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WHO SHOULD WRITE ABOUT AFRICA: FRAMING THE DEBATE³

Transcending one's own lived experience has always been one of the hallmarks of fiction, yet recent discussions on the subject reveal that this very practice has been criticized by some as an act of cultural appropriation. In the present study, we analyze the opinion of fiction writers by focusing on their linguistic choices. We examine metaphorical expressions in news articles which highlight the concerns surrounding the authors' right to write about Africa. The data has been compiled from eight articles (27,449-word sample) published in *The Guardian*, in the period between 2009 and 2022. The study of lexical choices in news discourse, within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), revealed the underlying ideologies and how the debate has been framed in the time period analyzed. Three framing possibilities were observed. Namely, the documented metaphorical expressions belonged to TERRITORY, LAW, and VIOLENCE-related metaphors which all focused on different aspects of the experience.

Key words: Africa, fiction, framing, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, news discourse

1. Introduction

The deep mysteries of "The Mother Continent" had been explored in memoirs of a number of journalists and explorers, presenting certain topics in a manner that was more readily accessible to the general public across Europe. Particularly influential was Henry Morton Stanley's (1872) *How I Found Livingstone: Travels, Adventures and Discoveries in Central Africa: Including an Account of Four Months' Residence with Dr. Livingstone*, followed by *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *In Darkest Africa* (1890), which went beyond the sense of adventure and addressed the issue of race and colonial bias (Rakić

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2022: 151-152). The representation of African culture in literature and the media through the prism of western society reinforced binary opposites such as black-white, The Self-The Other, or civilized-uncivilized (see e.g. Rakić 2022; Rakić, Ognjanović 2020). These opposites both manifested in and were constructed by discourse, in other words, they had ideological implications. Since “ideologies allow people, as group members, to organise the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, *for them* and to act accordingly” (van Dijk 1998: 8, cited in Goatly 2007: 1), those who tell the story determine how we see the world.

The relationship between words and understanding has much to do with what Fillmore (1976) described as *frames*. Namely, the exposure to a particular linguistic form in a certain context activates in the perceiver’s mind a particular system of related concepts (*frame*), because the words used to describe an entity or an event are associated in memory with frames and other linguistic material that is linked to the respective frames (Fillmore 1976: 25; Fillmore 1982: 111). For instance, when used in political context, the italicized words in the expressions like: “*run* for office”, “*neck* and *neck*”, or “*jockey* for position” describe political elections via the “game frame”, which emphasizes the winning and the losing party in the poll, while the words “battle”, “fight”, and “attack” describe politics as war (the examples are taken from Brugman et al. 2019: 46, 49). Describing a person as “thrifty” frames the fact that they do not spend much money in terms of resource preservation, while describing them as “stingy” frames the matter in terms of generosity (the example is taken from Lakoff 2002: 372). Framing, in Fillmore’s (1982: 117) terms, is the process of structuring the way in which the scene is represented or remembered. This notion is connected to the notion of ideology since “many objects, persons, and experiences in the world are framed in terms of their potential role in supporting, harming, or enhancing people’s lives or interests” (Fillmore 1976: 28). Ideological language thus activates ideological systems, and the repetition of that language in the media strengthens the neural circuits for that ideology in a hearer’s brain (Lakoff 2010: 72). The fact that a particular ideology can be activated unconsciously highlights the importance of the question raised by Lakoff (2010: 72): “whose frames are being activated - and hence strengthened - in the brains of the public?” Conceptual metaphor is one of the cognitive mechanisms of ideology that determines the ways of thinking and acting in the social spheres (Balkin 1998, cited in Goatly 2007: 3-4). It is especially interesting because its persuasive power is not always immediately obvious (Krennmayr 2011: 40). Therefore, studying the conceptual metaphors which are used to frame issues such as race, economics, climate change, environment, or politics matters. The present paper, in particular, centers on the question of who “deserves” to portray the African experience.

