

## A Study on Iconicity in William Carlos Williams' Poems

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**Abstract:** As the initiator and representative poet of American modernism poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, William Carlos Williams was good at dealing with the themes of daily life in his poems, which are characterized by concise form, colloquial rhythm, vivid image and strong visual effects. This paper attempts to use the principle of iconicity to interpret William Carlos Williams' poems, in order to prove that linguistic symbols are vivid reflections of the objective world and human thinking.

### 1. Introduction

William Carlos Williams is one of the most influential poets in the world of American modernism poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Breaking the boundaries of poetry and painting and the limitations of time and space, Williams introduced the aesthetic principles and creative skills of painting into poetry creation and put much emphasis on the visual effect and spatial expression of poetry. In addition, the poet put the formal structure of the poem in a prominent position by employing the unique arrangement of lines to create spatial symbols and shapes in pursuit of unique artistic expressions.

Iconicity refers to the phenomenon that linguistic symbols are iconically correspondent to their referents in sound, form and syntactic structure. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pierce first proposed iconicity and divided symbols into icons, index and symbols according to the different relations between symbols and the referents they refer to. On this basis, icons are further divided into images, diagrams and metaphors. Since the 1970s, with the development of cognitive linguistics, scholars have had a deeper understanding of the iconicity in language. Among them, the most representative is Haiman's research, who divides the iconicity of linguistic symbols into component iconicity and relational iconicity, and further divides the latter into distance, quantity, order, markedness, topic and sentence pattern iconicity. According to Haiman, the surface form of a sentence iconically "diagrams" its semantics. Linguistic structures are often similar to non-linguistic diagrams of our thoughts. Languages are like diagrams. This paper attempts to use the iconicity principle to interpret William Carlos Williams' poems, in order to prove that linguistic symbols are vivid reflections of the objective world and human thinking.

### 2. The main manifestations of iconicity in Williams' poems

#### 2.1 Phonetic iconicity

There are many natural phonetic similarities between words and things in nature, such as onomatopoeias exemplified by cackle, cuckoo, meow, etc. A close relationship can be found between the phonemic combinations and the meanings expressed in some words. Such words as *groan*, *growl*, *gruff*, *grumble* *grunt* and *gruntle* beginning with *gr-* often carry the meaning of dull and unpleasant sounds.

In Williams' poem *Dance*, a large number of words containing the sound of /aund/ are used, which not only implies that the dancing farmers are stout and round, but also indicates a circle formed by dancers and the cycle of their movements. The use of /aund/ achieves the iconic effect of

“sounds carry meanings”.

## 2.2 Quantity iconicity

The number of linguistic units is related to the amount and complexity of the concepts represented. The larger and more complex the concept is, the more time needed for processing, hence the more units of language are used. A dialogue between a couple can reveal this idea:

**A:** Let's get the kids something.

**B:** Okay, but I veto I-C-E C-R-E-A-M-S.

B utters the letters of ice cream one after another by deliberately dividing the word into separate letters, thus extending the duration and increasing the number of language units. As a result, simple idea is hidden in more language units, which can be less likely to be understood by the children. However, the hearer A can figure out the implied meaning from the marked expression and deduce that A selects this seemingly complex way in order to spare the trouble of children's begging for ice cream.

The poem *Paterson* by Williams can be regarded as the last grand work of the poet, in which Williams reproduces the rich content with a macro text. Williams chose his hometown Paterson as the subject of his epic because he tried to depict the rise and fall of this industrial city on the Bassek River to express a broader theme— the essence of industrialized America and the conflict between industrial civilization, nature and human beings. The length of this poem is due to its extremely rich content, including the description of the natural scenery of the Paterson City, the thoughts of the Poet Paterson, and even the contents extracted from old newspapers, as well as advertisements and notices. For such a rich content, it is extremely necessary for the poet to choose more words to describe. In this poem, the number of linguistic units seems to be used to express the complexity of reality.

## 2.3 Order Iconicity

There is a correspondence between the sequence of syntactic elements and the sequence of events they express. Its cognitive foundation is that the narration of events in conformity to the events happened is in agreement with the usual cognitive tendency of human beings. Let's have a look at his famous *Good Night*:

In brilliant gaslight  
I turn the kitchen spigot  
and watch the water plash  
into the clean white sink  
On the grooved drain- board  
to one side is  
a glass filled with parsley—  
crisped green.  
Waiting  
for the water to freshen—  
I glance at the spotless floor—:  
a pair of rubber sandals  
lie side by side  
under the wall table  
all is in order for the night.

Waiting, with a glass in my hand  
—three girls in crimson satin  
Pass close before me on  
the murmurous background of  
the crowded opera—  
it is  
memory playing the clown—

three vague, meaningless girls  
full of smells and  
the rustling sound of  
cloth rubbing on cloth and  
little slippers on carpet—  
high- school French  
spoken in a loud voice!

Parsley in a glass,  
still and shining,  
brings me back. I take my drink  
and yawn deliciously.  
I am ready for bed.

In this poem, the poet presents us with a picture of family life. In enumerating the things which aroused his attention, Williams clearly followed the order in which he perceived them, which was in full conformity with the principle of order iconicity. The emergence of one object after another is like a movie scene. In the first eight lines of the poem, the focus is on the kitchen following the order of the spigot, then the splashes, the white sink, then the grooved drain-board, and finally the glass filled with parsley. In reading, when the reader's eyes move from one line of the poem to the next, it seems that he is re-examining the poet's gradual perception of the kitchen in a series of scanning. In Williams' poems, the movement of the vision is usually spread out along one axis, usually from top to bottom. In *Good Night*, the movement of the vision is also essentially along a vertical axis from top to bottom (from the spigot to the splashes to the white sink), except that there is a lateral movement in Line Five to the grooved drain-board where a glass filled with crisped green parsley. In the second stanza of the poem, the eyes continue to move down from the water in the sink to the floor of the bedroom with rubber slippers under the table. The arrangement of lines is similar to the order of the poet's observation, so that readers can follow the poet's sight to perceive the spatial arrangement of objects.

