PERSPECTIVES ON AUDITORY METAPHORS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Alina ŢENESCU
Associate Professor, PhD, CCSCMOP, University of Craiova, Romania
alinatenescu@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper analyzes images that shape the perception and experience of sound into several categories of conceptual metaphor.

We identify the main aspects of figurative language associated with hearing and sound used by journalists, columnists and reporters in media discourse, relying upon an approach based on conceptual metaphor theory. We illustrate the identified categories by examples taken from a corpus of excerpts of media discourse in English discourse.

Our main research objective focuses on the identification of several patterns of associations of sound and hearing with other conceptual categories, applying the model of analysis developed by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980.

Keywords: cognitive metaphors, cognitive-semantic approach, sound mapping, auditory metaphors, media discourse.

1. Sound and auditory metaphors

In an article titled "Sound Design: The Dancing Shadow", the sound designer Walter Murch (1995: 238) conceives the metaphoric use of sound as "one of the most fruitful, flexible and inexpensive means". He argues that by making a careful choice on what sound to exclude and what sound to include in an audio-visual composition, even though that particular sound might appear to be in contrast with the accompanying image, a film music composer or an art director from the advertising industry might be able to build a perceptual void towards which the mind of the listeners would be attracted.

He concludes that any reassociation of sounds constitutes an example of metaphor, in spite of the fact that the reassociation may be brought about by a temporary error on behalf of the composer or sound designer.

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)



Image source: *dreamstime.com*

In his opinion, sound does not only bear a huge influence on individuals' attention, but it also renders people aware of the fact that if there are many nouns depicting the act of looking (such as a glimpse, a glance), by contrast with sight, there are almost no nouns for the act of listening[27]. Therefore, the sound designer has a different perspective on the connection between auditory metaphors and soundscapes. He believes that an auditory metaphor is nothing but a peculiar soundscape constructed so as to influence individuals, without them knowing why and how. That is to assert that a sound metaphor is synonymous with an art director's ruse.

For Diane Ackerman, in a *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990), there are many striking images drawing on analogies between scent and memory and between smell and sound. The author perceives perfume as "liquid memory", while music is nothing else but the "perfume of hearing".

Ackerman (*ibidem*, 73) acknowledges that, in their approach of auditive metaphors, individuals often associate a musical chord with an "audible idea". She also argues that the individuals' perceptions of materials that make up a musical composition vary according to culture. As there are odours, scents, flavours and touches that repel most people but appeal to others, the same is true of sounds. Particular sounds or music intervals trigger specific mood affecting states that prove to be pleasant to some or harmful to others.

She finally demonstrates that musical perceptions and representations that lie at the basis of auditory metaphors are not only culturally connoted, but also hidden deep within individuals' biology.

In the *Language of Music* (1959), Derrick Cook goes on to further ask himself whether the individuals' different responses to the same music note are due to something intrinsic, ingrained deep within their souls and bodies or due to the fact that these individuals have developed along the time the habit of responding to those particular music chords and sounds in that way and not in another.

[27] https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/walter_murch. Walter Murch Quotes. Accessed on the 12th of November, 2017.

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)

Johnson (1987: 114-115) also notices that while the effect of listening to music can be culturally driven, it is still motivated by our bodily experience.

Larson (1998) contends that whilst pre-existing concepts frame and mould the musical experience of people, their bodily based metaphoric reasoning leads them to understand temporal relationships among music events in terms of physical motion.

Johnson and Larson (2003:65) do not only show that musical motion represents a particular type of metaphoric temporal motion, but they also shed light on the importance of the cross-domain mapping between the source domain "physical motion" and the target domain "music motion".

Kovëcses (2002: 17, 2005: 23) adds that the physical structure of musical time is based on a conceptual mapping drawn with a source domain and a target domain where the source domain is the human body. He claims that the more dynamic the level of sound gets, the more it is likely to be related to direction and movement in the individual's conceptual mapping (*ibidem*, 21).

2. Sound mappings in media discourse

As we have shown in a previous study (Ţenescu, 2017: 143-152), many linguists, semanticists, music theorists and sound designers have proved that bodily metaphors brought about by the individuals' experience of music and sound are mainly driven and triggered by the listeners' shared bio-cultural predispositions.

Our corpus-based analysis identifies the experiences of sound by means of the cognitive semantic concept of metaphorical projection, while at the same time it distinguishes the conceptual maps that are mainly associated with the auditory sense starting from a set of examples taken from media discourse in English.

The Mapping Theory approach allows us to isolate the auditory metaphors as "cross-domain mappings" in the conceptual system of a specific individual (Lakoff, 1993: 204) and to establish the similarity – physical, psychological or other – that is to be found between the source domain and the target domain that renders the cognitive mapping possible.

