

**THE ARTISTIC CONCEPT OF ‘UPROOTING’
IN JEAN-MARIE GUSTAVE LE CLÉZIO’S NOVEL *POISSON
D’OR***



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Abstract: This article responds to the current trends of modern linguistics (anthropocentric paradigm), namely to the area of cognitive linguistics that resize the role of metaphor, treating it as a mechanism of thought. Thus, the approach addresses the artistic concept of uprooting in J.M.G. Le Clézio's novel *Poisson d'or* investigating metaphors that build this artistic concept as mechanisms shaping the artistic/textual vision, as a means of conceptualization. The artistic concept of ‘uprooting’ in the novel is mainly configured by metaphors from the dysphoric/evil and inferiority/marginality sphere, signaling an index of suffering and pain.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, conceptual index, concept, metaphor, uprooting.

Motto: “Being in a foreign country means walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood.”

(Milan Kundera)

Our metaphors do not embrace us anymore and run like soft landscapes beyond the world we live in, the world in which we think, the world we no longer believe in.

Introduction This article responds to the current trends of modern linguistics (anthropocentric paradigm), namely to the area of cognitive linguistics whose “greatest merit (...) is that language is no longer examined in itself and for itself; language appears in a new paradigm from the position of its participation in the cognitive activity of man” (Maslova: 4). From the perspective of cognitivism, all the cognitive activity of man represents, in fact, his ability (an ability in permanent development) to orientate in the world, and this involves identifying and delimiting “objects”. In this context, it is the concepts that emerge to ensure these processes.

The main objective of the research is to identify and describe/analyze/interpret the images/metaphors that illustrate the textual concept of ‘uprooting’.

Finally, the study will provide a cognitive perspective on the artistic concept under study.

Theoretical framework

Until recently linguists focused research on the study of phonetic, morpho-syntactic and lexico-grammatical peculiarities of language. Modern linguistics registers, in our opinion, a qualitative leap, by the fact that new generation linguists impose the study of language from a functional-cognitive perspective, language is seen as an instrument of world cognition, as a means of thinking and awareness (Samsitova: 220).

Cognitive linguistics⁹ appeared in the 1970s in the United States, and emerges, as Jean-Michel Fortis mentions in *La linguistique cognitive: histoire et épistémologie*, in an “avatar” that will gradually impose/infiltrate the world of linguistic thinking („(...) *un avatar qui viendrait régulièrement s’incarner dans le monde de la pensée linguistique*” (Fortis: 5). In this context, cognitive linguistics is seen as an approach that supports the idea that mental representations and grammatical processes have a neurobiological nature, [*ibidem*] („*Enfin*

⁹ Fillmore (1968, 1969), Rosch (după 1971), Talmy (1972), Lakoff (1973), Langacker (1975), Fanconnier (1978), Lakoff & Johnson (1980) etc.- are just a few of the well-known personalities who generated a multitude of theoretical models within the paradigm of cognitive linguistics of American origin. The distinctive features of cognitive linguistics in the American paradigm, synthesized by Fortis, are: empiricism, anti-formalism, psychology / general cognitive mechanisms, almost total neglect of utterance, unsystemic and semasiological vision and the quasi-absence of chronology of thinking or kinetics that articulate meanings in micro-systems (idem, 6)

on peut qualifier de linguistique cognitive l'approche qui considère que les représentations et les processus grammaticaux ont une réalité neurobiologique, (...)"[ibidem].

The issue of the theoretical framework of the concept and its afferent is extremely wide and complex, the approach varying depending on the paradigm (the paradigm of cognitive linguistics of American, European, Russian origin, etc.), its elucidation exclusively, however, would necessitate a large space. Since the purpose of our research is different, we will limit ourselves only to the clarification of the vision which covers the notion of concept.

In this order of ideas, we should point out that the reference literature fervently argues the correlation of terms: notion - meaning/significance - concept¹⁰, concluding that “the term meaning/significance migrated to the periphery of linguistic research, giving way to the term ‘concept’, without clarifying their relations” (Maslova: 37).

In modern linguistics there is a wide variety of approaches to the notion of ‘concept’. As estimated in the reference literature, all the diversity of perspectives on the ‘concept’ is mainly due to factors such as: the interpretation of the concept in terms of multiculturalism; correlation with terms such as “notion”, “representation” and “meaning” / “significance”; capitalization / use of the term "concept" in different fields such as philosophy, psychology, culturology, sociology, etc.