## 2.4 Distance Iconicity

In language expressions, the distance between language components often directly reflects the conceptual distance of people or the distance between objects described in the real world. Similarly, the distance between the constituent units of a text, such as sentences, paragraphs and stanzas, also reflects the conceptual distance of people or the actual distance between objects in nature. If the meaning of form A affects the meaning of form B, then, the CLOSER form A is to form B, the STRONGER will be the EFFECT of the meaning of A on the meaning of B. For example, in the following three sentences:

- (1) Only I want two apples.
- (2) I only want two apples.
- (3) I want only two apples.

The three *only* are in different positions in the three sentences, which carry divergent meanings resulting from the relationship between *only* and the neighboring word it modifies. In the first sentence, the meaning is I rather than anybody else want; the second sentence means that I only want two apples, rather than do anything else to apples; the third sentence I only want two apples, not more apples.

Please appreciate the well-known *The Red Wheelbarrow*:  
so much depends  
upon  
A red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

Although the poem has only one sentence, as far as verbal communication is concerned, it is a poem composed of four stanzas. In the last three stanzas, “glazed with rain water” is closer to “a red wheel barrow” than “the white chickens” because in the real world, rain water directly lies on the wheelbarrow, but there is a distance between the flock of white chickens and the wheelbarrow. From the perspective of cognition, the poet naturally put the eye-catching red wheelbarrow with bright color and large size near “depends upon”, while the less bright and small “white chickens” were put at the far end of the poem. The distance between linguistic units reproduces the distance between things in the real world.

## 2.5 Spatial iconicity

The arrangement and combination of linguistic forms can reflect the distribution of three-dimensional objects in the real world. In *Good Night*, the sixth line of the poem “to one side” is much shorter than the first few lines, and this line is also on the one side of the whole poem in terms of location in the space. The spatial position of this line achieves the effect of “shape carries meaning”. In the line of “waiting”, the poet is waiting when the water flows out of the spigot and becomes clean and fresh, so “waiting” occupies a line. The reason why “waiting” is placed at the far right end of the line is that a large amount of space on the left of it indicates the process of waiting for a long time. The “it is” at the far right of Line 21 also implies hesitation and thought. In the previous lines, when he waited for the water to become clean, the poet caught a glimpse of the spotless floor and found a pair of slippers standing side by side, thus recalling his cherished experience in the past. He seemed to see himself holding a wine cup, waiting for three girls in red to whisper past him. However, it has been a long time since the incident, and he cannot recall it for the time being. Therefore, before defining the mental image of these three girls in red who disturbed the peaceful life of the family, the poet used a blank space before “it is” to imply the psychological process of hesitation and thinking. After some hesitation and reflection, the poet finally recalled that it was a long time ago -- the perfume of the three girls in red, the rustle of their clothes and the sound of their slippers on the ground. The Line “it is” is placed on the right of the line, slowing down the speed of thinking and speaking because of the psychological reasons. The Line “it is” is also a sign that the following lines will be turned into distant memories, which form a sharp contrast with the present vivid reality— the plain and boring kitchen facilities and the memory of warmth and happiness. The Line “it is” not only resembles the hesitation of the poet, but also iconically indicates that the author will shift from realistic description to psychological and emotional account.

## 2.6 Shape iconicity

It generally does not occur at the lexical and syntactic level, but at the textual level. Shape iconicity refers to the imitation of the shape of objects in the real world on the whole (referring to the whole poem) or locally (referring to paragraphs or stanzas) of a poem, such as *The Hostess*:

The Nominating Committee presents the following

Resolutions, etc. etc.etc. All those

in favor signify by saying, Aye. Contrarim indeed

No.

Carried.

And aye, and aye, and aye!

And the way the bell- hop runs downstairs

ta tuck a

ta tuck a

ta tuck a

ta tuck a

and the gulls in the open window screaming over the slow  
break of the cold waves—

In the poem, the five “ta tuck a” are arranged in echelon form, just like the appearance of stairs and the movement of going down stairs, which vividly presents the scene of an energetic hotel porter going down stairs. The form of a poem is not only a form here. Instead, it is a content in itself.

## 2.7 Psychological iconicity

In order to truly describe the psychological states or changes of the characters, the author sometimes directly reflects the psychology to be expressed by means of the intentional organization of the structure of the text, like *The Great Numbers*:

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheaded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.

From the perspective of psychological iconicity, the arrangement of lines reflects the poet’s urgent psychological state. A close look reveals that the lines are longer at both ends and shorter in the middle. As for the things galloping by, it is natural for the poet to notice the most obvious part at first -- the huge number “5” followed by the color of the number; Then came the red firetruck, and at last, out of the confusing noises, the poet distinguished the sound of clangs, sirens, and rumbling wheels. From Line 3 to Line 8, each line has only one content word, creating an artistic effect of instantly superimposed impressions. It is also inevitable that the poet has no time to use more words in this urgent situation. The fire engine receded into the night, gradually distancing itself from the observer. It was then that the poet had time to describe its sound with more than two words. Thus, the long - short - long line structure perfectly reflects the poet’s psychological feeling of urgent need to grasp the scene in the night.

## 3. Conclusion

This paper interprets the poems of William Carlos Williams from the perspectives of iconicity of phonetics, quantity, order, distance, space, shape and psychology, proving that iconicity is an effective means to analyze and interpret poems. The application of iconicity is helpful to construct the beauty of sounds and form in poems, which in turn is conducive to constructing the beauty of images in poems.

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