

Multimodal Poetic Iconicity in Jimmy's *The Moon Forgets*¹

Xiufeng Zhao

China University of Petroleum, China

Abstract

This article draws on the theory of poetic iconicity as expounded by Margret. H. Freeman to offer a tentative study on how multimodality affects its realization through an analysis of a pictorial narrative by a Taiwanese writer—Jimmy's *The Moon Forgets*. The analysis shows that, different from its performance in verbal texts, poetic iconicity in a multimodal literary work is achieved by tapping the immense potential inherent in pictorial-verbal configurations. Diagrammatic iconicity, seen in its narrative structure and in the multimodal configuration of the story, is found in this case to serve the global metaphor LIFE-DEATH IS A CYCLE and contribute to an aesthetically wild ecstasy. The metaphorical implications in relation to the theme within the scope of diagrammatic iconicity help constitute the ineffable charm of this pictorial fiction. Multimodal poetic iconicity—deploying diverse structural patterns and relational configurations to create an artistic resemblance to the abstract patterns in feelings and thoughts—is shown to be an important contributing factor in the effectiveness of the work's literary communication.

Keywords: cognitive poetics, poetic iconicity, multimodal literature, multimodal metaphor, diagrammatic iconicity

1. Introduction

Iconicity has drawn a lot of attention from multiple disciplines since the publication in 1983 of Haiman's seminal essay, "Iconic and Economic Motivation". Iconicity has been both broadly defined (though with only subtly different terms) as "the property of similarity between one item and another" (Hopper & Traugott, 2003, p. 27), "a set of signs whose meaning in some crucial way resembles their form" (Haiman, 1992, quoted

in Alderson, 1999), “similarity between a sign and what it represents” (Saeed, 2003, p. 5), or “a non-arbitrary relationship between form and meaning in which the form bears a resemblance to its meaning” (Fromkin et al., 2003, p. 584), and narrowly defined as when “the structure of language reflects in some degree the structure of experience, that is to say, the structure of the world, including the perspective imposed on the world by the speaker” (Croft, 2003, p. 102). In both the broad definition of resemblance between sign in its general sense and meaning, and the narrow sense of resemblance between language, form, and meaning, the core of the term “iconicity” lies in non-arbitrary correspondence, or simply, similarity. This notion of non-arbitrariness is in agreement with the basic tenet of embodimentism of cognitive science, thereby falling in line with cognitive linguists in resisting the structural view of arbitrariness of language.

Following this same line, Margaret Freeman (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) has advanced a theory in which she applied iconicity to literature, and came up with the term of “poetic iconicity”. Described as “the means by which poetry/art in general creates the semblance of felt life”, poetic iconicity has been primarily used to address the linguistic form of poetry in terms of representation. This paper argues that, given its essential concern with art in general, the scrutiny of poetic iconicity should break this confinement of the linguistic sign alone: forms consisting of both non-verbal and verbal signs should be included to cement a general statement about art. In support of this, the paper intends to address the multimodal representation of poetic iconicity and its effects on readers by taking a look at pictorial narratives.

2. Poetic Iconicity

The coinage of the term “poetic iconicity” was initially ascribed to Margret Freeman (2006) in her endeavor to theoretically account for critics’ independent evaluations or judgments of a poem. In recognition of the inadequacy of the cognitive theory alone in explaining what distinguishes a poem from, say, its paraphrase, Freeman combined the insights of cognitive theory with those of literary critics and philosophers who attempt to explain the aesthetics of literary form. Working with Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1940/1955) notions of iconicity, especially as developed by Hiraga (2005) and the *Iconicity in Language and Literature* project (Nänny & Fischer, 2003), Reuven Tsur’s (1992, 2003) theory of cognitive poetics, and Susanne K. Langer’s (1953, 1967) theory of art, Freeman (2006, p. 7) proposes that a good poem is one that achieves what she calls “poetic iconicity” or, in Langer’s terms, the “semblance of felt life”. Following this logic, she sees poetic iconicity as a deciding criterion for the success of a poem. Despite the exemplary illustration and reiteration of “an iconicity of thought and feeling that creates the semblance of felt life” (Freeman, 2006, p. 9), she shows, through providing an explanation for the aesthetic evaluation of Emily Dickinson’s well discussed poem “My life had stood—a loaded gun”, that the rich content of the term is far from delineated, thus leaving much room for further elaboration. Subsequent essays (2007, 2008, 2009) are indicative of the ongoing

development of this concept towards a full-fledged theory.

