

# Interpretation of Image in Poetry from a Perspective of Figure-ground Theory

LI Chen, GAO Wen-cheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Figure-ground theory is originated from psychology and was then introduced to cognitive linguistics. The basic principle of figure-ground theory is proximity. The figure is a theme and the background serves a foil to it. Both Chinese and English poetry use different images, some of which are figures and some are backgrounds. This paper interprets image in poetry on the basis of figure-ground theory.

*Keywords:* figure-ground, poetry, left blank

## Introduction

Figure-ground theory is derived from psychology. It is a way used by Gestalt psychologist to study perception and describe the manner of spatial organization. Ungerer and Schmid (2001) suggest that figure-ground theory is first introduced to psychology by the Danish psychologist Rubin almost a century ago and later integrated into the more comprehensive framework of perceptual organization by Gestalt psychologist. They use that theory to study perception and the way of spatial organization. Then that theory is introduced into cognitive linguistics by Leonard Talmy (2008). William Croft and Alan Cruse (2014) note that Talmy uses the figure-ground relation to account for the expressions of spatial relations in natural language. And he has identified the defining and associated characteristics of figure and background respectively.

The basic principle of figure-ground theory is proximity. When people take notice of something, that thing is automatically prominent in their perception and the surrounding environment is regarded as background accordingly. According to Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green (2006), gestalt psychologists consider that the perceptual field is always divided in to two parts, figure and ground. Figure is the prominent part of perception, while ground is relatively blurry and it is usually used as the cognitive reference point of the figure. A figure is an entity that, among other things, possesses a dominant shape, perhaps due to a definite contour or prominent coloring. While ground is something undifferentiated and serves to set off the figure. Rubin believes that figure depends on the background and the figure appears on the background. Kovka (1998) suggests that the background plays a role of a frame, and determines the figure inside it. The figure is the theme, and the background is the foil, but the highlight of figure cannot be separated from the background. According to Gestalt psychologists, the figure must be an object with gestalt feature. It cannot be segmented and it is usually small and

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LI Chen, Master, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

GAO Wen-cheng, Professor, Ph.D., master student supervisor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

can move. Figure-ground relation corresponds to daily language expression, for example, “A bird is in the sky”, where “a bird” is the figure and “the sky” is the background.

The figure-ground theory is often used in poetry to show the information that the creator wants to express or highlight and hiding the background information with white place. It is therefore no accident that the image of poetry can be interpreted in terms of figure-ground theory. This paper focuses on poetries at home and abroad to analyze image based on figure-ground theory.

### **Literature Review**

It is obvious that linguists have paid more attention to the significance of language structure especially the preposition on the basis of figure-ground theory since it is introduced to cognitive linguistics. Linguists employ that theory to study how language organizes conceptual content. Kuang Fangtao and Wen Xu (2003) assert that from a linguistic point of view, it is very valuable and interesting to study the choice of figure and ground and how the relationship between them is represented in language structure. Later foreign scholars apply the theory to the study of cognitive poetics. Figure-ground theory also has been developed in China for many years. In the beginning, it is mainly theoretically developed, concerning many studies of syntactic order. Then it is used to explain grammatical structure and vocabulary. Wen Xu and Liu Xianqing (2004) study inverted sentences based on figure-background theory. Afterwards, linguists in China began to employ that theory to explain the characteristics of Chinese and apply it to Chinese-English translation. Shen Yanlei (2010) employs this theory to teaching Chinese-English Translation. With the rise and development of cognitive poetics, figure-ground theory has been widely used to analyze literary works. Jiang Xiao (2015) explores cognitive poetics by means of this theory. Later, the analysis of literary works has flourished. Many scholars began to use this theory to explain the Chinese language, like the phenomenon and characteristics of Internet language. The researches on the figure-ground theory in China are insufficient in depth and breadth. As pointed by Liu Yiting (2016), most of Chinese scholars focus on the researches of cognitive poetics, foreign language teaching, translation, grammar and sentence structure.

Literary creation in foreign countries emphasizes more on precision and seldom uses the skill of white place left. While Chinese literary creation pays more attention to artistic conception, so the skill of white place left is often used. This paper mainly studies the image of poetry on the basis of figure-ground theory.

### **The Analysis of Image in Poetry Based on Figure-ground Theory**

In this section we will analyze the images in Chinese and English poetries based on figure-ground theory respectively.

#### **The Analysis of Image in Chinese Poetry Based on Figure-ground Theory**

Blanks are usually used in Chinese poetry. Shen Yanlei (2010) holds that some of these blanks represent mountains and rivers, some represent clouds and fogs, and some imply a kind of artistic conception. White space is often used to produce good effect. It is closely related to the theme and interest of the work. It can create a deep and implicit artistic conception and give the audience infinite imagination (Jiang, 1999). So it is necessary to analyze the white place when studying the image in Chinese poetry. The most typical example is a Chinese poem

named Jiang Xue written by Liu Zongyuan. The poet uses a large piece of white space to highlight the image of the fisherman who is a rebellious and eccentric character.