Beyond the prolific nature of the approaches to the concept (which we do not intend to examine in this research), one aspect we want to highlight is that a large number of experts believe that it is somewhat broader than the lexical meaning¹¹ (Maslova: 40). In this order of ideas, we mention that “the concept is a cognitive imprint of the object in reality, relatively stable and resistant, as it is related to the universe in a more direct way than the notion. The word by its meaning represents only a part of the concept. And the access to the concept can be ensured best through linguistic means, through word, utterance, speech” (ibidem).

¹⁰ Correlation notion – concept (see Maslova, p.35-40)

¹¹ The Russian paradigm of cognitive linguistics conveys the idea that ‘concept’, ‘meaning’ and ‘notion’ are different terms. Thus, the linguist Maslova argues that ‘concept’ and ‘notion’ are different terms due to the fact that they belong to different disciplines: the term ‘notion’ is limited to logic and philosophy, and ‘concept’ relates to mathematical logic, culturology, linguoculturology, cognitive linguistics, despite the fact that they are similar from the point of view of the internal form (Maslova: 40)

A simple review of the three perspectives on approaching the concept of modern linguistics¹² can provide a complex picture of its approach. Thus, the first perspective is the linguistic-cultural approach to the concept: the concept represents “the basic element of culture in the mental universe of man¹³; the second perspective aims at the semantic approach of the concept: the concept is understood as a unit of cognitive semantics (the semantics of the linguistic sign as the only possibility of constituting the concept¹⁴; 3) the third perspective is limited to a “psychological” approach, the concept does not necessarily result from the meaning of the word; it is formed as a result of the “impact” between the meaning of the word and the individual and collective experience of man¹⁵, so the concept would be the interface between these two. In this regard, we note that our research aims, specifically, at the third approach and is based on the definition of the concept, which was postulated by E.S. Kubreakova: “operational-content unit of the mental lexicon memory, of the conceptual system of the brain (*lingva mentalis*), of the whole picture of the world reflected in the human psyche” (Kubreakova: 90).

Le Clézio’s concept of uprooting

This section is dedicated to our main objective: the identification and description/ analysis/interpretation of images/metaphors that illustrate the textual concept of ‘uprooting’.

Le Clézio, a Nobel laureate, spoke in a contradictory way when he was nominated for the Nobel Prize. Radu Vancu, for example, trying to capture the quintessence of the Le Clézio case, mentioned that “[...] I am now convinced that, on the one hand, Le Clézio's detractors are not right to despise him (he is, however, the author of some of the best French novels after the war - at least *Le Procès-Verbal* and *Le Chercheur d'Or* deserve this title); as I know, on the other hand, Le Clézio's case is that of a failure. Yet, it is an exemplary failure, more eloquent than any lukewarm success. Not just because the starting point is somewhere very high, close to the plus pole, and not just because it's a Nobel prize failure.

¹² The three perspectives on approaching the concept of modern linguistics, as presented, belong to the Russian School of Cognitive Linguistics.

¹³ Fundamental perspective of the Russian School of Iu.S. Stepanov, V.H.Telia, which enhances the linguistic-cultural aspect, the culture here meaning a set of concepts and interconceptual relations.

¹⁴ Perspective fortified by N.F. Aliferenco, N.D. Ariutunova, T.V. Bulîghina, A.D. Şmelev.

¹⁵ This perspective is consolidated by E.S. Kubreakova, D.S. Lihacev and others

Rather, it's a great study case on how, when given the initiative, the ideologue always devours the artist. His work is, cynically speaking, the delicious record of such an exemplary failure" (Vancu:75).

In Le Clezio's novel *Poisson d'or*, the concept of uprooting is strongly shaped, connected with that of alienation/the alien, of the Other, of migration and search of one's inner self. The novel tells the story of an African girl from the hilal tribe named Laila kidnapped at the age of 6-7 and sold to Lala Asma, a Spanish Jew, who provides her with basic education. Alone in the world, partially deaf, Laila herself is the goldfish in the book's motto (Oh fish, little goldfish, take care! For there are so many lassos and nets stretched out for you in this world.) She learns life, going through borderline experiences, growing through knowledge, love, communication and rediscovering her origins / identity first through music.

The conceptual structure of the text is built on the oppositions generated by textual dyads: identity-otherness (I-the other); uprooting - self-discovery, etc.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning that a concept represents a stratified structure, having a core that contains the updated primary index and peripheral layers, respectively, additional indices (historical, cultural, connotative, associative, etc.).

The concept of uprooting penetrates through the forestry sector with reference to trees, plants: *to uproot* - to pull a tree, plant, etc. out of the ground.