The theory of poetic iconicity emphasizes the aesthetic effect and essential role of metaphor in poetry. Freeman, from the standpoint of art in its super-ordinate category, repeatedly points out that literature distinguishes itself from the expressions of daily language through evoking the aesthetic experience of readers. To Freeman, poetic iconicity is achieved predominantly for the purpose of creating an emotional interpretant (in terms of Pierce's semiotics) in readers, rather than a logical interpretant. In other words, the primary motive for poetic iconicity resides not in the correspondence between linguistic form and thought (or conception), but in the resemblance between form and emotion, i.e., the felt life, which can be seen from Freeman's constant repetition of the thesis that emotion is the driving generative force of poetic creativity (2007, 2008, 2009). The aesthetic nature of poetic iconicity necessitates a special non-autonomous process involved in its production, driven by the producer's deliberate intention to profile the charm of literature, which is contrary to the case of creating general linguistic iconicity (Hiraga, 2005, p. 26). To Hiraga, metaphoricity is the mechanism working behind poetic iconicity. As mentioned earlier, poetic iconicity is not achieved by producing a pictorial copy of reality; instead, it is a result of the metaphor-triggered integration of emotion, form and function, indicating the essential role played by metaphor in creating the correspondence between the fictional world, the real world and the writer-reader conceptual world. In this vein, Hiraga proposes two understandings: that literary texts act as a global metaphor, and that systematic mapping across conceptual domains is constructed within the literary text.

To sum up, the theory of poetic iconicity, if not yet systematic or full-fledged, embraces the multifaceted character of the poetic experience; theorists argue that poetic iconicity is aesthetic in nature and metaphoric in its working mechanism. Such an understanding of literature/art in general enables us to account for the uniqueness of literature as experienced by readers.

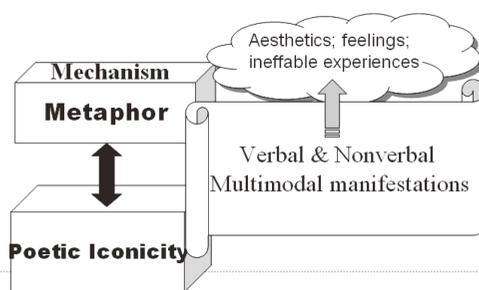
3. Metaphor and Multimodal Poetic Iconicity

Freeman's analysis of poetic iconicity in Emily Dickinson's poems is convincing and yet inadequate in terms of its prospective application to other distinct types of art, even within the realm of literature itself. As non-poetic literature, such as multimodal literary works, has been increasing in popularity since the start of the twenty-first century, it is relevant to ask how poetic iconicity is achieved and represented in its new forms. The questions include: How is poetic iconicity achieved and manifested in multimodal literary works as opposed to that in verbal art (such as poetry)? Does metaphor play a predominant role in their production? If so, in what ways?

In multimodal literature, unlike in traditional verbal art, the non-verbal aspects of the work are actively involved in meaning and aesthetic production. In this light, we assume that multimodality contributes to the achievement of poetic iconicity, which accounts,

at least in part, for its popularity among both the old and the young. In other words, the appealing effects of multimodal literature can be attributed to the artistic maneuver of poetic iconicity as manifested in a certain type of multimodal symbol, which for convenience's sake we may call multimodal poetic iconicity, and which occurs when the structural schemas are metaphoric in nature and are motivated by the feelings of lived experience. The difference lies in the use of metaphor. Instead of verbal manifestation, multimodal poetic iconicity is represented by multimodal symbols, or technically multimodal metaphor (Forceville, 2002, 2009). Incorporating multiple facets (including mechanism, process and representation) into a whole, we build up a framework for the understanding of the creation of multimodal poetic iconicity.

Figure 1. Framework for multimodal poetic iconicity



4. Diagrammatic Poetic Iconicity in Jimmy's *The Moon Forgets*

The subsequent analysis follows a dichotomy of categorization of iconicity in semiotics, i.e., diagrammatic iconicity and imagic iconicity, respectively defined as structural (or relational) similarities between the sign and the referent, and substantial similarities between the sign and the referent (e.g., sound symbolism) (Diesel, 2008, p. 468). In view of the primary relevance of diagrammatic iconicity to literary texts and for the sake of space, this paper will focus on diagrammatic poetic iconicity triggered by the use of multimodal metaphors in multimodal literary works.

