
A Cognitive Study of Profiling in Vincent van Gogh 's (1889) *The Starry Night*

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate the possibility of applying profiling parameter in Langacker's (2008 /2013) construal model to the visual domain represented by Van Gogh's (1889) canvas entitled *The Starry Night*. The study basically aims at finding out whether or not profiling can account for meaning construction in this type of texts. The study also aims at finding out the efficiency of the parameter to account for the reasons behind the variety of interpretations of this text by conceptualisers.

To achieve the aim of the study, two types of procedures have been followed: theoretical and practical. The theoretical part consists of presenting a brief theoretical framework of profiling parameter within the construal model of Langacker (2008 /2013). On the other hand, the practical part consists of analysing Van Gogh's (1889) "The Starry Night" by using the profiling parameter and its techniques.

The results of the study show that "profiling" can be applied to the visual domain. The results also show that canvases follow the same behaviour of linguistic entities since they have the same conceptual base, and both are part of the semiotic world. This means that they have the same content base and submit to the same coding process though they belong to different domains.

Keywords: Profiling, visual domain, conceptual base.

1. Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in cognitive studies of various types of texts, yet there may exist only few cognitive studies of visual texts including canvases with which this study is concerned. The rarity of such studies can cause a sort of uncertainty over the possibility of approaching canvases cognitively. It can also give rise to a number of problematic questions that require urgent replies among which are:

1. Can profiling parameter be applied to canvases?
2. Can profiling reveal the process of meaning construction and the conceptual structure of canvases?
3. Do canvases follow the same behaviour of linguistic entities?
4. Do they have the same conceptual base?
5. Can profiling show the reasons behind the variety of interpretations of this sort of texts by conceptualisers?

The study attempts to answer the questions stated above through verifying the hypothesis that states the applicability of profiling to the text under study. For this purpose, Van Gogh's (1889) canvas entitled *The Starry Night* is selected to be analysed by using the profiling parameter as stated in Langacker's (2008 /2013) construal model.

2. Profiling: Definitions and Overviews

Profiling is a mental operation that represents a particular focus of attention within its immediate scope which could also be reflected in the figure/ground relation between entities. It has the ability to evoke the same conceptual content but with differences in sense by virtue of profiling its nature differently which leads to many substructure entities within the same common base (Yuan, 2013:50-51). For instance, the *North Pole* and the *South Pole* concepts share the same conceptual base, but they profile different parts of the earth. This can be extended into linguistic expressions such as verbs, adjectives, and prepositions. For example, the verb *hit* invokes a two-participant profile relationship (ibid.).

Langacker (2008:66) argues that profiling involves two concepts: the conceptual base and “a particular substructure termed as profile”. It relies on the notion that an expression's meaning selects a particular body of conceptual content called “conceptual base”. The conceptual base of an expression is represented by its maximal scope which extends through all its domains of its matrix that can be accessed mentally. Within a broader notion, there is a narrow one, which is the immediate scope within active domains. The immediate scope in profiling is “onstage” and foregrounding in focusing spot is called “profile”.

For Hamilton (2003:56), profiling is the best-known instance of a perceived relationship between two entities in the world. This type of relationship can be found clearly in visual perception where a small figure is profiled against a larger ground as its background. This recognition arises from profiling phenomenon which reflects how we cognitively organise our world around us. Profiled figures and non-profiled grounds omnipresent, for instance, at a music concert when one instrument becomes the core of attention against the larger orchestra which is the musical background.

Profiling relates to our perceptual ability that involves visual perception. These conceptual pairing notions are primarily proposed by gestalt psychologists and have been widely used in cognitive linguistics (e.g Talmy's and Langacker's models), and literary studies (e.g. van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier, 2007) (Yuan, 2013:50-51).

An expression could profile conceptual entities of two kinds: *a thing or a relationship*. Profiling relationships emerge among grammatical categories that cannot stand independently, while profiling a thing indicates a conceptual entity

with an autonomous nature such as *a noun* which does not construe as a relation between two entities, but it still can invoke a relationship within its conceptual base. For instance, a *kin* term such as *aunt* which invokes a relationship with an individual in its conceptual base sense. It actually profiles a thing indicating a kinship relation (a female and a reference individual), and profiles the female sense as in Figure (1) where letter F stands for female, letter A stands for aunt, and IN for an individual (Langacker, 2008:67-68).

