garden of Eden*, the unit signifies a perfect paradise. Some more examples: *Noah's ark, thirty pieces of silver, Judas' kiss, to kill the fatted calf* and many others.

Another ample source of allusions has been Greek mythology and Ancient Greek literature across centuries. For instance, the meaning of *Achilles' heel* is a fatal weakness, a vulnerable area or a point of vulnerability. It is an allusion to the Greek legend about the heroic warrior Achilles whose mother tried to make him immortal by holding the infant by his heel and dipping him into the River Styx. In modern

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<sup>1</sup> Instantiation is a stylistic realisation in discourse; it is a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a lexical or a phraseological unit in discourse resulting in significant changes in its form and meaning, determined by the thought and the context [Naciscione 2010, 2020].

use, the unit is employed in a metaphorical meaning, e. g., *This division, which is rarely profitable, is the company's Achilles' heel*. Some more examples: *the Trojan horse*, *Sisyphus labour*, *Pandora's box*, *between Scylla and Charybdis* and many others.

Thus, allusion has traditionally been viewed as an implied reference to something or somebody. Over the centuries, the scope of use has expanded to allude to historical, mythological, folklore, cultural, social and political phenomena, events and facts.

Let me turn to some cases of allusion, which will reveal the semantic and stylistic subtleties of instantiation and the need to identify its message.

### Allusion to facts

In verbal and visual discourse, analysis of what is implied discloses that there is much more to it than meets the eye. It is not that simple, nor is it as straightforward as it might seem. The given case of allusion (see Figure 1) conveys an implicit reference, which calls for more detailed recall and identification of background knowledge of facts, social and political information.



Figure 1. Cartoon, *Weekend with Eccles*, published on August 7, 1976.

Background information is essential for an understanding of both verbal and visual discourse. Identification seeks to uncover missing factual and semantic information to disambiguate the instance. Here the scene is set by Big Ben, a British cultural icon and a prominent symbol of parliamentary democracy. Visual perception works together with the textual message, which is impossible to interpret without a reference to historical facts. A search leads us to some facts, which bear a semantic connection with the political and social implications, hinted at in the cartoon. The year 1975 was not a good year for the British government as it had to face a strike by

miners and a lengthy strike by garbage transport workers. Furthermore, on August 5, 1976 London witnessed the first major breakdown of the chiming system of Big Ben, which was still using the original Victorian mechanism. Big Ben fell silent and stopped striking the hours.

Big Ben provides a direct associative relationship with the British Parliament as Big Ben is part of the Houses of Parliament. Recognition is facilitated by the briefcase with the acronym *MP* on it, serving as a metonymic link to the House of Commons. In this way we learn that the two members of parliament are leaving the parliamentary building. One of them is saying:

*It's been a good year, even Big Ben isn't striking!*

Interpretation of the phrase *isn't striking* calls for a study of the semantic structure of *to strike*. A close look at a dictionary entry of the verb *to strike* reveals that this phrase is based on the interrelationship between two metaphorical meanings of this verb, creating a pun. In stylistics, pun is a stylistic pattern, involving a play on words, which usually forms a semantic link between the literal meaning of the word and one of its metaphorical meanings. The literal meaning of the verb *to strike* is "to hit"; however, it does not surface in this text at all. This instantiation is a rare case of a pun, acquiring a discourse dimension: the pun is formed by two metaphorical meanings of the same polysemous word *to strike* in one context: *to protest by not working* and *to make a sound like a bell (about a clock)* [Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners 2006: 1420–1421]. The first meaning is alluded to while the second emerges in the caption of the cartoon.

Thus, analysis of the empirical material shows that allusion works together with other stylistic patterns, in this case, metonymy and pun, in creating a novel instantiation in verbal and visual discourse. Allusion functions as an implicit mental reference that works by force of associative thinking.

### Allusions to literary works

As a stylistic technique, allusion helps to contextualise a message by referencing a well-known literary work. Literary allusions are common. Implied references to literary works, their characters and authors abound in language use. For instance,

*You don't have to be William Shakespeare to write poetry.*

*Don't act like a Romeo in front of her.*

A literary allusion refers to a specific writer or literary work. The pattern of allusion allows the author to compress a great deal of significance into a phrase or sentence. The brevity of expression and the implicit reference underscore the significance of the message. To recognise and comprehend the implied reference, we

need to rely on long-term associations, leading to our knowledge store. “Long-term memory is memory for information that has been well processed and integrated into one’s general knowledge store” [Reber 1995: 448]. Cognitive access to our memory store<sup>1</sup> is central to perceiving, identifying and interpreting the semantic and stylistic subtleties of allusion.