Example (1)

*Qianshan niao fei jue*  
thousand mountain bird fly over

“From hill to hill there is no bird in flight.” (Xiao & Cheng, 1983, p. 931)

There are two images in this sentence, hills and birds. According to Talmy’s definition about figure and ground, the figure is unknown, whose spatial and temporal characteristics need to be determined (Talmy, 2000). It is the more prominent part of the cognitive concept or perception, that is, the focus of attention. The background has known features that can indicate the unknown of the figure. A figure is usually smaller than ground and should be included in the ground. And a figure is movable while ground is relatively stable. On this account, birds are unconsciously regarded as figures and hills are regarded as background. However, there is no bird in flight and only hills are left in the whole picture. So, no birds can be the figure. Hills become the perceptual prominence temporarily.

Example (2)

*Wanjing renzong mie*  
Ten thousand road people absence

“From path to path there is no man in sight.” (Xiao & Cheng, 1983, p. 931)

Space is a basic concept of human cognitive system and language system. Figure-ground theory is also used by gestalt psychologists in the study of spatial organization. On this basis, Talmy (2000) introduces this theory to the field of linguistics. Figure-ground theory explains the implicit spatial relationships between things in language. Spatial relations can also be used to determine figure and ground. In the spatial relations of existence or presentation, what exists is the figure, and the spatial reference frame is the background. The spatial relations of motion is dynamic, and the spatial reference in this spatial relation is the source-path-goal frame. This sentence has two images on the surface, path and man. This sentence can be understood as both a spatial relationship of existence or presentation—there is a person on the road, and a spatial movement relationship—there is a person walking on the road. No matter what kind of relationship, man should be the figure, and the roads should be the background. However, there is no man in sight. Combined with the previous sentence, there are two images in the picture, hills and paths. The paths wind between hills. From a close-up view, paths are the figure and hills are the background. It is noteworthy that hills have changed from figure to background. That is because reading a text is inherently a dynamic process. Readers constantly update their focus to form and follow the relationship between the figure and background.

Example (3)

*Guzhou suoli weng*  
Alone boat straw rain cape old man

“A lonely fisherman is afloat with straw rain cape.” (Xiao & Cheng, 1983, p. 931)

Associating the first two lines, the hills are drawn into a distant view at once. Paths become invisible correspondingly. So the figure and ground relationship have changed again. Any image appearing in the third sentence must be the figure, and hills are still background. There seem to be only two images in this sentence, a

boat and an old man. Indeed, an image of a river is also implied. The relationship between them is as follows: the boat is on the river and the old man is on the boat. As the reader's cognitive focus changes, the relationship between the figure and the background is constantly shifting between hills, rivers, the boat, and the elderly. At first, the river is the figure and the hills are the background. The reader's attention is drawn to the surface of the river, where a small boat appears. The reader's attention then converges from the wide river to this small boat. At the same time, here comes a new round of figure-ground relationship conversion. The small boat is by no means the figure and the river is the background. While the snow-covered hills are faintly visible, and they seem to be integrated with the world. Along the same lines, the old man is the figure and the boat is the ground. The river fades out of sight.

Example (4)

*Du diao hanjiang xue*  
Lonely fish cold river snow

“He is fishing on a lonely boat in snow.” (Xiao & Cheng, 1983, p. 931)

Finally, with the word fishing, the reader's attention is completely attracted to the old man. The world behind the old man seems to be invisible except the lonely boat. Whether the hills or the river, they all merge into the heavy snow and return to blankness in the whole picture. Not to mention the birds which have flown away and the person who never comes. Consequently, all the images in this poem can be represented by white place. This is reflected in Ma Yuan's painting, named *Du Diao Han Jiang Xue*. He uses a large area of blank space. The river is only represented by a few ripples under the boat. Behind the scenes of lonely boats and old fishing man are large areas of blank space, which makes the picture look vast and bleak, empty and quiet, with a sense of chills (Jiang, 1999). The figure and background in the poems are constantly changing. In the process of figure-ground transformation, some backgrounds are blurred. Sometimes they seem to be absent but sometimes they appear in your sight again, making it difficult to distinguish between virtual and real world (Jiang, 2015, pp. 504-506). Throughout the whole poem, the background always appears before the figures. On the one hand, it is because Chinese speakers have a strong tendency to move from background to figure when perceiving spatial relationships. On the other hand, the background and the figure in the poem changes continuously until the old man is finally determined to be the figure. Almost all the backgrounds fade out of the field of vision, and a strong sense of loneliness is instantly created. As the picture is simplified to the extreme, the emotion of the whole poem has also arrived at the highest point in order to highlight what the author wants to emphasize, and at the same time to express the poet's emotions to the readers more accurately.