Through the metaphorical field displayed, the novel *Poisson d'or* reflects the following indications of the investigated concept:

Conceptual index of violence - Uprooting involves a tinge of violence (psychological, emotional, sometimes physical)

Laila, whose name means "night", is brutally, violently and traumatically torn from that original matrix meant to give the human individual the feeling of existential identity. Laila's memories of that act of primitive barbarism, although very brief and diffuse, symbolically shape the inner geography of the drama of the character's uprooting, evoking the following spectrum of symbolic images: dream, nightmare, the sun-white and dusty street, blue sky, the heartbreaking cry of a black bird, a man's hands cramming her into a sack. Once the rupture occurs (of everything that means ethno-cultural matrix), Laila will seek throughout her existential trajectory to recover her identity, and by discovering her vocation for music she will try to repair the trauma of uprooting with a golden thread, in a psychological perspective.

Laila's abduction at an early age is a wound with consequences for her whole life, the trauma of violent uprooting being a trauma that affects her perception. Relevant in this sense, the metaphor of the "sack", consolidates the conceptual signs of violence, inhumanity, hostility, etc. of the investigated concept:

„Pour moi, il n'y a rien eu avant, juste cette rue poussiéreuse, l'oiseau noir, et le sac”; „Quand j'avais six ou sept ans, j'ai été volée. Je ne m'en souviens pas vraiment, car j'étais trop jeune, et tout ce que j'ai vécu ensuite a effacé ce souvenir. C'est plutôt comme un rêve, un cauchemar lointain, terrible, qui revient certaines nuits, qui me trouble même dans le jour. Il y a cette rue blanche de soleil, poussiéreuse et vide, le ciel bleu, le cri déchirant d'un oiseau noir, et tout à coup des mains d'homme qui me jettent au fond d'un grand sac, et j'étouffe”.

Let's focus more on the metaphor of the "sack". Trying to define her experience through the image of the sack that devours her identity, the narrator-character suggests in an authentic way all the drama of forced uprooting: the sack, an object made of canvas, resistant paper, plastic, etc., used in storage and transportation of products; bag of wheat, bag of sand, etc. (Romanian Explanatory Dictionary). Used with reference to the human person, it illustrates **the conceptual indices of uprooting such as: non-human, dehumanization, hostility, impairment of human dignity).**

The imagery of uprooting is imprinted by the black chrononym, for this color in the universal collective mind is mainly associated with suffering, grief, despair, death:

„J'avais peur du noir, peur de la nuit. Je me souviens, je me réveillais quelquefois, je sentais la peur entrer en moi comme un serpent froid. Je n'osais plus respirer”; Je l'ai regardé bien en face, et fort, pour qu'il entende, j'ai récité Aimé Césaire : À moi mes danses/ mes danses de mauvais nègre/ à moi mes danses/ la danse brise-carcan/ la danse saute-prison/ la danse il-est-beau-et-bon-et-légitime-d'être nègre”.

A subtle observation is required here: from the point of view of physics, black absorbs light of any frequency, i.e. all other colors of the spectrum (color is, first of all, light). This would explain the association of the affective-emotional register of 'uprooting' with the black colour that absorbs any other color related to joy, leaving room only for suffering (a suffering that absorbs/ affects / alters all other joys / manifestations of life).

The metaphors that build the artistic concept of uprooting in the novel are mainly from the sphere of dysphoric/signaling a dynamic of

suffering caused by the inhuman living conditions that led to health problems:

„J'avais l'impression de deux animaux froids et secs qui s'étaient cachés sous mes vêtements.

J'avais si peur que je sentais mon coeur battre dans ma gorge. Tout d'un coup ça m'est revenu, la rue blanche, le sac, les coups sur la tête”; „Je faisais des cauchemars. Je ne savais plus si c'était la nuit ou le jour. Il me semblait que j'étais dans le ventre d'un très grand animal, qui me digérait lentement.”

The conceptual index of violence doubled by the conceptual index of despair/suffering is amplified in the passage:

„Je crois que j'ai crié, j'ai ouvert la porte de fer et j'ai crié dans le tunnel, un rugissement, pour que ça monte jusqu'en haut des tours, mais personne n'a entendu. Il y avait les moteurs des souffleries qui se déclenchaient, l'un après l'autre, avec une vibration d'avion. Ça couvrait tous les bruits. J'ai pensé à Simone. J'avais terriblement envie de la voir, d'être à côté d'elle, pendant qu'elle répétait une boucle musicale. Mais je savais que c'était impossible. Je crois que c'est cette nuit-là que je suis devenue adulte.”

