

Multimodal Metaphor Construction of Death Meaning in Children's Picture Books from the Perspective of Conceptual Integration Theory

Hu Minglin

School of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

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Abstract: Children's picture books, as typical multimodal texts, present a unique way of meaning construction through the interaction of images, words, and other symbolic elements. In these books, the interaction between text and image goes beyond a supplementary relationship and involves cross-domain conceptual integration, collaboratively constructing more complex and profound metaphorical meanings. Conceptual Integration Theory, as an effective framework for explaining metaphor and cognition, holds significant value in analyzing multimodal metaphorical discourse. This paper takes the children's picture book *Little Scar* as the research object to explore the multimodal metaphor integration process of the abstract concept of death in the interaction between text and image. The study finds that the images and words in the picture book complement and connect with each other to jointly construct an emotionally rich metaphor of death, helping children understand and accept this complex concept both emotionally and cognitively. Through a detailed analysis of *Little Scar*, this paper verifies the applicability of Conceptual Integration Theory in multimodal discourse and demonstrates that the theory effectively explains how images and words integrate across domains to create new metaphorical meanings.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of Chinese society and the continuous progress of educational philosophies, children's mental health and life education have gradually received more attention. However, the topic of death, an inevitable part of life, is often considered a taboo in traditional Chinese culture and is rarely discussed in public forums. This is especially true in the field of children's education, where systematic exploration and research on death remain limited.

Children's picture books on death education serve as textual works that explain the relationship between death and life, analyzing the meaning of death and the value of life. These books, which include both visual and verbal modalities, are typically targeted at children aged 3 to 12 and aim to establish correct life values. As an important educational discourse in children's education, picture books play a significant role in death education literature aimed at young audiences. Their design must align with the cognitive characteristics and developmental patterns of children. Due to

children's limited literacy skills, incomplete logical thinking, and emotional cognition still in development, picture books on death education use various modalities, such as images and words, to jointly construct metaphors that help children understand complex and abstract concepts. These books are rich in metaphorical content, with images and text working together to form multimodal metaphors. Li Yang ^[1](2018) defines picture books with death as the theme, also known as death education picture books, as publications that focus on the end of life as the central theme, revealing the meaning and value of life, and explaining the concept of death.

The study of multimodal metaphors has mostly focused on genres like advertisements, political cartoons, posters, and promotional videos, while research on picture books is relatively scarce. Furthermore, existing research has primarily concentrated on emotional metaphors in picture books, with little exploration of death metaphors. As multimodal texts, children's picture books on death education provide a valuable corpus for studying the processing and integration of multimodal metaphorical meanings. Thus, this study, grounded in Conceptual Integration Theory and Multimodal Metaphor Theory, aims to analyze how the meaning of death is constructed in the children's picture book *Little Scar* by Charlotte Moundlic.

2. Conceptual Integration Theory

According to Wang Zhengyuan ^[2](2006), Fauconnier & Turner's Conceptual Integration Theory refers to the synthesis of mental spaces.. Conceptual integration occurs within a network of mental spaces, with the most basic minimal network consisting of four mental spaces: Input Space 1, Input Space 2, Generic Space, and Blended Space. These spaces are interconnected through correspondences, which allow for cross-space mappings, thereby forming a conceptual integration network.

In the integration process, the Generic Space contains conceptual structures shared by the two Input Spaces, playing a guiding role in the integration. The Blended Space, in addition to including the structures of the Generic Space and Input Spaces, also contains emergent structures—innovative structures created through the blending operation. As Zhao Yuqian ^[3](2003) suggest, cross-space mappings condense (compression) the conceptual relationships between the two spaces, known as "vital relations," which include identity, analogy, and causal relationships. Feng Dezheng ^[4](2020) argues that a metaphor can be defined as a multimodal metaphor if its source domain or target domain is represented by two or more symbolic resources.

Zhao Xiufeng ^[5](2013), based on Conceptual Integration Theory, proposed a multimodal metaphor integration modality, as shown in Figure 1. The modality symbol representation space refers to the formal representation of multimodal symbols, including shape, color, lines, composition, actions, angles, relationships between objects, and so on. In this modality, the source domain and target domain of metonymy or basic metaphors are represented by boxes S and T, and the dashed arrows indicate the preliminary mappings within the input spaces.

In multimodal discourse, Input Space 1 and Input Space II are often first mapped through metonymy or basic metaphors to form corresponding target domains. Afterward, selective mappings occur between the two domains (indicated by the dashed lines in the diagram). After the metonymy or basic metaphor mapping, the components within the two input spaces, under the guidance of the overarching Generic Space, selectively enter the Blended Space, generating emergent structures and producing blended meanings.