The issue of who has the right to write about Africa has been addressed across disciplines. In an article on the development of South African anthropology, for instance, Bošković and Van Wyk (2007: 151) note that, in

some African countries, certain nationalist intellectuals hold the view that the “outsiders (especially white researchers) cannot achieve the degree of empathy necessary to understand the cultural values of African people in an authentic way”. The authors refer to such a view as the “claim for privileged insight on the grounds of ethnicity” (ibid.). In recent years, this issue has been raised in the media as well. The right to appropriate other people’s stories has both been defended and denied by authors whose conflicting viewpoints have been expressed in the press. In the pages ahead, we will explore the frames the writers apply to this situation by analyzing the linguistic choices they make, i.e. their choice of linguistic metaphors, since the way an issue is framed depends on the conceptual metaphors which are used (Johnson 1993: 2; Semino et al. 2018: 628; Bogetić 2018: 110). We thus rely on the notion of framing⁴ as a process which is used “to explain how choices of metaphor may relate to people’s views and opinions on specific issues in specific contexts” (Semino et al. 2018: 629).

2. Data and Methodology

To investigate this very narrow topic, the news register has been chosen for this study because it offers a chance to explore the actual language use, and because it shapes the public opinion and generates actions due to its pervasiveness in modern society (Krennmayr 2011: 13, 39). Eight articles, published in the period between 2009 and 2022, were gathered more or less at random from *The Guardian*, they all discuss books, primarily fiction, about Africa. The dataset contained 27,449 words in total, while the articles varied in length, the longest one contained 15,668 words and the shortest 631.

Given that we are not concerned with news discourse and metaphorical language use in quantitative terms (that is, the distribution of metaphor across this register), but with the way this particular issue has been represented in the contemporary news texts, we take a qualitative approach. The texts have not been annotated for all metaphorical language, because they cover a range of domains, but solely for the expressions that belong to source domains which focus on African fiction in broad terms. This entails the discussions on how Africa has been portrayed, predominantly through the prism of western perspective, and the writers’ supposed right to solely tell stories within their own nationality and country of origin. Upon an initial reading of the articles, the words *experience*, *Africa*, *African*, *fiction*, *boundary*, *outside*, *white writer*, *writer of color*, *write*, and *cultural appropriation* were identified as the *key discourse terms*, or the most frequent terms related to African fiction in connection with which conceptual metaphors were used. The examples containing metaphorically used expressions were gathered from the articles by applying the Metaphor Identification Procedure VU, devised by Steen et al. (2011). For instance, the

4 Sullivan (2006: 388) notes that the contrast between the notion of *frame* and that of *domain* is in the fact that “a domain is usually structured by multiple frames”, for instance, the BODY domain includes frames related to eating (INGESTION), dying (DEATH), or EXERCISE.

lexical unit *see* in the example: “There’s a big problem with the way that the rest of the world *sees* Africa” was marked as metaphorical because its meaning in this particular context (“to think about or consider someone or something in a particular way”, *Longman* sense 9) contrasts, but can be understood in comparison with its basic meaning (“to notice or examine someone using your eyes”, *Longman* sense 1). Therefore, the lexical unit represents a linguistic manifestation of the conceptual metaphor TO THINK ABOUT AFRICA IN A PARTICULAR WAY IS TO LOOK AT AFRICA IN A PARTICULAR WAY, which can be explained in terms of the THINKING IS SEEING conceptual metaphor at a more general level. Following the *discursive metaphorical frames* (DMFs) approach (Bogetić 2018: 112), the analysis included the following sequence of steps: we identified (i) the metaphorical expressions according to the MIPVU, (ii) the source domains which they are based on, and (iii) the metaphorical frames according to the most frequent domains of experience determined in the step ii. The following segment illustrates the use of metaphorical expressions that represent linguistic realizations of conceptual metaphors in discussions on African fiction and identity.

3. Results and Discussion

Since framing involves both *selection* and *salience* (Entman 1993, cited in Semino et al. 2018: 627), we identified the aspects of the situation which the authors chose to highlight in the texts, they include the following: WHITE AUTHORS’ PORTRAYAL OF AFRICA, ATTITUDE TOWARDS LITERATURE BY WHITE AUTHORS, WHITE AUTHORS’ RESPONSE TO CRITICISM, WRITING FROM ONE’S OWN EXPERIENCE, and WRITING OUTSIDE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE. Among the metaphorical linguistic expressions used to talk about these aspects were those to do with the domain of NATURAL RESOURCES (e.g. “Shriver’s speech was ‘a celebration of the unfettered *exploitation* of the experiences of others, under the guise of fiction”), the domain of SIGHT (e.g. “It concluded: ‘The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina recently published an article entitled How to Write About Africa, a satirical *look* at books about Africa”), the domain of FOOD (e.g. “Writing about characters steeped in a living culture that you know only through travel and research is *a recipe for offensive disaster*”), the domain of POLITICS (e.g. However are we fiction writers to seek “permission” to use a character from another race or culture [...]? Do we set up a stand on the corner and approach passers-by with a clipboard, getting signatures that grant limited rights to employ an Indonesian character in Chapter Twelve, *the way political volunteers get a candidate on the ballot?*), or the domain of CLOTHES (e.g. “And of course, many years later, once I figured out that what I loved more than anything else was *trying on* different lives, I became a writer”), most of which were represented with few instances of use. White author’s portrayal of Africa, for example, has been expressed via different direct (1) and indirect (2-3) metaphors:

1. We are shown one side of a *rusty, old colonial coin* where helpless Africans need saving from themselves in their *dark paradise*.
2. Such stories would provide a more authentic and badly needed alternative to the clichéd, often patronising tales by “white saviours”, with their *echoes* of Kipling and Conrad.
3. One of the reasons it’s frustrating when writers *recycle* familiar colonial fantasies is that they’re refusing to engage with what’s actually in front of them, or else can only think about what they find in Africa today by comparison with spurious Eurocentric clichés about the continent.

Yet, the majority of expressions indicated that PERSONAL EXPERIENCE is mainly viewed through the metaphors from the domain of CONTAINER, such is the case in examples 4-7 below:

4. If white people can’t appropriate the experiences of the oppressed for fiction then it no longer becomes possible for anyone to write *outside* their own experience.
5. When an author pretends to be someone he is not, he does it to tell a story *outside* of his own experiential range.
6. I remarked that while this kind of anxiety seemed to focus on writing *outside* one’s own ethnicity or gender, class was often overlooked and by far the most challenging in my experience.
7. “Where did the new orthodoxy arise that writers must only set stories *within* their own country of origin or nationality?”

The type of the container is not precisely specified in these cases, but the containment aspect, evinced by the opposite spatial terms *outside* and *within* point to the metaphorical mappings: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS A CONTAINER, WRITING ABOUT YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS REMAINING INSIDE THE CONTAINER, WRITING ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS GOING OUTSIDE THE CONTAINER. However, the references to *boundaries*, *barriers*, and *space* listed below suggest that personal experience is framed by the TERRITORY-related metaphors.

8. “What *boundaries* around our own lives are we mandated to remain *within*?” asked Shriver.
9. “I would argue that any story you can make yours is yours to tell, and trying to *push* the *boundaries* of the author’s personal experience is part of a fiction writer’s job.”
10. Even if novels and short stories only do so by creating an illusion, fiction helps to fell the exasperating *barriers* between us, and for a short while allows us to behold the astonishing reality of other people.
11. Musa says white writers should read, support and promote

the work of writers of colour before attempting to *encroach* on that *space* themselves, if that is something they want to do.

12. As the civil rights movement grew, so did criticism of white people attempting to *exploit* the images and experiences of people of colour for social and financial gain.
13. Categories were added: American literature, post-colonial literature, comparative literature, women's literature. The creative output of the world's writers was hived off, *territory* was *staked out* and *defended*.

The words that are grounded in this frame display the mapping between personal experience and a territory, they place the individual in the role of a local resident, meanwhile, writing about personal experience is portrayed as remaining within the boundaries of that territory⁵, and the effort to write other people's stories is seen as the act of extending those same boundaries, on the part of the white authors. Interestingly, this limiting quality of personal experience is represented by the lexical unit *barrier* when the effort to escape the confines of personal experience is viewed as a favorable outcome ("to behold the astonishing reality of other people" in 10), which can only be achieved through fiction. Unlike the neutral term *boundary*, which solely marks where one area of land ends and another begins, *barrier* expresses the negative attitude because it denotes that the activity is obstructed. Since personal experience correlates with the possession of land within this frame, the value of that land (experience) corresponds to natural resources of that particular area (*exploit* in 12). The criticism of the white authors' attempt to write about the experience of others is evident in its representation as an attempt to *encroach* on that space (11), or cover more area of land. As a defense mechanism, the people whose experience white authors are trying to portray "mark the area with fences to show that it belongs to them" (*stake out* in 13). The metaphorical construction of personal identity/experience as a territory includes mappings of the following kind: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS A TERRITORY, TO WRITE ABOUT YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS TO STAY WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THAT TERRITORY, TO WRITE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS TO ENCROACH ON THEIR TERRITORY, and TO DENY WHITE AUTHORS THE RIGHT TO PORTRAY AFRICA IS TO DEFEND YOUR TERRITORY.