Multimodal literature is a broad concept. For practical purposes, this paper chooses to limit its analysis to printed pictorial fictions, and the example used for illustration was written by an author known as "Jimmy". It is a pictorial narrative fiction titled *The Moon Forgets* (hereafter abbreviated as *MF*).

4.1 Jimmy and *The Moon Forgets*

Jimmy, born Liao Fubin on November 15, 1958, is a popular Taiwanese illustrator and picture book writer. As an artist, Jimmy is known to his readers for representing emotions, sensations and sentiments through the skillful maneuver of bold colors and designs. He is also known to make the unspeakable tangible through the use of poetic iconicity in his works, and turn the unsayable into something that can be experienced or felt.

MF is an image-text type narrative fiction, with a seemingly simple story loaded with

a profound philosophical understanding of the essence of life. It is an allegorical story of a close encounter between a little boy and the moon. The little boy, who is lonely in his human world, runs into a baby-faced moon in a pond in summer. Wild with joy, the boy takes him² back home and takes good care of him, by virtue of which the moon gradually grows. Eventually, the moon reaches a point where he remembers his life in the sky and has to return, despite his and the boy's strong attachment to each other. The boy spares no effort to keep the moon, but in vain. Finally, the moon returns to the sky, and the boy gets a new understanding of the intimacy between them. The story is represented in colorful pictures accompanied with a poetic verbal text. One point worthy of special mention about *MF* is the 53 page encounter story between the boy and the moon at the centre of the book³. The story is inserted within a narrative frame (6 pages in sum, 3 at the beginning, 3 at the end) in a symmetrical pattern, which pictorially narrates a sequential series of events constituting another complete narrative chain separated from but somehow interrelated with the embedment. This structure plays a prominent role in creating a sense of poetic iconicity.

It was reported that *MF* was created out of a devastating situation: one of the writer's close friends jumped from the top of a tall building, leaving his wife and little boy behind. Shocked and grieved, Jimmy had no idea as to how to console the mother and the son verbally, so he turned to his paintings, colors, shapes and designs in combination with words, as an outlet of strong feeling and as a conveyer of profound understanding of life and death to console the heartbroken. Created with such a practical intention, the fictional artifact is inevitably loaded with ineffable feelings and sentiments towards life and death.

A close reading of the multimodal text in combination with the knowledge of the claimed situational motive for its creation reveals that the overriding theme of the fiction gives credit to a global metaphor: LIFE-DEATH IS A CYCLE, the entailments of which include: death is an alternative way of life; somebody dead is a being living in another world, another dimension; and, beings from different dimensions, corporeally visible or not, can be companions. The global metaphor of A CYCLE is composed of multiple local metaphors, which involve dynamic mapping from the domain of CYCLE to that of LIFE, and which can be deemed as a creative poetic extension of the entrenched metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The metaphors multimodally manifested and integrated at every level of its multimodal form (i.e. the discursive narrative structure, visual iconic-images and language arrangement) result in the creation of the magic poetic iconicity, by which the ineffable feeling about life and death is felt and experienced by readers, thereby significantly enhancing the emotional expressiveness of the fiction.

4.2 Diagrammatic iconicity in narrative structure

The pictorial fiction in *MF* is seemingly simple and naïve, but is tremendously intricate in terms of narrative structure. Meticulous excavation by competent readers leads to the discovery of a chained symmetrical pattern (the shape of a circle) as narrative frame. See Figures 2(a) and 2(b) and their multiple interrelations.