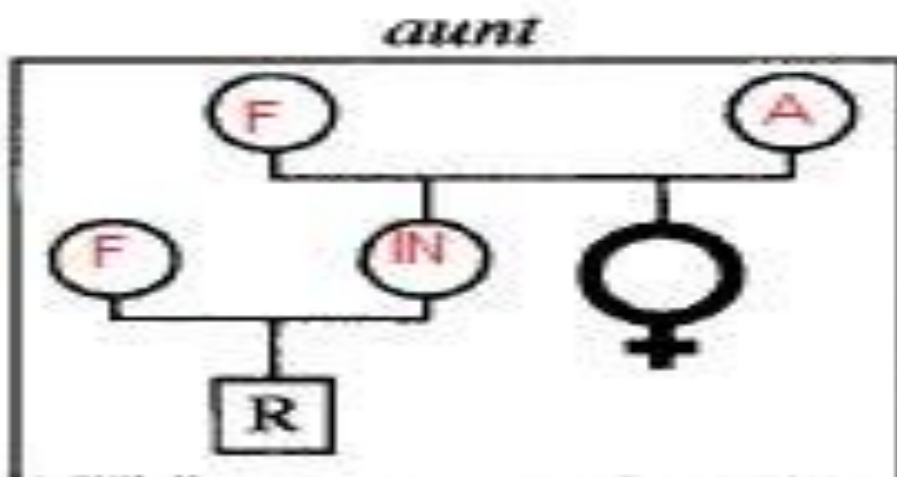


Figure (1) Relationship invoked by aunt (Langacker ,2013:67).

According to Langacker, it is common for expressions that profile relationships to have the same conceptual base, but still to be “semantically distinct because they profile different facets of it”. in grammar any verb and its corresponding progressive form (e.g. examine vs. be examining) can have the base form of the verb assigned an entire event, while the progressive aspect profiles only an internal portion of that event.

The lexical verb *come* vs. *arrive* is also a good instance of the semantic distinction that arises by profiling. Each verb evokes a relationship in which the mover occupies several spots on the path in the temporal axis, yet they still invoke different senses. The verb *come* profiles a full motion event through the entire path, while *arrive* depicts only the final landmark (ibid.68).

3. Profiling in Visual Domain

Langacker (2013:69-70) argues that “profiling” does not figure the core of metonymy which pertains to things, but it can also profile relationships. “Metonymy” is a shift in profile between two entities within the same cognitive domain. This type of profiling emerges in particular contexts as in example (1a) in a restaurant which profiles a shift from inanimate into animate entities within the same cognitive domain (dessert and the person who orders it), or a shift from person to information , as in (1b) (ibid.):

(1a) *I'm the pudding.* (= a kind of dessert= *inanimate*)

(1b) *My number 2.* (a person =animate)

Metonymic expressions can emerge through profiling relationships when the same entity is used in different relations which makes it evoke different senses as with the verb *come* in:

(2a) *Tom came all the way from London.*

(2b) *Tom came at exactly 7:45 PM.*

In visual scope, profiling instances represent visual metonymy *and* metonymic extension from artist to artist's work. In other words, we can title things by their maker's name literally or metaphorically (Langacker 2013:69_70). For instance, a book can be referred to by its author or a painting by its painter.

Ambrose and Harris's (2005) also hold that visual metonymy is “a symbolic image that is used to make reference to something with a more literal meaning”. For instance, scissors might be used to signify the barber (<https://www.thoughtco.com/metonym>).

It is true that “metonymy” can emerge in verbal, visual, and multimodal domains, but Forceville (2009:19-20) debates that in non-verbal and multimodal domains, metonyms have more dynamicity with highly contextualized character more than purely verbal specimens. At the same time, Forceville insists that “the stylistic form in which a metonym occurs affects its construal.

The notion of profiling notion in visual domain can be clarified by considering Salvador Dali's canvas entitled *The Face of War* where profiling may arise at two levels: *structural and content*. At the structural level, the canvas is the conceptual base and the maximal scope for its substructure profiles entities inside their immediate scope that involves the grieving face floating on a desert, faces, colors, shapes shadows, and so on. The immediate scope entities stand out as the specific focus of attention and the foreground within the viewing relationship.

At the content level, metonymy represents profiling aspect. The canvas shown in Figure (2) below represents the symbolic metonymy of WAR and its faces such as misery, terror, the continuous pain of people, and so on (<http://salvadordaliprints.org>). The canvas can also be a pictorial metonymy in the sense of an extension from artist to artistic creation evoking pictorial metonymy as a visual representation of WAR.



Figure (2) Salvador Dali's The Face of War,(1941), (<http://salvadordaliprints.org>).