The first example from our corpus of study reveals the conceptual mapping from the source domain "hearing" onto the target domain linked to a personal quality: greatness in terms of achievement or as a concept of a state of superiority that affects a thing or a person in a particular area. The cross-domain

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)

mapping shows a similarity between the act of perceiving sound and the acquisition of a better status for a person or for his/her work, so that hearing is being great:

> "In Embudo, Paulette is chiseling away at a 10-year project combining all he's learned in the past quarter-century. Sun will shine through many openings of the "Luminous Caves," which he refers to as *his magnum opus* and his final excavation. His fierce independence has made working for others hard, and this one, he says, is just for him"[28]. (excerpt from an article by Irina Strochlic on New Mexico's Amazing Man Made Caves, 2013)

Another example from our corpus shows the conceptual mapping from the physical sense of "hearing" onto the target domain intensity that is the force and power required for a particular physical (or mental) activity:

> "Everyone *bursts into delighted peals of laughter*"[29] (Twitter post by Charlotte Lieberman on the 17th of October, 2015).

Sounds can also be marked by intensity which in cognitive semantic terms is construed in the listeners' ears in terms of a set of image schemas that are basic to the experience of sound – the schemas strength, vigour, brightness and joy:

> "You already know that laughing does wonders for you. You've felt it *brighten your day*, calm your mind and lift your mood to whole new heights, all thanks to an inside joke in the office, a hilarious comment from a kid, or a totally spontaneous mishap that makes you (and everyone around you) *burst into peals of laughter*. The kick it gives your mental health and emotions is awesome […]."[30] (excerpt from an article by Kate Moriarty in *The Huffington Post* on how laughter affects the body, 2015)

We discover another cross-domain mapping from the source represented by auditory sense onto the target domain success, linked to the social life sphere. Success is sought as the good outcome of a social undertaking, as the achievement of results hoped for in a great event:

[28] https://www.thedailybeast.com/new-mexicos-amazing-man-made-caves
[29] https://twitter.com/clieberwoman/status/655448064635838465
[30] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/09/28/physical-benefits-laughter_n_7756874.html

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)

"CPM's 2nd 'Evening For Managers' presentation *ends on a high note*. […] The highly-interactive evening, which was the second in the EFM series saw detailed presentation done by Dharshana Amarasiynghe, AGM – Marketing, Union Assurance PLC. […]"[31] (excerpt from an article in *Daily FT* online, 2016)

The corpus-based analysis reveals patterns of associations with three main categories: greatness, intensity and success. These image schemas of the experience of sound reflect the striking analogies that link elements which pertain to different cognitive domains.

Conclusion

The corpus-based analysis reflects the lexical richness of sound imagery in English media discourse. It also shows that the sense of hearing is used in multiple circumstances in our daily life, rendering it a valuable and efficient medium for expressing metaphors. The metaphoric configuration related to one of the five senses highlights the existence of several patterns of associations of sound and hearing with other conceptual categories: greatness, intensity and success. The variety of cross-domain mappings from the source domain "sound" to abstract target domains reveals the complexity of the metaphorical thought built around the conceptualization of the sense of hearing.

Corpus

Strochlic, I. 2013. "New Mexico's Amazing Man Made Caves", also available at https://www.thedailybeast.com/new-mexicos-amazing-man-made-caves
https://twitter.com/clieberwoman/status/655448064635838465
Moriarty, K. 2015. "This is How Laughter Affects Your Body", also available at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/09/28/physical-benefits-laughter_n_7756874.html
"CPM's 2nd 'Evening For Managers' presentation ends on a high note", also available at http://www.ft.lk/hr/cpms-2nd-evening-for-managers-presentation-ends-on-a-high-note/47-524720
The pages were accessed on the 12th of November, 2017.

[31] http://www.ft.lk/hr/cpms-2nd-evening-for-managers-presentation-ends-on-a-high-note/47-524720

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)

References

Ackerman, D. 1990. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage Books.

Cooke, D. 1959. *The Language of Music*. London: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, M. 1987. *The Body in the Mind. The bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, M., Larson, S. 2003. "'Something in the Way She Moves: Metaphors of Musical Motion". In *Metaphor and Symbol* 18, no. 2: 63-84.

Kovëcses, Z. 2002. *Metaphor. A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kovëcses, Z.. 2005. *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G. 1993. "The contemporary theory of metaphor". In Andrew Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and thought: Second edition* (pp. 202-251). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Larson, Steve. 1998. "Musical Forces and Melodic Patterns". In *Theory and Practice* 22-23: 5-71.

Murch, W., 1995, "Sound design: the dancing shadow". In *Projections 41/2: Film-Makers on Film-Making*, Boorman, J, Donohue, W. ed., London: Faber and Faber. 237-251.

Ţenescu, A. 2017. *Mass Media, Language, Creativity*. Bucharest: PROUniversitaria Publishing House.

Electronic references

https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/walter_murch. Walter Murch Quotes.

dreamstime.com

The pages were accessed on the 12th of November, 2017.

BDD-V4485 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 05:48:55 UTC)