Figure 2(a) The opening

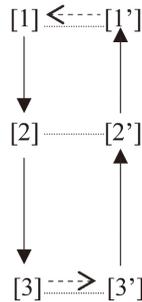
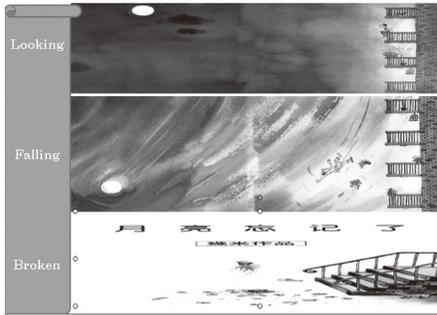
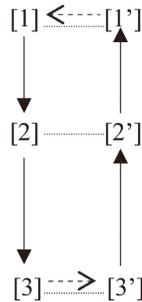
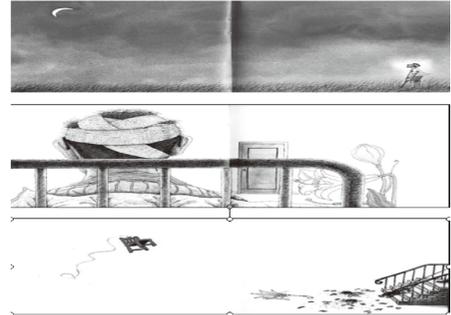


Figure 2(b) The ending



2(a) shows the first three pages of the fiction while 2(b) the last three pages. The numbers mark the sequence in the book; solid arrows represent the narrative sequential progression; dotted arrows represent the resumed narrative progression; dotted lines mean symmetric correspondence.

The opening three pages pictorially present a mini narrative chain, comprised of [1] LOOKING: the man looking at the moon, or them mutually looking at each other, [2] FALLING: the man and moon falling simultaneously and [3] BROKEN: the two flower pots on the balcony which have fallen and broken, metonymically pointing to falling as a result of action. In fact, the three pages are all pictorial metonymies, narrating a chronological event in a sequence motivated by sequential iconicity.

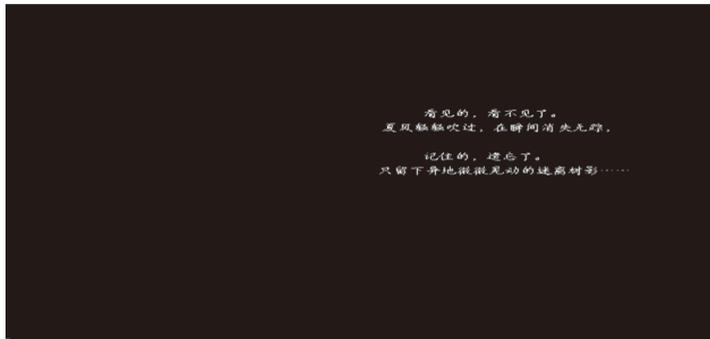
Figure 2(b) presents another series, depicting the last three stages marked as [3'] (BROKEN), [2'] (RECOVERY), [1'] (LOOKING), according to the page sequence in the book. Apparently, the opening three pages and the ending three are in symmetry with perfect correspondence between [1] and [1'], [2] and [2'], and [3] and [3'] in terms of the content represented, illustrated by dotted lines between the figures. In terms of inter-sign relations, each pair is, to some extent, identical: the first two pairs share the same structural relations between two icons—man and the moon: in [1] and [1'], they are apart but looking at each other; in [2] and [2'], they are concerted in action and state (in [2'], the moon is understood to be behind the door, invisible though according to the story embedded), while the last pair [3] and [3'] are roughly identical except for a red chair tied with a line. Such a systematic symmetry is stylistically foregrounded, prompting readers to establish semantic connections between recurring instances of icons during interpretation.

The two mini-narrative chains in the beginning and the end, within which the three stages are sequentially interconnected and extending forward are linked head-to-tail (forming a ring with [3] and [3'] that stand as roughly identical pictorial images and [1] and [1'] forming a nearly identical inter-relation between the man and the moon, as the linking interfaces), are marked in the figure by a dotted arrow indicating connection and direction. By virtue of the forward progression represented by arrows in the figures, the ring forms a cycle. Such an image of cycle triggers readers' association with the "cycle of life", thereby effecting the metaphorical mapping onto the domain of LIFE. In this way, the chains and symmetrical patterns, visually represented, are endowed with crafty

missions: to serve the global thematic metaphor of the LIFE-DEATH CYCLE and to create diagrammatic iconicity.

