

# Laughter vs Fear: Conceptual Metaphor in the Literary World of Martin Amis

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**Abstract** – The article deals with the description of cognitive processes that underlie the perception and interpretation of humour embodied in comic situations which form the plot of some literary works. Metaphor in a satirical or humorous text is a way of self-expression of the writer's personality, who feels that life in the world around him is fragile and imperfect. The research carried out by the authors let them formulate and describe the cognitive-psychological foundations of M. Amis's satirical and humorous attitude to reality in his novel "Money". Such vision is asserted by Amis's allegorical interpretation of human vices and weaknesses. Most metaphors used in the novel raise some crucial philosophical issues and evoke the feeling of sadness in a reader. The grotesque comic image of the main character reflects the nature of the modern hedonistic man and highlights his caricature, low intellectual delights and psychological phobias. The analysis of the linguistic material made it possible to identify cognitive metaphorical models that Amis purposefully used to explicate the vices of the modern world and the weaknesses of the modern man, and to consider the cognitive mechanisms for modelling modern reality.

**Keywords** – *humour, satire, laughter, fear, conceptual metaphor, allegory*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Category of humour, denoting "a culturally designed, socially and aesthetically significant laughable" [1], is an integral part of human existence. In fact, despite the abundance

of theories on the study of humour (as early as in 1923 John Greig, while studying the psychology of laughter and comedy, counted 88 theories of the comic [2]), there is no worthy mechanism for "measuring" humour.

As a result of the paradigm shift in the study of language at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis in studying language categories shifted from system-structural to anthropocentric. The study of the linguistic personality, its communicative and cultural competence, its individual aspirations and attitude becomes the primary task of researchers.

There is no doubt that the category of humour has an anthropocentric character, which brings to the forefront the need to study the cognitive mechanisms involved in the understanding of humour. This concerns cognitive efforts required to notice and appreciate comic intentions.

When humour reaches its goal most effectively, mental work is done instantly, immediately and, as it seems, absolutely free, without visible effort. This process can be compared with the production and understanding of ordinary everyday speech in the native language. However, from the point of view of cognitive linguistics, complex mental processes are involved deciphering in appreciation of both, speech and humour.

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The conceptual system of the research is metaphorical. Metaphors structure the perception of the world, thinking, behaviour, ongoing and actions. A metaphor in a literary text, in a humorous or satirical text particularly, acquires a new philosophical, didactic or epistemological bearing.

Humour achieves the greatest acuteness in works of fiction, where a writer, with the help of mastery of the word, is able to concentrate the comic phenomenon to the maximum. Accordingly, the cognitive processes that underlie the perception of humour and the generation of laughter as a reaction to the comic contents are also most obvious in literary speech. A metaphor in a satirical or humorous text is a way of self-expression of the writer's personality, who feels that life in the world around him is fragile and does not worth a penny. The satirical metaphor contains an explicit message, forcing you to pause the reading, to keep your attention on individual metaphorical postulates. The second meaning, which is opened to the reader, creates images that excite him and emotionally affect his inner world and understanding of the surrounding reality.

## III. RESULTS

### A. *Laughter vs Fear*

Laughter as a reaction to unjustified fear (arousal-safety humour) - one of the natural cognitive-psychological reactions of a person to situations of the surrounding reality - occupies a special place in the works by contemporary English novelist Martin Amis. After all, for his heroes, life itself is a struggle with fear. The protagonist of the novel "Money" John Self reasons:

*'Fear walks tall on this planet. Fear walks big and fat and fine. Fear has really got the whammy on all of us down here'* [3].

Amis's metaphor FEAR IS A BULLY presents to us fear as a domineering, peremptory and powerful person. Fear laughs at us and makes us obey. He (not IT) is a hector and a bully, he is a fearless boss and overlord. The only drawback of this strong personality is the ability to get carried away, succumb to instinct, lose control:

*'Fear might get carried away, like I've seen them do, pure damage, with nothing mattering'* [3].

The metaphor FEAR IS A BULLY is dual in its origin: it is a structural metaphor (Amis describes the dimensions and appearance of fear) and an ontological metaphor (the hero's knowledge and ideas about fear are derived from his life experience).

