

## The interpretation of Božena Němcová's letters: the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas

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1.

Contemporary cognitive approaches to language, text and literature are heterogeneous (cf. Brône and Vandaele 2009) and the word *cognitive* can refer to many different concepts. This heterogeneity can be seen as enriching and advantageous, enabling us to combine several theories or concepts in order to see some well-discussed questions from a new perspective. This article concentrates on the theory of the linguistic picture of the world and its combination with the image schema theory (cf. Johnson 1987), although other cognitive theories and some originally non-cognitivist approaches to text (e.g. Macurová 1983) and the letter (e.g. Skwarczyńska 1937) are also used. This theoretical background is used to discuss the question of the reception and interpretation of older (i.e. non-contemporary) texts. The problem will be explored using letters written by and to Božena Němcová, a nineteenth-century Czech female writer. The main research question relates to the role that the linguistic picture of the world and the image schemas play a) in the context of the original epistolary communication between the writer and the addressee in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and b) when the letter is read and interpreted by a contemporary reader living in a different context. The topic is, among others, associated with the problem of stability and changes in the linguistic picture of the world and the possible universal character of image schemas. It can be rephrased as a tension between the universal and the specific: the linguistic picture of the world seems to be more relevant to the specific, while image schemas appear more relevant to the universal.

The linguistic picture of the world is defined as the interpretation (and to some extent creation, e.g. Ziółkowski 2007, 341) of the world as reconstructed from linguistic material in a given language. The linguistic picture of the world is not universal – there are different pictures which relate to different languages and genres (e.g. a scientific or folk picture of the world), and different groups of language users (e.g. children or adults; cf. e.g. Ziółkowski 2007, Vaňková et al. 2005, Gzregorczykowa 2002, 162–165). The theory of the linguistic picture of the world is considered to be a specific approach that has developed within Slavic linguistics, although thinking about the relation between language, its users and the community or nation has a long tradition (cf. Vaňková et al. 2005). It appears in several manifestations and is currently probably the strongest cognitive approach within the context of Czech lin-

guistics.<sup>1</sup> Despite its relatively long tradition, its application to literary texts is not at all common in the Czech context. Literary texts are analysed, for example, by I. Vaňková (e.g. the analysis of poetry by M. Topinka, in Vaňková 2007, 263–281) or by D. Danaher (e.g. the analysis of so-called key words in texts written by V. Havel, in Danaher 2010).

The term “image schema” will be used in accordance with M. Johnson’s (1987) definition, as denoting a general pattern or an abstract structure that exists in our minds, based on our everyday experience of repeating patterns, and allowing us to comprehend the world and our experience: “[...] in order to have meaningful, connected experiences that we can comprehend and reason about, there must be pattern and order to our actions, perceptions, and conceptions. A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities” (1987, 29). Image schemas are very general (e.g. the image schema of part or whole, a cycle, a path); they have certain parts or components and some “inner logic” to their functioning (e.g. Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987).

What is important for the analysis of Němcová’s letters is the fact that the theory of the linguistic picture of the world does not typically and explicitly study the diachronic dimension; the analyses are as if panchronic,<sup>2</sup> although some authors also pay attention to the historical aspects (e.g. Mikołajczuk 2004). I believe that in some cases, such as the interpretation of older literature, the diachronic development of the linguistic picture of the world cannot be ignored. In the case of image schemas, we have to bear in mind that they may be to a certain extent universal (e.g. influenced by our bodily experience, the way we move, see, hear etc.,<sup>3</sup> and other aspects that are typically common to all human beings), but they grow from our everyday experience, which can vary in different cultures and different times.

## 2.

Let us illustrate the problem of the cognitively based interpretation of the “older” literature by a sample analysis of letters written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by and to Božena Němcová. The chosen texts are particular in several aspects: they represent a genre that is difficult to handle theoretically; they were written in a context that differs in many respects from that of our time; and they were, and are, read and interpreted by different types of readers with different backgrounds. The analysis is based on the new critical edition of Němcová’s letters (Němcová 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007).