4. Methodology

4.1 The Adopted Model

The model adopted in this paper is Langacker's (2008 /2013) construal model which involves profiling parameter within the prominence dimension. The model is originally proposed for processing linguistic texts, but in this study, it will be used for processing Van Gogh's (1889) canvas entitled *The Starry Night*.

4.2 Method of Analysis

The selected canvas will be analysed first by identifying its major and minor themes, and then showing how these themes are developed by using the profiling parameter.

4.3 Introduction to Vincent van Gogh 's (1889) The Starry Night

4.3.1 About the Artist

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) is a Dutch painter, born in Holland. He belongs to Post-Impressionism movement because his style of painting is analogous to the Impressionist School. The striking colors, forceful brushwork, and contoured shapes of his work powerfully influence modern expressionism in artworks nowadays (<https://www.britannica.com>).

His mental and physical disorders besides poverty are reflected in his works which became a central notion for anyone dealing with Gogh's art. Nowadays, Van Gogh is considered one of the most significant and masterminded figures, not only in the post-impressionist wave, but also in the history of art. At the same time, some still question whether his supposed genius is a result of a

creative mastermind or of his health issues (Roglitz,2016:1-8). Niels Arnold (2004:40-41) holds that Van Gogh was not a “mad” artist, but rather an exceptional man with exceptional talent. He was a brilliant creator, intelligent, and hard worker. He was a genius in spite of his illness, not because of it.

Van Gogh visualises internal emotions by deep symbolism rather than only portraying impressions about visual appearances, atmosphere, or light. His techniques depend on simplified but intensive strong colors and definitive forms with a renewed aesthetic style, but with abstract sense. The emphatic brushwork, with sensitive contour reflects his extreme emotions(ibid.).

4.3.2 About the Canvas

“The Starry Night” is an oil canvas which Van Gogh painted in June 1889. It portrays a view from his asylum room window in France just before sunrise with an idealised imaginary village. Now, it belongs to a collection of the Modern Art Museum (Van Gogh, & Irwin,1975:1). “The Starry Night” is a Post-Impressionism piece of art, which tends to geometric style for creating strong impact by using artificial or arbitrary colours (ibid.).



Figure (3) Van Gogh's (1899) Starry Night (Van Gogh, & Irwin,1975:1).

“The Starry Night” represents the conceptual embodiment of Van Gogh's internal mental image towards nature in that he uses heavy brushstrokes, entities as cypress, church fiery sky and the quiet village as a metaphor to link between his mental state, emotions, religious notions, and life after death . It represents a sign of his death at the young age of 37 (Dahlan,2014:335-336).

Here, Van Gogh indicates the idea of existing in another world after death analogical to the night sky. At the same time, he affirms that this painting does not belong to romanticism or religion. However, many art historians stand against this opinion. Some of them believe that it indicates a religious temper, while others consider it as a sign of unity and absorption of the artist by the

cosmos. Another group argue that it indicates death since “cypress” is the tree of death in the Mediterranean countries. At the same time, the moon is a symbolic meaning for consolation (Van Gogh, & Irwin,1975 :27).

4.4 Analysis of The Starry Night

Profiling in “The Starry Night” arises at four levels: *structural, content, visual, and symbolic levels.*

At the structural level, “The Starry Night is the conceptual base and the maximal scope for its substructures. The profiled entities inside its immediate scope involve the moon, eleven stars, a village, the houses, and a church. The background of this night scene involves the mountains, while the foreground involves the cypress tree.

As part of its nature, “metonymy” can profile either an entity or a relationship between entities (Langacker, 2013:69- 70). Visually, things can be real or imaginary. Accordingly, it can be argued that “The Starry Night” is a pictorial metonymy since there are more than one copy of it. It is also a visual metonymy as an image of the French city of Arles at night in 1889, during Van Gogh's stay at the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

At the content level, Brandl alleges that *the wild sky of The Starry Night* is a metaphor that consists of metonymies “*a flame is fire*” and “*fire is hot*” (<https://www.metaphorandart.com>). Figure (4) illustrates this relation between pictorial metonymy and pictorial metaphor.