Let me turn to a case of creative use of allusion in the media, based on a literary work. Allusion is a favourable stylistic pattern among media journalists. It emphasises their point, lends a certain persuasive tone to the text and makes it emotionally expressive. For instance,

*At present there is winter in America, can spring be far behind?*

BBC World TV, 07.11.2020.

This case is an implicit reference to the poem *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1820). The last two lines of this famous poem read as follows:

*O Wind, if Winter comes,  
Can Spring be far behind?*

Shelley is one of the key figures of the Romantic Movement in English literature. Like all Romantic poets, Shelley makes ample use of personification, ascribing human traits to nature, in this case, to seasons of the year. Interestingly, the last phrase of the poem *Can spring be far behind?* is a rhetorical question, which helps the audience understand, sympathise with the message, and react emotionally. This rhetorical question serves to involve the audience personally and to create a dramatic effect.

In general, comprehension involves making use of any relevant general knowledge that we may possess. However, each particular case is a new challenge. This case of allusion calls for a good knowledge of English Romanticism and Shelley’s poetry. Shelley perceives winter as something foreboding and uses it as a metaphoric personification of the darkest times in people’s lives, while spring is a time of hope, signifying light and development. Winter aptly portrays the political situation in the USA in November 2020. *Winter in America* is a metaphor for Donald Trump’s rule.

The BBC broadcast is dated 07.11.2020, that is, a few days after the American Presidential Election 2020 on 03.11.2020, when Biden’s victory was confirmed, despite Trump’s continued refusal to formally concede, saying that the election was rigged, which was fake news, to use his own terminology. Many American voters could not accept Trump’s offensive manner of presidency, his aggressiveness, use of racist language and his numerous boasts. His presidency was too unpresidential.

<sup>1</sup> For more on the functioning of human memory and its role in the cognitive processes, see Eysenck [1996: 68–75].

People were looking forward to a change for the better; they were looking forward to Spring. The rhetorical question *Can Spring be far behind?* signifies light and hope.

This case study shows that identification of the allusion presupposes a good knowledge of Shelley's poetry. It calls for additional cognitive endeavour to enable retrieval of the item from storage in long-term memory. It also requires thorough background knowledge of the political scene in the USA at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, if the reader does not possess knowledge on the subject, the allusion remains unresolved.

### Allusion to quotations

When we quote a part of a text verbatim, we need to put it in quotation marks and specify the origin (the author, the year and the source), which indicates strict adherence to the original text. However, here I am concerned with creative use of quotations, which, if applied effectively, will convey a novel meaning along with semantic and/or structural changes, signalling an unusual stylistic instantiation.

A recurrent type of implicit reference is allusion to a well-known quotation, being part of a speech delivered by a famous or prominent person and which has later become a popular quotation, used in both verbal and visual discourse, including cartoons and caricatures.

Figure 2 presents a cartoon by the well-known American graphic artist John Morris (1906–1994) who focussed on creating intelligent and distinctive visual communications for publications and businesses.



"Phew! Fooling some of the people all the time is damn hard work."

Figure 2. John Morris (1906–1994), *Advertising Agency*, uploaded by Cartoonstock on 13/08/2001:

<https://www.cartoonstock.com/cartoonview.asp?catref=jmo0258>

In Figure 2, the caption requires a cultural reference and a resolution of the allusion. Without it, the text would not make any sense. In visual discourse, “vision is an active grasp”, since seeing means grasping some outstanding features with the aim of grasping the essentials [Arnheim (1954) 1974: 43]. In cognitive linguistic terms, SEEING IS UNDERSTANDING.

When we cast a look at a visual representation, we realise that much is not explicitly stated in the discourse; it is only alluded to. Psycholinguistics has established that we constantly draw inferences, that is, extract from the underlying discourse pieces of meaning, which are crucial to our understanding [Kess 1992: 189].