A letter (and especially a private letter) is a textual form that can be interpreted in several different ways. Some authors attempt to delimit an epistolary style (e.g. Ruščák 2002, in Slovak stylistics; Jelínek 1995, in the Czech tradition), with a basic epistolary stylistic unit (“epistoléma”, e.g. Ruščák 2002) or an epistolary function (e.g. Jelínek 1995). Other authors prefer to see the letter as a specific genre (e.g. Jedlička, Formánková and Rejmánková 1970, in the Czech stylistic tradition). Such unifying interpretations often struggle with the large variability of epistolary texts. On the other hand, some authors deal with the letter as a more complex textual form, Skwarczyńska (esp. 1975), for example, interprets the letter as a form that oscillates between written and spoken texts, between dialogue and monologue, between a literary and

a non-literary character, or between ephemeral and lasting entities. Another important observation (cf. Skwarczyńska 1937; Hoffmannová 1993) is the fact that a letter is not isolated but usually constitutes a part of an epistolary dialogue between the writer and the addressee. The addressee thus becomes an important factor (a kind of a co-author) who influences both the form and the content of the letter. One should therefore be aware of the fact that when we read and interpret a single letter in isolation, or as a part of a larger epistolary dialogue we may (and most probably will) come to very different conclusions. As far as the analysis of Němcová's letters is concerned, several different approaches appear: sometimes the letters are used as documents, "proofs" of the author's life, opinions, and so on (e.g. Tille 1911), but (more recently) they can also be considered to be an integral part of Němcová's literary work (e.g. Janáčková and Macurová 2001).

This dialogical and oscillating character (especially the oscillation between the literary and non-literary and the ephemeral and the lasting) is important for our analysis of Němcová's letters. The collection of texts under analysis is dialogical in several respects: the letters themselves typically contain both dialogical and monological features (consider, for example, various long narrations concerning events in the writer's life and the variety of ways of addressing the addressee), and the collection of letters (correspondence) as a whole has many authors. For example, the analysed edition (Němcová 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007) which has all of the letters written by and to Božena Němcová that were known at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century contains almost 700 texts. Approximately half of them were written by Božena Němcová to approximately 80 different people. The second half comprises texts addressed to Božena Němcová and again written by approximately 80 authors. The writers/addressees of the letters are of different ages, nationalities and social classes. The whole collection of letters thus becomes a kind of a polyphonous, collective piece of work featuring and interweaving different contributions from people of different characters, life experiences and levels of language knowledge, and also many different personal interpretations of the world, and possibly also different versions of linguistic pictures of the world and image schemas. The personal linguistic pictures of the world and image schemas may share common features because (as we have already mentioned) they are influenced by the shared experience of the given time (in this case the middle of the nineteenth century) and common perceptual or cognitive abilities of human beings. They may also differ, however, as the world is always seen through the prism of an individual's particular experience. Consider, for example, when the same fact is described by two different authors, but two authors who are very close to each other – Božena Němcová and her husband Josef Němec:

Josef Němec (Němcová 2003, 308) wrote:

S Domažlickými mám proces, chtěli mě zbit a zapověděli mně, abych se neopovažoval více do Domažlic páchnout anebo něco o nich napsat, že městu dělám ostudu. ... Za to hrubiánství, co mně veřejně udělali, jim ale povím, bylo jich as 50 okolo mě, nejvíc se vyznamenal pan Kilb a Blätterbauer, ti jen mě práť, a kdyby nebylo bývalo pražských studentů, bylo by se mně zle vedlo. To bude kronika, v které se pan purkmistr a ještě jiné jako v zrcadle uvidí. Je to kříž na tomto světě, milý kamaráde, samý boj.

(I have a trial with the people from Domažlice, they wanted to beat me and they forbade

me to enter Domažlice any more or to write about them, that I discredited the city. ... But I will tell them, for the vulgarity they made to me publicly, they were about 50 around me, the most prominent were Mr. Kilb and Blätterbauer, they only wanted to beat me, and if it had not been for the Prague students it would have been bad with me. It will be a chronicle that Mr. Burgomaster and others will see themselves in as in a mirror. One bears one's cross in this world, dear friend, all fighting.)