The general metaphor PERSONAL EXPERIENCE/IDENTITY IS A VALUABLE OBJECT captures a wide variety of expressions which show that the experience is defined relative to the metaphorical frame of LAW:

14. Who is a *professional kidnapper*? [...] The fiction writer, that's who.
15. Who is the *premier pickpocket of the arts*? [...] The fiction writer, that's who.

5 The expression "to tend our own gardens" in 18 is based on the same mapping.

16. Who *swipes* every sight, smell, sensation, or overheard conversation like *a kid in a candy store*, and sometimes takes notes the better to *purloin* whole worlds?
17. Yet were their authors honouring the new rules against *helping yourself to* what doesn't belong to you, we would not have Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.
18. Besides: which is it to be? We have to tend our own gardens, and only write about ourselves or people just like us because we mustn't *pilfer* others' experience [...].?
19. I confidently *plead not guilty* to the first *charge* – but I happily *plead guilty* to the second; and my suspicion is that many people instinctively conflate those two separate things.
20. She then used her keynote speech at the Brisbane writers' festival to tear into the argument that writers – most particularly white writers – are *guilty* of “cultural appropriation” by writing from the point of view of characters from other cultural backgrounds.
21. I'll admit both as possibilities – and naturally I invite you to read and *judge* for yourself – but neither seems particularly likely.
22. As for *the culture police's* obsession with “authenticity,” fiction is inherently inauthentic.
23. But in principle, I admire his courage – if only because he invited this kind of *ethical forensics* in a review out of San Francisco: “When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl, is it an act of empathy, or *identity theft*?” the reviewer asked.

Within this frame, the major qualities that are highlighted are those of morality and regulation. Since one's experience is assigned the role of a valuable possession, APPROPRIATING THE STORIES OF OTHERS IS STEALING, which is evident in the expressions *swipes*, *purloin*, *pilfer*, *helping yourself to*, and *identity theft*. Accordingly, the one who appropriates the stories is represented as *a professional kidnapper*, *premier pickpocket of the arts*, or *a kid in a candy store* whose innocence (*guilty* in 19–20) is determined by the *culture police* (THE CRITICS ARE THE CULTURE POLICE) or a team of *ethical forensic scientists* (CRITICIZING THE LITERATURE BY WHITE AUTHORS IS CARRYING OUT A FORENSIC INVESTIGATION). Given that all of the linguistic metaphors listed above pertain to the act of committing and/or solving a crime, the negative overtone of writing outside one's experience is clear. The sentences both express the white author's response to criticism, and reflect the existing ideologies present among the writers of color.

Given the topic and the overall tone of the articles, the presence of VIOLENCE SCENARIO in the dataset is not surprising. This particular domain accounted for the expressions such as:

24. But then a good many white writers would probably say they too feel increasingly under *assault*.
25. Wainaina's essay is, in essence, an *attack* on two things: writing about modern Africa as if it is a mythical and alien place [...] and [...] through the prism of a western perspective, with white protagonists.
26. She then used her keynote speech at the Brisbane writers' festival to *tear into* the argument that writers – most particularly white writers – are guilty of “cultural appropriation” by writing from the point of view of characters from other cultural backgrounds.
27. But maybe rather than having our *heads taken off*, we should get a few points for trying.
28. Shriver *took aim* at the suggestion that an author should not “use” a character they created for the service of a plot they imagined.
29. [...] new writers are even more unnerved by the thought of producing imaginative work only to have it *shot down* by prior claims of ownership over the material.
30. Some authors have indeed *come under fire* for writing about experiences outside their own.