Amis's hero has not yet won out fear, but he is going to do it soon:

*'One of these days I'm going to walk right up to fear. I'm going to walk right up. Someone's got to do it. I'm going to walk right up and say, Okay, hard-on. No more of this'* [3].

Fear in his understanding is personified, it has the qualities of a strong and domineering person who knows no mercy. The

monologue of the main character about fear, representing such an invincible person, plays a special role in the text of the novel:

*'Fear walks tall on this planet. Fear walks big and fat and fine. Fear has really got the whammy on all of us down here ... Fear is a bully, but something tells me that fear is no funkier. Fear, I suspect, is incredibly brave. Fear will lead me straight through the door, will prop me up in the alley among the crates and the empties, and show me who the boss' is* [3].

Fear is metaphorically endowed with the following anthropological features and qualities: stout (big and fat), confuses everyone around (has really got the whammy on all of us), merciless and fearless (a bully; incredibly brave), demonstrates who is the master of the situation (will show who's the boss). In all the epithets and descriptions presented above, a sufficiently noticeable proportion of envy and respect is felt. The main character himself would not mind having all these virtues. But, having reflected on the power of fear and his abilities, John loses courage and gives in:

*'Now I come to think about it, maybe I'd better let fear be. When it comes to fighting, I'm brave - or reckless or indifferent or just unjust. But fear scares me. He's too good at fighting and I'm too frightened anyway'* [3].

J. Self seems to be too afraid to resist fear. However, the noticeable self-irony of the character is an effective means of self-protection. The reader feels the comic effect as a result of the collision of the hero's initial bravado, its further surrender and self-irony, serving as a kind of meta-text with respect to this micro-plot. In everyday life, most people repeatedly go the same way in relation to different situations that require effort, will and responsibility. The initial desire to be a winner is gradually replaced by fears, when in the process of cognitive effort all hazardous steps and possible difficulties are mentally drawn. Martin Amis mocks this human weakness, noting that a person is primarily afraid of fear itself.

At the same time, Amis's protagonist, John Self, is trying to define his niche in relation to fear. He realizes that he is not the most fearful, especially when drunk:

*'People are easy to frighten and haunt. People are easy to terrify. Me too, and I'm braver than most. Or drunker, anyway'* [3].

Thus, the hero's next attempt to compete with fear ends once again in a comedic failure. Here the second cognitive process (the incongruity-resolution process), which generates laughter, is also manifested. Bravery is a quality that delights and enraptures people. However, drunken bravado, which turns out to be our hero's courage, causes opposite feelings of scoff and sneer.

To feel successful and domineering, John Self needs to feel the fear of other people addicted to him. Thus, his friend, who wants to borrow some money from him, must be fearful of John in order to get that money:

*'This is what I needed to see and hear and feel, the salute of his fear as we passed each other by. Me going up, him going down. Perhaps this was what I was paying for'* [3].

As mentioned earlier, the feeling of superiority is the desired sensation of man from nature. Amis's character is willing to pay big money to obtain this feeling. This is where the third cognitive process by Attardo, humorous disparagement, works.

Different people are afraid of different things. The list of fears of John Self's girlfriend, Selina, is so heterogeneous and grotesquely long that it cannot but cause the reader's smiles:

*'In addition to rape, Selina is frightened of mice, spiders, dogs, toadstools, cancer, mastectomy, chipped mugs, ghost stories, visions, portents, fortune tellers, astrology columns, deep water, fires, floods, thrush, poverty, lightning, ectopic pregnancy, rust, hospitals, driving, swimming, flying and ageing' [3].*

Here the authors encounter deliberate violation of the objective proportions of the subject of satirical or humorous criticism [4]. Amis puts on a par and even mixes completely heterogeneous phobias from different areas of life: zoophobia (mice, spiders, dogs), mycophobia (toadstools), fears about health (thrush, cancer, mastectomy, ectopic pregnancy, ageing), fears of natural disasters (deep water, fires, floods, lightning), social fears (hospitals, driving, flying), peniaphobia (poverty). Mixing irritants causing Selina's sense of fear disrupts a sense of logic, which helps create a comic effect.