Božena Němcová (2003, 94) wrote:

Vyznamenali se ty dni krásně někteří domažličtí páni a sousedné; to je ten vděk za naše upřímné smýšlení s nimi; ani já, ani můj muž nesmíme tam přijít, sice že nás z města vyženou a mně chtějí nafackovat, jak se někteří vyjádřili. Je to surovost! Já bych jim odpovíděla, že by je mrzelo, ale nestojí ta holota za to, abych se s nimi hněvala, můj muž jim to ale neodpustí a také nesmí, protože ho veřejně pohaněli.

(These days some men and neighbours from Domažlice distinguished themselves; it is gratefulness for our sincere treating of them; neither I nor my husband must come there, otherwise they would chase us out of the town, as some of them have stated. It is a barbarity! I would answer to them in such a way that they would regret it, but the bad lot is not worth it for me to be angry with them, but my husband will not forgive them and he also must not, because they publicly dishonoured him.)

These extracts are taken from a two-part letter that Němcová and her husband wrote to Petr Fastr.<sup>4</sup> The two authors are describing the same event (inhabitants of Domažlice wanted to insult Josef Němec and his wife), but the descriptions are very different and may be read as reflecting the authors' individual (male and female) experiences and as referring to their particular pictures of gender roles and their stereotypes (cf. for example the difference between forgiving and fighting for oneself or taking revenge).

The question as to the role that the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas play in the interpretation of these nineteenth-century epistolary texts becomes even more complex when we try to consider the different types of readers of the texts. Let us consider several configurations of the psycho-physical persons<sup>5</sup> of the writer of the letter and the person who reads it: a) the letter is interpreted by a person who was intended as the original addressee; b) the letter is interpreted by a person who is not the originally intended addressee, but who was alive at the time; c) the letter is interpreted by a person who is not the intended addressee and who lives in a different and distant (contemporary) period. These three situations differ in several respects. For example, the writer and the reader share different life experiences. Furthermore, different readers have different reactions to the texts (this influences, among other things, which "pole" of the continuum from the literary to the non-literary character of the letter is stressed) and they may know different parts of the whole collection of letters. We will use mainly "non-literary" examples to illustrate the discussed problems, but the question to what extent the letters or their parts were or are perceived as "literary" and what role do the linguistic picture of the world and image schema play in this process would deserve attention as well.

In the first case, when the letters are interpreted by a person who was the original addressee, the situation is closest to everyday dialogue, and the letter is most likely to be read as a form of substitution for face-to-face dialogue (Jungmann 1845), and as

non-fiction, although the letter may also have an aesthetic impact.<sup>6</sup> In this configuration, the two participants share the context of the given period and the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas in the writer and the addressee will be most similar, though not identical. We may expect more distinct differences between people of different ages (adults vs. children, i.e. Němcová's children) or people who live in different countries (e.g. Němcová vs. her friends from Slovakia or her family living in Prussia). The reader is most likely to unite the subject of the writer modelled within the text with its real counterpart outside the text and elements of the depicted world with the real world. On the other hand, the reader (the intended addressee) typically knows only a part of the whole epistolary dialogue (mostly his or her own letters and the answers he or she receives) and cannot usually see the larger whole of the collection from a more distant perspective. Therefore we may think of a shared picture of the world that is at the same time unique to the given pair (or group) of people.

In the second case, when the letters are interpreted by a person who is not the intended addressee, but who was alive at the time, the reader shares the contemporary context with the writer (and we may expect that his or her picture of the world would be close to that of the writer as far as the culturally conditioned aspects are concerned), but may not be aware of various personal details. The reader may not, therefore, understand certain parts of the epistolary text and, not being directly addressed by the text, can therefore keep a certain distance from its content. This may lead either to the fact that he or she pays less attention to the letter or that other, non-informative (e.g. literary or aesthetic) aspects of the text may be stressed.