Chinese ancient poets are skilled in using white space. Another well-known poem is Wang Wei's *Mission to the Frontier*.

Example (5)

*Damo guyan zhi, changhe luori yuan.*

A large desert lonely smoke straight, long river sunset round

“In the vast desert lonely smoke rises straight. Over the long river the setting sun is round.”

(Xiao & Cheng, 1983, p. 162)

The image in the first sentence is the vast desert and the straight smoke. People cannot see the concept of nearness and farness, but they regard a certain thing as a landmark to give things the attributes of nearness and

farness (Liu, 2016, pp. 215-216). In a spatial relationship, an object must be at a certain spatial position or move relative to another object. This object is called the figure, and its spatial position or the relative object is called the background. The background is a large containment space, and the figures are small solid objects. Compared with the desert, smoke is relatively small and dynamic. Hence, smoke is the figure and desert is the ground. As for the second sentence, there are two images and they are long river and setting sun respectively. Although there is no clear spatial existential relationship between the two images, visually the long river is a face, and the setting sun is a point, so the setting sun is the figure and the long river is the ground. It goes without saying that the images of the two lines are simple. As readers constantly change their focus during the reading process, the background is gradually diminished, therefore, a large white place emerges.

### **The Analysis of Image in English Poetry Based on Figure-ground Theory**

English poetry usually presents figure and background through spatial relationship and they seldom use a white space. Take Alfred Tennyson's *The Eagle* for example:

Example (6)

He clasps the crag with the crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.  
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like the thunderbolt he falls. (Tennyson, 2014)

The first half of the poem is static, and the second half is dynamic. The following part analyzes the first half first. There are six images and they are "he", "crag", "sun", "lands", "azure world", "sea" respectively. From the beginning of the poem, the author draws readers' attention on "he", the eagle. 'He' is the focus of perception, in this case 'he' is the figure. The left images express the various spatial relationships between the eagle and them with the help of different positional relation words, which makes the information of the eagle more complete. In other words, the spatial position of the eagle is determined with reference to them. The prepositions such as "close to", "ringed with", "beneath" have different spatial properties, and they show different relationships between the eagle and the frame of other images. So the remaining images serve as the background to set off the figure.

The second half includes three images, which are "he", "mountain walls" and "thunderbolt". As mentioned before, this part is dynamic. Generally speaking, the movable and relatively small entity is the figure. Among the three images, "the eagle" and "thunderbolt" are movable. But this sentence has a metaphor, and the thunderbolt is the target domain. So "eagle" is the figure, "mountain walls" is the background, where the eagle watches and falls.

The other example is Wordsworth's poem *The Sparrow's Nest*:

Example (7)

The Sparrow's dwelling, which, hard by  
My father's house, in wet or dry (Yang, 2012, p. 4)

There are two images in this line and they are the sparrow's dwelling and my father's house. There is also a spatial relationship between them, which can be indicated by the phrase "hard by". Compared with the bird's nest, the father's room is more familiar. By expressing the spatial relationship between the bird's nest and the father's room, the author reveals more location information about the bird's nest. The figure has unknown spatiotemporal characteristics that need to be determined, while the background has known characteristics that can indicate the unknown information of the figure. So the figure is the sparrow's dwelling and the background is the father's house.

*A Noiseless Patient Spider* was created by Walt Whitman. The poet describes a tiny spider on a promontory and then thinks of the relationship between his soul and the outside world. At the beginning of the poem, the noiseless patient spider is the figure and the little promontory is the background. Because the spider is much smaller than the promontory and it is movable. As we can see in the following line:

Example (8)

I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;  
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding (Walt, 1995)

The poem ends with the author's soul as a graphic, which sets against the background of the outside world. The author's soul is as insignificant to the outside world as the little spider is to the headland. The soul is also purposeful to contact and connect with the outside world.

Example (9)

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,  
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, ---seeking the spheres, to connect them; (Walt, 1995)

The clever application of figure-ground theory in this poem subtly conveys the interdependent relationship between the poet's mind and nature. And it makes such active and dynamic relationship more visible and easier to understand.

### **Conclusion**

According to the figure-ground theory, the figure refers to the prominent part of a certain cognitive concept, that is, the focus of attention. And the background refers to the part that serves to highlight the figure. The figure is the object to be described, while the background is the environment in which the figure exists, or the reference object for the motion of the object. Chinese and English poetry both use different images, and figure-ground theory can be used to analyze such images. We can determine the figure and the background with the help of the spatial relationship and the attribute characteristics of the figure and the background. The application of the figure-background theory makes the picture of poetry more layered but more concise, and then makes the theme of the poem more clear. By means of background, the figure image is more vivid. At the same time, the graphic background theory can shorten the distance between the reader and the author, which makes it easier for the author's emotion to be conveyed to the reader.

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