The conceptual metaphor of FEAR IS A BULLY is certainly one of the most prominent in the novel and manifests itself at different levels and in different episodes throughout the story. However, Martin Amis - master of allegory - gives us the opportunity to enjoy other forms of metaphorical rethinking of reality.

#### B. Other Metaphors to Enjoy

John Self, a successful commercialist, arriving in New York, immediately assesses the situation:

*'Inflation, they say, is cleaning up this city. Dough is rolling up its sleeves and mucking the place out' [3].*

Inflation plays the role of cleaners in the city. Money (dough), rolling up their sleeves, rake manure. There is a huge meaning in two short sentences: urban mud, which have been accumulating for years, is washed away by inflation: the depreciating money is invested in new modern buildings, roads, the appearance of the city is ennobled. Thus, inflation, which everyone dislikes and fears, seems to be a source of progress - cleanliness and rejuvenation. The metaphor INFLATION IS A CLEANER unfolds.

Inanimate concepts – inflation and money – are personified, endowed with human traits: they perform functions inherent to nurses and caretakers. Personification, as a type of metaphor, is used by Amis as a powerful emotionally colourful means, and at the same time, a subtle tool for shaping the worldview. The lexeme "dough", in its secondary nominative meaning "money", adds to the whole statement of the metaphor and further characterizes the main character.

The most interesting case of the conceptual metaphor from the novel Amis - HEAD IS A CITY OF PAINS - is used in the following monologue of the main character:

*'My head is a city, and various pains have now taken up residence in various parts of my face. A gum-and-bone ache has launched a cooperative on my upper west side. Across the park, neuralgia has rented a duplex in my fashionable east seventies. Downtown, my chin throbs with lofts of jaw lass. As for brain, my hundreds, it's Harlem up there, expanding in the summer fires. It bolts and swells. On day soon it is going to burst' [3].*

In this metaphorical complex, the hero's facial features held down by pain (gum-and-bone ache, neuralgia, chin throbs) are used as a source of transference; urban areas and buildings (cooperative on the upper west side, across the park, duplex in the fashionable east seventies, downtown) are used as targets. The pain settles in different parts of the face, as if located in a big city. The essence of this metaphor is that phenomena of one kind (pain in the face of the head) are comprehended and experienced in terms of phenomena of another kind (the city and its districts). The entire metaphorical complex, which describes the unobservable mental space (pain in the face) by means of transferring to the observed mental space (city and its places), creates a holistic picture of the visible real world, which is used to represent and comprehend a three-dimensional and multidimensional phenomenon.

Amis's character considers the telephone to be one-sided instrument of torture. The following passage unfolds the metaphor TELEPHONE IS AN INSTRUMENT OF TORTURE:

*'The telephone was a one-way instrument, an instrument of torture. Caduta rang. Lorne Guyland rang. A trio of nutters called Christopher Meadowbrook, Nub Forkner and Herrick Shnexasnyder – I had them on the line too. That madman, that accredited devo crazoid, he checked in again, three times, four times, son of a bitch. He's really got to me, I admit it' [3].*

John Self's phone does not stop ringing. The enumeration of those who called him without indicating the content of the conversation indicates that the calls were unimportant, they did not affect the essential, vital or desired questions for the protagonist, but only increased his irritation. It is worth noting that John is waiting at this time a call his girlfriend, Selina, who, unlike the others, is in no hurry to use the phone. The phone turns into an instrument of torture, and one-sided torture, by the way, because John's interlocutors are unaware of his spiritual anguish.

From the point of view of its origin, metaphor HEAD IS A CITY OF PAINS, describing main character's sufferings, contains both structural and ontological features. Structurally, one phenomenon, the telephone, which is a source of metaphorical transference, is introduced in terms of another phenomenon, an instrument of torture. Ontological features are represented by the fact, that the hero interprets the experience of using a telephone in terms of objects familiar to him from encyclopaedic or empirical sources of knowledge.

Literary texts by the famous English novelist and critic Martin Amis are deeply metaphorical, they abound in structural and ontological metaphors that conceptualize certain areas of life by transferring familiar elements of the structure or the results of understanding the experience to the described entities.