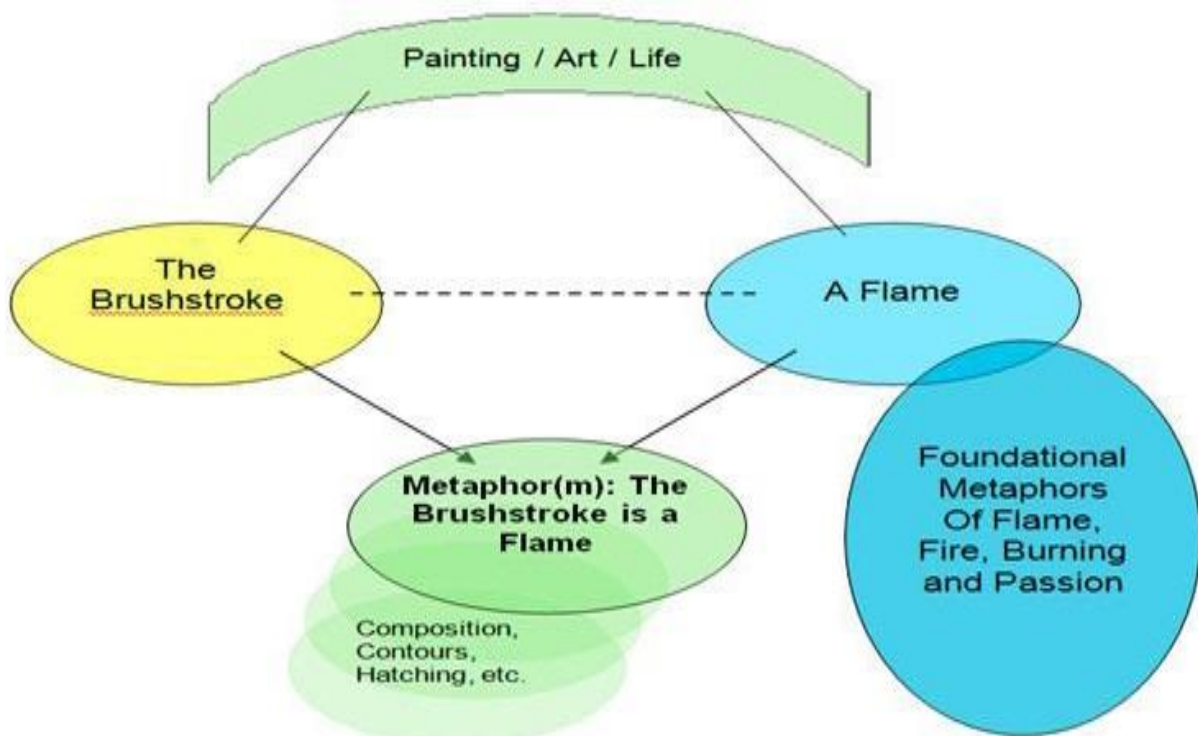


Figure (4) Van Gogh's metaphorical blending (<https://www.metaphorandart.com>).

At the symbolic level, “The Starry Night” reflects another type of visual metonymy through its visual elements. According to Dahlan (2014:337), the cypress, and the steeple of the church may represent a masculine concept, while the moon, stars, and blue sky can convey the sense of feminine qualities. Since metonymy profiles figures, so the *cypress* and *the steeple of the church* are a metonymy of masculine concept, whereas *the moon, stars, and blue sky* are a metonymy of feminine qualities.

The canvas can also offer a symbolic religious metonymy. Van Gogh and Irwin (1975:5) argue that the painting can be an apocalyptic vision supporting his own symbolist theory by denoting to the eleven stars in one of Joseph's dreams in the Old Testament book of Genesis with a sign to The Starry Night's stars. Thus, the eleven stars can be a metonymy for apocalyptic vision as the eleven stars in one of Joseph's dreams.

Table (1) summarises the rise of profiling at structural, content, visual and symbolic levels in Van Gogh's The Starry Night.

Table (1) **Profiling** in Van Gogh's “The Starry Night”

Profiling Level	Elements
Structural	The Starry Night is the conceptual base. The maximal scope for its substructure entities inside its immediate scope involves the moon, eleven stars, a village, the houses, and a church etc. The background involves the mountains & the foreground involves the cypress tree.
Content	1-As an extension from artist to artistic creation: The Starry Night is attributed to Vincent van Gogh (Van Gogh's). 2-The wild sky of The Starry Night, is a metaphor that consists of metonymies “ <i>a flame is fire</i> ” and “ <i>fire is hot</i> ” by the virtue of the brushstroke and compositional elements & techniques.
Visual	“The Starry Night” is also a visual metonymy for an image of the French city of Arles at a night in 1889.
Symbolic	1-The cypress and the steeple of the church are a metonymy of masculine concept, whereas the moon, stars, and blue sky are a metonymy of feminine qualities. 2-The eleven stars can be a metonymy for apocalyptic vision, as the eleven stars in one of Joseph's dreams.