As far as Němcová's letters are concerned, one specific subject of this type appears: the police's monitoring of Němcová and her husband (and their letters).<sup>7</sup> We may imagine that these subjects read the texts with some kind of very specific intention and that in some respect (e.g. the relationship to the activities leading to the emancipation of Czech culture and the Czech nation) their values and opinions differed substantially from those of the participants of the epistolary dialogue. That is, as the police and Božena Němcová, and her family and friends, shared the contemporary context, we may expect that they had a similar picture of the world, but that some parts of it were probably associated with different values. This is a good example of how the interpretation of the world can be influenced by a context – in this case a social role.<sup>8</sup> The police may know more letters than the original participants, but their knowledge is limited to certain periods and only to those letters that were intercepted. On the other hand, the participants are aware of the police's monitoring and this influences their letters (e.g. they avoid certain topics, burn some letters, and use nicknames and secret codes). The police thus become a kind of co-author of the texts.

When the letters are read by a person who is living now, more than 150 years later, the situation is very different. Let us consider a "common" Czech reader for whom Božena Němcová and her work is a part of the shared ("Czech") cultural tradition (the situation is even more complicated for readers from other cultures, but we will leave these questions aside for the moment): the contemporary reader does not usually know very much about life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has a different experience in terms of many aspects of everyday life. When reading and interpreting the texts,

the reader may be also influenced by the fact that they know what happened after the letters were written and also by the fact that they are not typically reading the texts in their original form (i.e. a handwritten text on various types of paper)<sup>9</sup> but as a published text presented in various editions that also offer some interpretation of the letters (e.g. Macurová – Janáčková 1997, 87). This type of reader can keep the greatest distance from the texts: one who does not have to reply to the letters, but who also does not understand many parts of them, for example, words, facts, names, and so on, and does not have, in many respects, the same experience as the original writer and reader. The person is able to read a larger part of the epistolary polyphony (depending which edition they are reading), but on the other hand, some letters are unknown today because they were lost at the time.<sup>10</sup> Such gaps illustrate well the vulnerability of letters and letter collections.

As far as the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas are concerned, let us consider several examples where these phenomena differ in the writer and the contemporary reader.

Some differences are associated with epistolary communication itself. Today, letters are associated with different values – they are not a substitution for face-to-face communication but have in some ways become a kind of ancient relic used either for some sort of specific purpose or for very formal communication.

Today, we also have a different approach to the variability and heterogeneity of communication. The analysed collection of letters is written in many languages,<sup>11</sup> the authors use different writing systems and orthographic rules and it all seems very natural and “normal” for the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But today we see such heterogeneity (or, for example, a lack of orthographic rules) as un-ordinary. This feeling of un-ordinariness may even be amplified by the fact that a contemporary reader may not understand all the languages and may need to refer to an editor’s translation. The polyphony of languages and language varieties is connected to a complicated but crucial question concerning the values and interpretations (linguistic pictures of the world) associated with each language or variety – we can be sure that they are not identical with the contemporary situation (cf. contemporary values associated with the German language), but when we read the letters we typically and involuntarily project contemporary values onto them.

The language itself and the norms of communication have also changed. For example, many words are practically unknown to the modern-day reader (e.g. various expressions referring to food, clothes and other artefacts of everyday life, such as “šmízetka”, “podvlěčky” – “something that is worn under the clothes” or “noční střevíce” – “night slippers”, Němcová 2006, 392) and certain expressions may be felt to be unusual or even “pathetic” or emotional,<sup>12</sup> such as the way the women address one another – for example, Němcová (2003, 16): “Mnohovážená! Velice mně milá přítelkyně!” (“Much valued! Friend very dear to me!”), or Němcová (2003, 27): “Moje drahá, vroucně milovaná přítelkyně!” (“My dear, dearly beloved friend!”). Such linguistic units may be perceived by a contemporary reader both as signals of difference (e.g. in the linguistic picture of the world) and as aesthetically active elements. For example, the above-mentioned words “šmízetka”, “podvlěčky” and “noční střevíce” are taken from