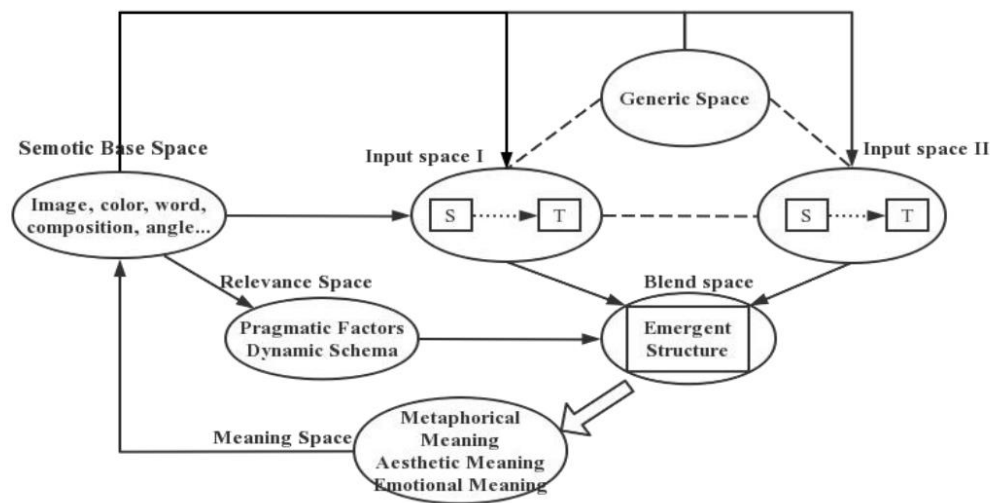


Figure 1: Conceptual Integration Model of Multimodal Metaphor.

3. Multimodal Metaphor Integration Process of Death Meaning in *Little Scar*

Based on the multimodal integration modality theory, and in accordance with the characteristic that both the verbal and visual modalities participate in metaphor construction in children's death education picture books, this section analyzes the multimodal metaphor integration process in these books. The input spaces mainly consist of two categories: the "Death Representation Space" and the "Emotional Metaphor Space." The "Emotional Metaphor Space" is further divided into two subcategories: "Sadness Emotional Metaphor" and "Love Emotional Metaphor." Shared elements are extracted from the input spaces, and the death metaphor of the deceased and the emotional metaphor experienced by the observer are synthesized to form the Generic Space.

The Generic Space, under the influence of the associated space, undergoes further integration. In children's educational picture books, this integration primarily involves social consensus, educational purposes, and the intended audience of the text. Considering the societal consensus on death, the positive educational objectives of children's death education picture books, and the target audience age range of 3-12 years, the construction of death meaning in *Little Scar* is analyzed through the multimodal scene-building process.

Through the combined action of the verbal and visual modalities, *Little Scar* vividly constructs the multimodal metaphor integration space of "Death is a wound that can heal."

3.1 Verbal modality

From the verbal modality, the phrases "walking away" and "leaving" activate the input space of "death as departure." Combined with the phrases "too tired" and "the body can't hold on," which activate the input space of "death as a physical characteristic," and "put into a wooden box, buried in the ground," which activates the input space of "death as the result of death," these elements collectively form the Death Representation Space. Through actions and symbols such as hugging, covering ears to keep mother's voice, and honey as a sensory symbol, the Emotional Metaphor Space of love is activated through various senses such as vision, hearing, and taste.

Based on the Emotional Metaphor Space of love, actions such as crying and leaving a wound activate the Sadness Emotional Metaphor Space. In response to his mother's death, the boy uses the

method of creating wounds to ease his longing. Through intense physical activities, causing pain, and creating wounds, he reinforces his memory of the deceased loved one. The death of the deceased thus becomes a painful wound for the observer.

3.2 Visual modality

From the visual modality, two main characters are presented: the deceased and the observer, with the narrator being the observer. In the illustrations, the little boy and his father represent the observer, and the deceased is not depicted visually. In terms of color selection, the background colors mainly consist of red and white. Red, in Western symbolism, is the color of blood and is often used to metaphorically represent death, bleeding, and danger. Because it resembles the color of fire, it is also used to symbolize negative emotions such as anger and sadness. In the book, the relationship between red and the narrator (the boy) follows a strong-weak trend: as the sadness from the mother's death becomes stronger, the area enveloped in red increases. Beyond the narrative subject "I," the surroundings, including the room, chair, stairs, and sofa, are all occupied by red. When the sadness reaches its peak, the boy himself also turns red. In terms of facial expressions and actions, "pouted lips, sinking corners of the mouth, tears, lowered head, and hunched body" activate the pain caused by the mother's death through expressions and actions.