These corresponding pages comprise only the outer layer of the narrative framework; what is bulgingly embedded within is the main story in the fiction—that between the boy and the moon. The starting and closing of the embedment are demarcated by another set of two corresponding pages—page 4 and the 4th page from the end—both of which serve as separating curtains by virtue of their color, layout of verbal lines and the overall space arrangement (Figure 3), and which are also linked head-to-tail. In this way, the whole structure of the narrative fiction resembles concentric circles involving energy transmission from the center, across the inner circle (i.e., story world) to the outer (Figure 4).

Figure 3. The demarcation of embedment

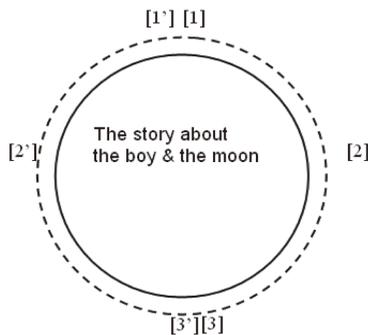


P4: the beginning of the boy-moon story, a curtain ready to open



P4 from the end: the closing curtain, the end of the boy-moon story

Figure 4. The concentric narrative circles



The interwoven relations between the two circles give credit to the difference between [1] and [1'], [2] and [2'], and [3] and [3'], all indexically pointing to the embedded story world. First, the noticeable transformations in the ending page [1'] in relation to the opening page [1], including color of sky (light blue, vs. dark grey), shape of the moon (crescent vs. round), position and well-being of the man (down on the grassland, upright and calm vs. on balcony, bent and gloomy), are all metaphorically ascribed to the happenings embedded in the story world. For instance, the overwhelming light blue color, metonymically indicative of the natural color of the sky on fine days, metaphorically suggests the inner serenity and tranquility of the man, symbolizing his calm acceptance of natural law or natural cycles, e.g. the falling and rising of the moon, analogous of a human being, a mature psychological stage finally achieved thanks to the encounter with the Moon in the story. Still in the ending picture, the open grassland on which the man is standing, constituting a sharp contrast with the enclosed building in the opening, metonymizes the organic natural world, standing for vitality and immortality⁴, which are mapped onto man's LIFE domain metaphorically. Such a view or sentiment of the immortality of life is a consequential realization from the boy-moon encounter within the embedded story world. Besides, the upright and head-raising posture of the man with red shorts looking up at the crescent moon which is on its way to grow into fullness incarnates the man's mental state: calm expectation and empathetic identification with the natural world away from desperation—a state of recovery from trauma.

The interconnection between the second pair [2'] and [2] can be interpreted diversely—of these interpretations, causality and progressive relation may be the most plausible. The man in bandages in [2'], a consequence of falling in [2], is undergoing recovery. However, beyond that, the head with the upper body of the man in recovery is largely profiled in the pictorial representation, in sharp contrast with the little figure of the whole body of the falling man in [2], metonymically foregrounding his mind—though physically wounded—in a state of calm with no trace of the gloom predominantly diffused in [2]. In fact, all the pictorial elements in [2'] (such as the zoomed-in figure with broad shoulders and profiled head, the vibrant lilies, one in full blossom, the other in bud with a vigorous wide green leaf, the door in light blue, the white walls) weave themselves into a peaceful life-episode full of vitality and tranquility, metaphorically representing a new stage, recovered from trauma. At this point, the readers cannot help but track the driving force of such a dramatic transformation: the man's encounter with the moon within the story world immersed. In such a fashion, the narrative circle in progression at the outer layer (or in an upper-dimension) is interconnected with or driven forward by the inner story.

The interconnectedness between [3'] and [3] is more obvious in that the falling red chair tied with a line as well as the fallen flat yellow umbrella are the tools employed by the boy to keep the moon in the story world. Thus entities from another world seem to have transgressed into his world. From this perspective, the two story worlds (one comprised of the man and the moon [W], the other, of the boy and the moon [W']), which seem to have been totally segregated by the curtains, are somehow circulated by means of canalization,

e.g. transgression from one dimension to another. The circulation allows the occurrence of transformation as another form of existence, which metaphorically echoes parts of the traditional Chinese philosophy about life and death—the intentional thematic topic of the fiction.

All in all, the narrative framework, presented in the form of a running circle interwoven with another inner circle, pictorially tells a story about life transformation and progression, resembling the factual life sequence in some Chinese philosophies, and simultaneously it serves as an overriding trigger of an unspeakable feeling and attitude towards life, creating a semblance of felt life, by virtue of the metaphorical mapping from a specific domain to the life domain in general. Accordingly, competent readers can acquire stunning pleasure at the discovery of such narrative patterns, leading to the yielding of an unspeakable aesthetic experience.