4.5 Discussing the Results of Analysing the Selected Canvas

The results of analysis show that “The Starry Night” profiles many pictorial metonymies. As a modern artwork, it is linked to its creator who has made it an aesthetic psychological artistic subject tending to be symbolic. It also relies on visual metaphors. As the analysis shows, profiling in *The Starry Night* extends from the four profiling levels that reflect the conceptual base and profiles its substructures into three main types of metonymies: content, visual, and symbolic.

The analysis of results also shows the applicability of the profiling parameter to visual texts. Thus, it provides a clear answer to the first research question which states "can profiling parameter be applied to canvases?"

The results of analysis also reveal the possibility of having several construals of the same piece of visual text due to some factors like the personal view and background of the conceptualisers as well as the structure of the canvas itself in addition to temporal factor. This is a clear answer to the fifth research question which states "can profiling show the reasons behind the variety of interpretations of canvases by conceptualisers?"

Finally, the analysis of the selected canvas shows the efficiency of profiling parameter to reveal how meaning is constructed in visual texts which share similar behaviour and conceptual base with linguistic texts. This finding clearly answers the second, third, and fourth research questions which respectively state: "can profiling reveal the process of meaning construction and the conceptual structure of canvases? Do canvases follow the same behaviour of linguistic entities? Do they have the same conceptual base?"

5. Conclusions

The findings of the study lead to the following conclusions:

1. Profiling can be applied to visual domains.
2. Canvases have the same conceptual base as linguistic entities since they are part of the semiotic world which means they have the same content base and submit to the same coding process, but by different signs.
3. Profiling techniques are highly overlapping. They can be recognised almost in every aspect of the text, and the manner of layers depends on the target purposes and accessibility.
4. The behaviour of a visual text reflects the behaviour of the individual who produces it.
5. The variety of canvas construal may be due to personal factors, not only due to the difference in the artistic era or school. Canvases like Van Gogh's “The Starry Night” may reveal a mental complexity reflected in the use of symbolism and structures that seem outwardly simple, but in their depths is more quirky and based on high conceptual energy.

6. Visual language, especially painting, consists of many layers that extend from the smallest elements, metaphorically called “morphemes”, into larger constructions, in our case the final piece. Visual language has its unique components like syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

7. Metonymy, as a profiling element, is one of the conceptual structures that participates in the multi-construal phenomenon. It can be used in its pure form in the visual domain, whereas in the linguistic domain, “metonymy” can profile things, relationships, etc.

دراسة معرفية لمعلمة التتميط في لوحة (الليلة النجماء) لفنست فان جوخ (١٨٨٩)

ا.د. أياد حميد محمود

إخلاص نعمان اسماعيل

جامعة ديالى / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

المخلص

تعد هذه الدراسة محاولة للتحقيق في إمكانية تطبيق معلمة التتميط ضمن الانموذج التفسيري للانجاكير (٢٠١٣/٢٠٠٨) في مجال النصوص المرئية والمتمثلة بلوحة (الليلة النجماء) للفنان الهولندي (فان جوخ). وتهدف الدراسة بشكل اساسي الى الكشف عن امكانية معلمة التتميط في تفسير كيفية بناء المعنى في هذا النوع من النصوص. كما تهدف الدراسة الى الكشف عن الاسباب الكامنة وراء تعدد القراءات للنصوص موضوع الدراسة من قبل المتلقي.

ولغرض تحقيق هدف الدراسة تم اتباع نوعين من الاجراءات: نظرية وعملية. وتمثلت الاجراءات النظرية بتقديم اطار نظري وجيز لمعلمة التتميط ضمن الانموذج التفسيري للانجاكير (٢٠١٣/٢٠٠٨). اما الاجراءات العملية فقد تمثلت بتحليل النص موضوع الدراسة وفقا للانموذج الذي تبنته الدراسة.

واظهرت نتائج الدراسة امكانية استخدام معلمة التتميط في تحليل النصوص المرئية. كما اظهرت الدراسة تشابها بين اللوحات المرسومة والنصوص اللغوية من حيث السلوك لكون هذه النصوص مبنية على نفس الاساس من المفاهيم ولكونها جزء من العالم الاشاري. وهذا يعني ان كلا النوعين من النصوص لهما نفس الاساس من المحتوى ويخضعان لعملية الترميز نفسها رغم انتمائهم لمجالين مختلفين.

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