The visual modality also presents the symbol of a "bleeding wound," which is consistent with the verbal modality in its expression. The shared elements between the Death Representation Space and the Emotional Metaphor Space, along with actions such as covering ears to preserve the mother's voice, and the sensory symbols like honey, activate the Emotional Metaphor Space of love. Based on this, crying and leaving a wound as action symbols activate the Sadness Emotional Metaphor Space. In response to his mother's death, the boy creates wounds to ease his longing, reinforcing his memory of the deceased loved one. Thus, the death of the deceased becomes a painful wound for the observer.

3.3 Color

The color selection features red and white as the main background colors. Red, symbolizing blood in Western cultures, is commonly used to metaphorically represent death, bleeding, and danger. As it resembles the color of fire, it is also used to symbolize negative emotions such as anger and sadness. In the book, the relationship between red and the narrator (the boy) follows a strong-weak trend: as the sadness from the mother's death intensifies, the red area surrounding the boy increases. Beyond the narrative subject "I," the environment, including the room, chair, stairs, and sofa, is enveloped in red. When the sadness reaches its peak, the boy himself is also consumed by red. Facial expressions and action symbols such as "pouted lips, sinking corners of the mouth, tears, lowered head, and hunched body" activate the pain caused by the mother's death through expression and action. The visual modality also features the "bleeding wound" symbol, which aligns with the verbal modality in its expression. By extracting the shared elements from the Death Representation Space and Emotional Metaphor Space, a new information space is created: "Death is a painful wound."

3.4 Construction of Death Meaning

Based on the social consensus that death is the eternal departure of the deceased and that wounds can heal, combined with the expressions in both the verbal and visual modalities in the picture book, in the visual modality, as sadness diminishes, the range of red that surrounds the boy becomes smaller, and the red color shows a tendency to fade. In terms of facial expressions and action

symbols, the smile symbol and the action symbol of spreading arms represent the shrinking of the sadness metaphor space. In the verbal modality, the phrases "the wound has scabbed over" and "the scab is gone" activate the associated space "sadness can heal." By connecting the positive educational meaning of death in children's death education picture books and helping children correctly understand life, the generic space and the associated space are further combined, ultimately forming the integrated space "death is a wound that can heal."

4. Conclusion

As a form of art with multimodal characteristics, children's picture books are an ideal subject for analyzing multimodal metaphorical discourse. Unlike traditional text analysis, picture books construct a comprehensive form of expression through the interweaving of various elements such as images, words, colors, and layout, allowing the picture book to encode and transmit information using multiple symbolic systems when conveying meaning. Therefore, each illustration and each segment of text in the picture book is not limited to the surface literal meaning, but presents richer and more layered metaphorical meanings in the interaction between text and images. In this context, Conceptual Integration Theory, as an important framework for explaining how humans combine concepts from different domains to create new meanings, plays a crucial role in the metaphorical construction and interpretation of multimodal metaphorical discourse. Conceptual Integration Theory posits that humans integrate conceptual structures from different domains to create novel and creative meanings in the cognitive process.

In the context of children's picture books, the relationship between words and images is not simply a pairing but a collaborative construction of new metaphorical structures through conceptual integration, stimulating the reader's imagination and emotional resonance. The interaction between images and words not only facilitates understanding of meaning but also deepens the cognition of certain abstract concepts, especially complex and sensitive topics like death. Taking the children's picture book *The Little Scab* as an example, the picture book uses multimodal integration of images and text to present the difficult-to-express theme of death. By combining specific visual expressions, it overcomes the limitations of language and uses both visual symbols and written narration to present a profound and touching death metaphor.

This study, through detailed analysis of the interaction between images and text in *The Little Scab*, explores the multimodal integration process of death meaning in the picture book.

By comparing the similarities and differences in how text and images express the theme of death, we find that images are not just a supplement to the text; more often, they offer an alternative interpretive route to death through an independent visual symbol system. For example, some images in the picture book use warm and soft tones, anthropomorphic techniques, and emotionally rich details to help children understand and accept death as a life phenomenon, while the text provides more specific situations and emotional guidance through storytelling. This complementary relationship between text and images forms the multimodal metaphorical integration of the meaning of death and effectively helps children build a cognitive framework for this concept.

The analysis results of this study validate the applicability of Conceptual Integration Theory in multimodal discourse analysis. By examining the metaphorical construction in the picture book, we further demonstrate that Conceptual Integration Theory can effectively explain how the interaction between text and images creates new, profound metaphorical meanings in the reader's cognition through cross-domain conceptual integration. This theoretical framework not only helps understand how children construct complex abstract concepts in multimodal discourse but also provides strong theoretical support and methodological guidance for further research on multimodal metaphors.

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