4.3 Diagrammatic iconicity in multimodal configuration

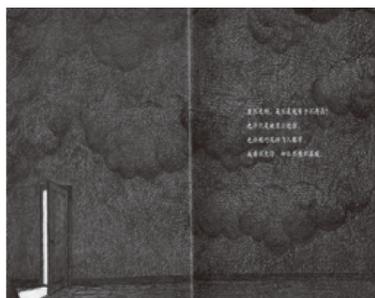
If the narrative frame is a container, the embedded story is what is contained but intentionally foregrounded. From another perspective, we can conceive of the fiction as a theatre, and the embedment as the drama played on the stage. The plausibility of such a view is evidenced by the arrangement of the multimodal representation of the story embedded.

Three dark colored pages, positioned respectively in the beginning, middle and at the ending of the story, act as curtains within a play, signifying 3 stages—initial, transitional and concluding—sharing identical image-text configurations, represented here as MC (multimodal configuration) (1), (2), (3).

MC (1) initial stage



MC (2) transitional stage



MC (3) concluding stage



transgression of boundaries metaphorically triggers associations about human being's existence on and perishment from the earth, hence serving the macro-global metaphor of the LIFE-DEATH CYCLE.

With reference to the situational context of the authorial intention, it is not terribly difficult for readers to detect the metaphorical workings and implications of these designed structures and arrangements which combine to make the work's clear diagrammatic iconicity.

5. Conclusion

Poetic iconicity, as an effect of created semblance of felt life, is a defining quality of successful literary works. Multimodal fiction is no exception. In the case of printed pictorial narrative fiction, imagic icons are naturally the predominant signs deployed in pictorial representations; however, diagrammatic icons are more significant in creating aesthetic effect and representing ineffable feelings, i.e., for achieving poetic iconicity. As shown in the above analysis of *MF*, diagrammatic iconicity can be attained by means of skillful maneuver over narrative structure and multimodal configurations of the pictorial and verbal representations. The charm of the diagrammatic icons resides in their metaphorical implications in relation to the theme of the fiction, and also, to the global metaphor.

Multimodal poetic iconicity, an essential virtue for multimodal literature, endows this type of literary work with both serious interest and artistic charm. Rather than a photographic "copy" of reality, it deploys diverse structural patterns and relational configurations to create an artistic resemblance of the abstract patterns in feelings and thoughts. By virtue of the iconicity manifested pictorially and verbally, and through metaphorical mappings, multimodal fictions with high artistic value can readily bring readers into an immersive illusion of undergoing an emotional change and let them sense underlying insights about life. Readers, who are aware of the patterns underlying the diffuse image-texts, can feel as if they are gold-miners, and they can leave these texts overwhelmed by a wild ecstasy. In the same way, works with multimodal poetic iconicity will always act like a labyrinth and they will always stand as an irresistible artifact for inquisitive readers.

Notes

- 1 *This paper is sponsored by a grant from the Humanities and Social Sciences Fund of the Ministry of Education of China, for the project entitled "A Cognitive Poetics Study of Discourse Perspective" (13YJA740082).
- 2 This paper takes the moon as a boy, following the protagonist's perspective.
- 3 Here "page" refers to a double-page.
- 4 Chinese culture readily associates grass with immortality and vitality inspired by the poetic line "野火吹不尽 春风吹又生".

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(Copy editing: Curtis Harrison)

About the author

Xiufeng Zhao (xiufeng96@126.com) is a professor of cognitive poetics at China University of Petroleum, China. She has a PhD from Beijing Normal University. Her research areas include cognitive linguistics, cognitive poetics and multimodal studies. She is the author of *Reference as Perspective Marker: Linguistic Representation of Discourse Perspective* (monograph, 2009) and numerous articles on cognitive studies of literature. She is supported by a Humanities and Social Sciences Fund from the Ministry of Education of China for her project entitled “A Cognitive Poetics Study of Discourse Perspective”. She is currently vice president of the Chinese Society of Cognitive Poetics and a member on the editorial board of a journal published by that Society (*Cognitive Poetics*).