These linguistic metaphors point to the mappings between the domains of CRITICISM and PHYSICAL ATTACK. The first three citations (containing the metaphorical linguistic expressions *under assault* (24), *attack* (25), and *tear into* (26)) do not focus on the (type of a) weapon used, while the remaining ones do. The one in 27 represents a linguistic realization of the TO CRITICIZE SOMEONE IS TO DECAPITATE THEM conceptual metaphor, while the ones in 28–30 draw on the conceptual metaphor TO CRITICIZE ONE'S PORTRAYAL OF AFRICA IS TO POINT A WEAPON (GUN) AT THEM. In both of these cases (28–30), the role of the AGGRESSOR is assumed by the critics. However, when the white authors choose to respond to criticism, the roles are reversed (as in 26 and 28). The frame seems to stress the severity of the conflict between the opposing sides and their direct engagement. Instead of framing the situation from a moral aspect, the metaphors of violence draw attention to consequences, or the severe treatment of those who choose to commit this “crime” (24–25, 27, 29–30), as well as their willingness to fight back (26 and 28).

The selected subset of the aspects which are seen as relevant to the present discussion, along with the choice of certain frames show how this issue has been represented to the public, and they could potentially shape public opinion on this matter. The emphasis is placed on their *potential* to change the belief content since frames entail a “change in belief importance”, which may or may not in turn “alter overall opinion”, this quality is what separates framing from persuasion (Druckman 2001: 1044).

4. Concluding Remarks

The texts from our dataset indicate that fiction has sparked off an intense debate on the right to write outside one's country of origin in general, and about Africa from the western perspective in particular. The emphasis, in the time period analyzed, has largely been on problems concerning the white authors' portrayal of this continent and the problem with certain simplistic or false interpretations, which stressed the need to protect one's own identity. The prevailing opinion, therefore, appears to be that Africa should be portrayed by those with "privileged insight", which points to a strong connection between fiction and identity.

The metaphorical expressions which were identified in the analysis can be attributed to a small set of source domains, which was probably the result of the narrow topic of analysis. Yet, the prominence of TERRITORY, LAW, and VIOLENCE-based metaphors suggest three entirely different ways of framing this debate. The TERRITORY frame highlighted the special relationship between the individual and personal identity and/or experience by drawing on the idea of one's place of residence. Namely, the prospect of losing the place of residence threatens one's stability and security. As a consequence, transferring the linguistic expressions associated with the TERRITORY frame onto the domain of PERSONAL EXPERIENCE produces a powerful emotional effect. From the perspective of African people, the examples express negative emotions, because the practice of encroaching on their territory (i.e. the western portrayal of their experience) puts them in a defensive position. This subsequently leads to a different set of judgements than those formed when the practice is seen as a fiction writer's obligation to move beyond identity "borders", because the frame highlights the safety issue. The frame's competing figurative descriptions of the situation could therefore be summarized as *exploitation vs. exploration* of the experiences of others. Unlike the TERRITORY frame, the LAW frame shows that metaphors perform the function of framing by emphasizing moral evaluations. They stress the negative attitude towards the practice of appropriating stories by drawing on the domain of CRIME, which, by implication, should dissuade the authors from giving voice to characters from other cultural backgrounds. Conversely, the metaphorical descriptions in the VIOLENCE frame dismiss the possibility of being able to deny the accusations of cultural appropriation in a more civil manner, like in the LAW frame. The use of VIOLENCE-related metaphors indicates that writing outside one's experience is severely punished, and points to open confrontation and the intention to engage in more disruptive behavior. The three frames therefore have entirely different implications, but this "bias in the process of conceptualization" is precisely what constitutes the framing power of metaphor (Semino et al. 2018: 628).

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КО СМЕ ДА ПИШЕ О АФРИЦИ: ПОЈМОВНО УОКВИРИВАЊЕ

Резиме

У раду анализирамо мишљење аутора о односу идентитета и књижевности. Истраживање се спроводи у оквиру теорије појмовне метафоре (Лејкоф, Џонсон 1980) на примеру језичке грађе (27,449 речи) прикупљене из британских новина *The Guardian*. Новински текстови на којима се спроводи анализа објављени су у периоду од 2009. до 2022. године. Скуп одабраних текстова посвећених дискусији о књижевности о Африци, превасходно, из угла белих писаца анализиран је квалитативно не би ли се на основу присутних метафоричких језичких израза установило на који је начин дата тема уоквирена у новинском дискурсу у посматраном временском периоду. У складу са циљним лексичким јединицама испитана је метафоричност израза, који су потом разврстани према изворним доменима којим припадају. Анализа је допринела издвајању метафоричких представа, заснованих на доменима територије, права и насиља, што упућује на доминантне идеологије када је у питању књижевност о Африци.

Кључне речи: Африка, књижевност, уоквиривање, теорија појмовне метафоре, новински дискурс

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