In this article, the authors intend to find out the ways of expressing Amis's attitude to the surrounding reality, and that

of his protagonist, in the novel “Money”, included in 2005 by Times magazine in the hundred best novels in English since 1923. The authors have to answer a number of questions:

- what main processes, accompanying the perception of humour with the help of emotionally colourful metaphorical images, exist;
- what metaphorical images arise from the author of the novel “Money”, and, accordingly, the reader, in the process of reading the novel and how they conceptualize reality;
- what types of metaphorization M. Amis uses and what they are based on;
- what cognitive-psychological foundations of M. Amis's satirical and humorous attitude to reality in the novel “Money” are found;
- what gnoseological image the writer forms.

In accordance with the above questions, which structure this article, the authors formulate the main goal of the research: to identify and describe the cognitive-psychological foundations of M. Amis's satirical and humorous attitude to reality in the novel “Money”, asserted by the author's allegorical interpretation of human vices and weaknesses.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The cognitive-discursive approach to the analysis of the conceptual metaphorization of reality through its satirical and humorous reinterpretation serves as the methodological pillar of the research article. The main theoretical base of the research comprises the studies of recognized theorists of humour – S. Attardo [5, 6], J. Suls [7], E. Baldwin [8], A.J. Chapman [9], N.D. Bells [10], as well as modern scholars Adrian Hale [11], Michael P. Jeffries [12], Christopher Robert and Serge P. da Motta Veiga [13], A. Pundt and F. Herrmann [14], Jyotsna Vaid [15] and others.

The fundamental theory of conceptual metaphor by J. Lakoff and M. Johnson [16–18] serves as a starting point for identifying the paraphrases prevailing in Amis's novel, which are central keys for understanding reality.

In addition, the works of a number of linguists, conducted in the framework of the study of metaphorical conceptualization (O. Esenova [19], O.A. Sokolova [20], M.V. Duzenli [21], Z. Kövecses [22], V.I. Zobotkina, M.N. Konnova, L.S. Belousov, N.L. Peshin [23]) played a special role in solving the problems posed in the study.

Besides, the authors highly appreciate the ability of the author of the novel “Money” to find a source of inspiration for the comic description of human failures, their vices, shortcomings and weaknesses [24] with the help of allegory, similitude and irony based on cognitive metaphorization of reality.

Theorists of humour call the three main processes that accompany the perception of the comic [5]. First, it is laughter as a result of defeated (or unjustified) fear (so-called ‘arousal-safety humour’) - a situation of embarrassment from foreboding

something terrible or dangerous, which ends with a laugh of relief from the unjustified fear.

The second one, the incongruity-resolution process, combines incompatible mental schemes in humour. A joke arises from the sudden realization that there is a mixture of two very heterogeneous phenomena based on random and insignificant similarities between them. A joke in this case does not work if there is no sudden realization of which mental schemes overlap each other [6, 7].

The third process is humorous disparagement or attack humour. This mechanism is based on the premise that people love to feel superior to others. In order for the joke to be perceived in this case, the humiliation must be justified. This is the most risky process, since it is likely to offend the feelings of the listeners if they fail to appreciate the comic situation [5].

It should also be noted that perception of humour in relation to cognitive processes implies at least two elements. The basic cognitive element - understanding the joke (‘getting the joke’) [8] - reflects the dissonance between the humorous material and the person's past experience. The affective element - the perception of a joke (‘humour appreciation’) - refers to the emotional component [25].

#### V. CONCLUSION

Using the example of Martin Amis's novel, the authors argue that any kind of metaphorization is based on associative links within the framework of human experience. Thus, metaphor is inherently anthropometric, i.e. it measures different entities, and on their basis a completely new epistemological image (cognitive unit) is formed, in which the signs of other entities are created.

In the works by Martin Amis, for example, the affective element, following the understanding of a joke, often has the character of sad humour, causing philosophical sentiment. The grotesque comic image of John Self reflects the nature of the modern hedonistic man and puts him on a universal Supreme Court for his caricature, shallow intellectual delights, low self-esteem and psychological phobias.

The analysis of the linguistic material from the novel by M. Amis made it possible to identify cognitive metaphorical models that the writer purposefully used to explicate the vices of the modern world and the weaknesses of the contemporary man, and to consider the cognitive mechanisms for modelling present-day reality.

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