a letter written by Božena Němcová to her son Karel on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 1858. Jiří Kolář used this letter as material for his poem “Máš v balíku” (“You Have Got in the Package”) from the collection “Česká suita” (“Czech Suite”, Kolář 1993, 209). The poet seems to evaluate the words in terms of their “strangeness” to the contemporary reader – he uses “podvlěčky” or “noční střevíce”, words that the contemporary reader may associate with “something”, and leaves out “šmízetka”, a word which is completely unknown.

In some cases, the basic elements of the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas are to some extent the same, although they differ, for example, in their associated values or relative configuration. Consider, for example, the experience of movement, speed and time: the letters contain many passages concerning both spatial and temporal distance – for example, how long it took to receive a letter or to travel from one place to another. These aspects are typically associated with image schemas of “path” and “movement along a path”. As can be expected, what was considered to be a long distance in the nineteenth century feels much shorter today – a journey that took several days (for example, from Prague to Beroun in Central Bohemia) takes a matter of hours, or even minutes, today, and while “traditional” letters travelled for days, electronic communication today is practically instant. Life expectancy and the notion of old age have also changed – for example, when Němcová is 40 she writes to her son (Němcová 2007, 143): “Je mi 40 let; už mne nebudete tak dlouho mít, jako jste mne měli!” (“I am 40 years old; you will not have me as long as you have had!”). All of these examples represent one type of change to the image schema: the main components of the schema (such as the starting point, the goal, or the path) and its inner logic are still the same, but the values connected with them, and their “relative value” (that is, what is considered long, fast, old, or too long or too slow), have changed.

In other examples, the information itself may be lost to the contemporary reader, but some general experience is still shared. For example, the letters contain many different statements about money (various currencies, prices, exchange rates, and so on) – for example, in Němcová (2006, 395):

Máme nové peníze, ale ne pro dobrotu, je při tom ztráta; šesták platí jen 10 nových krejcarů, krejcar dobrý jen 1½ nového, a tak při všem ztráta trojník, což při sumě do roka mnoho dělá. Staré šajnové peníze už neplatí. Tím je všecko dražší, takže jen za rohlíčky k snídání o 6 fr. CM ročně více platit musíme.

(We have got new money, but not for good, one loses with them; “šesták” pays only 10 new “krejcars”, “krejcar” good only 1½ of the new one, and so there is a loss of “trojník” with everything, which makes together a lot during a year. Old “šajn” money is not valid any more. Therefore everything is more expensive, so we have to pay for the rolls for breakfast 6 “fr. CM” per year more.)

Such statements can be somewhat of a mystery to contemporary readers, but they can still understand the general principles and values connected with money (for example, that it is important for everyday life) and share it with the writer, even though the “factual” information (how much money one needs in order to buy something or to support oneself) is different. Another example concerns emotions. The contemporary reader may not, for example, understand why the police were monitoring Němcová and her husband, and how it worked, but may share certain emotions asso-

ciated with the situation, such as tension, or fear. On the other hand, the letters sometimes explicitly reveal that some emotions were different in the nineteenth century – family relations and the emotions expressed between family members are a salient example.<sup>13</sup> For example, the death of a child was so frequent that J. Helcelet wrote to Němcová about the death of his daughter (Němcová 2003, 171): “Ty, sama matkou, nejlépe v tom uhodneš, jak takové udalosti, ačkoli všední, tím zamelou, koho se dotykají.” (“You, being a mother, can best guess how such an event, though common, moves one who is involved.”) Similar examples reveal that emotions, though to some extent considered universal, are also influenced by culture, and the linguistic picture associated with them may change over time.