The man sitting at the table is the Advertising Director of the company. When the cartoonist is presenting his work for approval, the Advertising Director is obviously satisfied with the result. He utters a sigh of relief: “Phew!” It is relief from the ever-ending pressure to go on “fooling some of the people all the time”. “Damn hard work” is evident in his facial gestures. The worried expression on his face and his unshaven appearance suggest the unrelenting pressure of his job.

The caption contains the first part of a famous quotation that acts like a recall cue, evoking associations of contiguity, which help to retrieve the full quotation from long-term memory, going back to the knowledge store, once acquired. The pattern of the conceptual metonymy PART FOR WHOLE comes into play, aiding recall of the name of the author of these lines:

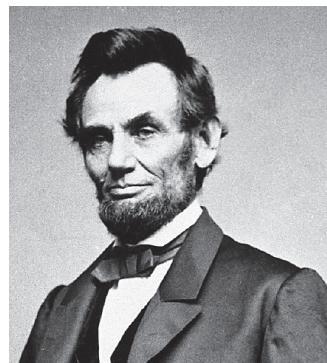
*You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.*

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

Historians believe that Abraham Lincoln pronounced these famous lines in his speech at the Lincoln – Douglas debates in Clinton, Illinois, 1858.

Abraham Lincoln gained his place in history by taking action to end slavery and win the Civil War between the North and the South (1861–1865). Although a

Figure 3. Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865),  
the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (1861–1865),  
[laphamsquarterly.org](http://laphamsquarterly.org)



Republican, he was famous for speeches, which disclosed his democratic values and his commitment to the people: he was a democratic leader at heart. He will also be remembered for his style of saying and writing honest truths. The given quotation is part of Abraham Lincoln's legacy in American culture and in political debate.

### **Identifying allusion in discourse**

Identification and analysis of creative instantiations of allusion in discourse largely rely on people's essential cognitive abilities. Language comprehension requires us to go beyond the literal meanings of the words we see or hear. Much of the information needed is frequently implicit. Hence we need to draw inferences to understand the whole context and the message that is conveyed.

The human mind possesses numerous cognitive faculties, such as figurative thinking and imagination. The skills of perception, recognition and comprehension are essential in the process of interpretation of creative use of language [Naciscione 2010: 45–55, 2020: 273]. In identifying allusion, cognitive abilities play an essential part in retrieving essential items, which leads to disambiguation of the instantiation.

Psycholinguists confirm that people remember because they have the mental faculty of memory, which is crucial to language use in all aspects and at all levels [Garman 1990: 309]. It is also of vital importance in identifying creative use in discourse, allusion included. The role of memory lies not only in retrieving implicit items from long-term memory but, importantly, also in processing information and associatively related items.

Memory operates with the help of associations, which aid memory to retrieve essential information from long-term memory. Memory is associative *per se*. Associations also facilitate comprehension since they form a connection or a relationship between two items (ideas, concepts, feelings, events, experiences). In this way, “experiencing the first item activates a representation of the second” [VandenBos 2007]. Thus, the associative abilities of the human mind form part of the human cognitive faculties. Associations are fundamental to identification and analysis of creative use of allusion and other stylistic techniques.

### **Conclusion**

It has been a long-established practice to regard allusion as an indirect reference to historical, mythological, cultural, social and political phenomena and events. In the cognitive stylistic framework, allusion operates as a pattern of creative use of language in discourse, resulting in novel expression of thought. Allusion is an implicit mental verbal and/or visual reference, which is represented in discourse by one or more explicit elements, performing a metonymic function and providing associative links by acting as a recall cue. Allusion is a stylistic pattern in both thought

and language. In discourse, allusion works together with other stylistic patterns, which are part of the instantiation, contributing to the stylistic effect and meaning: metaphor, metonymy, pun, personification and others.

A cognitive perspective means recognising and understanding the cognitive faculties of the human mind, such as figurative thinking and imagination, the skills of perception, recognition, comprehension and interpretation of creative use of language. In identifying allusion, cognitive abilities play an essential part in retrieving essential items, which in turn leads to disambiguating the instantiation. The role of memory lies not only in retrieving implicit items from long-term memory but, importantly, also in processing information and associatively related items. Allusion functions as an implicit mental reference since it works by force of associative thinking.

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