These differences in the picture of the world and image schemas may have an impact upon the contemporary reader in various ways: some of them may go unnoticed; some may have a higher aesthetic impact on the reader and trigger various types of individual interpretations. We may assume that those aspects that the readers find common to their experience might have the strongest impact on their interpretation. This may for example, be one of the reasons why the most popular of Němcová’s letters is probably that which she wrote to her husband on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1857 (Němcová 2006, 128–136), in which, among other things, she explains to him what she thinks about their relationship (cf. Janáčková 2007, 95–107).

### 3.

The cognitive approach offers various perspectives on how to treat literary texts. The theory of the linguistic picture of the world and of the image schema can contribute to discussions concerning changes in the interpretation of texts between readers living in different times and cultures. They do not offer an exhaustive analysis of the problem but do enlighten several aspects of diachronic changes in the possible interpretation of “older” literature associated with the language used in the texts and with the experience of the writer and the readers. All readers live within a linguistic picture of the world, and use image schemas characteristic of the times in which they are living, but linguistic picture (pictures) of the world and versions of image schemas from previous times will still be a part of the contemporary world, even if the reader is not aware of it. When a contemporary reader reads and interprets a letter from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some parts of the nineteenth-century linguistic picture of the world, and the image schemas, may be still alive (active), some may be forgotten, and some may become activated and interpreted in a novel way. This type of analysis also shows that it may be fruitful to consider a diachronic perspective in the chosen cognitive theories and that the linguistic picture of the world and image schema may be sensitive not only to cultural factors or personal experience but also to other social phenomena.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Czech theory stems mainly from the Polish tradition of the theory developed in Lublin and Warsaw, cf. Vaňková (1999).

<sup>2</sup> The panchronic approach is used by other theories as well, cf. A. Stich’s analyses of motives (cf. Šebek



- 2007) or T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (e.g. 1991), even though the author discusses the diachronic aspects as well.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. the question of embodied meaning and grounded cognition, e.g. Barsalou 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> This example is slightly atypical – the "dialogue" between Božena Němcová and Josef Němec is only implicit; we may expect Němcová and her husband to read the part written by the other author, but we do not know for sure.
- <sup>5</sup> As far as the complex question of various layers of subjects modelled in the text and standing outside of it, I will use the theory and terminology developed by A. Macurová (1983). This theory proposes three layers of subjects or persons connected with the text – subjects that are modelled explicitly within the text (the narrator and the addressee), subjects that are modelled implicitly (the producer and the receptor), and subjects that stand outside the text (the psycho-physical persons of the writer/speaker and the listener/reader).
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the Rott sisters evaluated this aspect of Němcová's letters from Slovakia. The letter may also, and often does, include parts of different genres (e.g. a narration about Šándor in Němcová's letter to Žofie Rottová, Němcová 2004, 39–40).
- <sup>7</sup> For more details, see the foreword by M. Pokorná (2004, 7–26).
- <sup>8</sup> For a discussion about the role of context in metaphors, see Kövecses (2011).
- <sup>9</sup> About the paper and the process of writing in Němcová's letters, see Janáčková (2007, 95–107).
- <sup>10</sup> We know, for example, that Němcová burned part of the letters she received in fear of the police, and we know that some manuscripts existed when some older editions were published but are now lost.
- <sup>11</sup> For a discussion about the role of foreign languages in Němcová's letters, see Janáčková and Macurová (2001, 95–118).
- <sup>12</sup> The level of emotion in a letter is called "temperatura"/temperature by A. Kalkowska (1982).
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Lenderová and Rýdl (2006).

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## The interpretation of Božena Němcová’s letters: the linguistic picture of the world and image schemas

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Linguistic picture of the world. Image schema. Epistolary communication. Božena Němcová.

The article presents the theory of the linguistic picture of the world and the theory of image schemas and discusses their role in the interpretation of “older” literature. The problem is illustrated using letters written by and to B. Němcová, a nineteenth-century Czech female writer. The text attempts to demonstrate that the two aspects play different roles in different writer-reader configurations – in the context of the original epistolary communication, when the texts are read by nineteenth-century readers who were not the intended addressees, and when they are interpreted by a contemporary reader.

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