Uprooting is accompanied, as we see in the novel, by a series of moments and vulnerabilities involving psychological, emotional, sometimes physical violence (sad experiences, physical and mental abuse by people responsible for the protection and care of the character, which leads to avoidance behaviors, generalized anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, etc.) : *„Je ne regardais plus les gens dans les yeux”*.

Another **conceptual index** is that of **foreignness/marginalization** that we find in the fragments of the Paris scene:

*„Mais, à Paris, la nuit ne tombe jamais complètement. Il y avait une lueur rouge au-dessus de la ville, comme une cloque. Hakim et Nono sont venus nous rejoindre. On s'est installés sur **le gravier du toit**, près des bouches d'aération. Nono a commencé à jouer du tambour, et Hakim a fait grincer la sanza. On chantait, juste des sons, ah, ouh, eho, ehe, ahe, yaou, ya. Très doucement. On était jeunes. On n'avait pas d'argent, pas d'avenir. On fumait des joints. Mais tout cela, le toit, le ciel rouge, les grondements de la ville, le haschich, tout cela qui n'était à personne nous appartenait”*.

The roof, in fact, is a metaphor for the world, and, in the symbolic register of the center-periphery relationship, sitting at the edge of the roof

signifies a position at the edge of the world, at its peripheries impregnated with meanings of hostility, of unfriendly and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors in a world in which the symbolic center has the attributions of prestige and privilege. The dark, hopeless atmosphere, full of heavy emotions, which the uprooting releases, is also suggested by the image of the garbage man - a metaphor for uprooting. The dump - the morbid epicenter of the community with misery and desolate landscape - displays a grotesque picture whose symbolic dimension is linked to the meanings of misery in terms of the attitude of the center to the periphery - garbage (whether social, economic, etc.):

„Les tonnes d'ordures étaient déversées, raclées, pilées, broyées, et la poussière âcre montait sur toute la vallée, montait jusqu'au centre du ciel, tissant une grande tache brune dans le bleu de la stratosphère. Comment ne le sentaient-ils pas dans le reste de la ville ? Ils jetaient leurs déchets, puis ils les oubliaient. Comme leurs déjections. Mais la poudre fine comme un pollen retombait sur eux, chaque jour, sur leurs cheveux, sur leurs mains, sur leurs parterres de roses.

J'avais déjà vu des dépotoirs, à Tabriket, mais je n'avais jamais rien vu de tel. L'air était saturé d'une poussière fine, âcre, qui piquait les yeux et la gorge, une odeur de moisi, de sciure, de mort”.

The practice of garbage processing does not reflect a grotesque manifestation of the other; rather, it is a consequence / effect of relating to the life of the other, to the center-periphery relationship established between community members. Being often marginalized, minimized or accepted with great reluctance, the otherness unfolds in the novel in a metaphorical polyphony.

The conceptual index hidden/fear/anxiety is updated, par excellence, in Le Clezio's novel by the metaphor of the “beetle” (“cafard”), that suggests that uprooting dooms beings to survive in the “underground galleries of the world / existence”:

Et puis on a fait cela chaque soir. C'était notre cinéma. Le jour, on restait cachés sous la terre, comme des cafards. Mais, la nuit, nous sortions des trous, nous allions partout. Dans les couloirs du métro, à la station Tolbiac, ou plus loin, jusqu'à la gare d'Austerlitz. Hakim, le copain de Nono, vendait des choses d'Afrique noire, des bijoux, des colliers, des colifichets. Lui s'en foutait. Il faisait cela pour payer ses études d'histoire à la fac, Paris VII, il habitait à la cité U d'Antony. Il me parlait de son grandpère Yamba El Hadj Mafoba, qui avait été tiraillleur dans l'armée française, et qui s'était battu contre les Allemands. Dans le couloir du

métro, le tam-tam résonnait chaque soir, à Place-d'Italie, à Austerlitz, à la Bastille, à Hôtel-de-Ville. Ça faisait un roulement dans les couloirs, tantôt menaçant comme un orage qui gronde, tantôt très doux et régulier comme un cœur qui bat.

Underground identity ties, ethnic biographies erupt at the sound of drum music. The nebulous subterraneans of her ethnic identity are volcanic, erupting on the surface in the Paris Metro. The music of the drums points to the signs of finding one's own identity. The ethnic substance has not been affected by migration, by the hardships of destiny, in its deep layers the ethnic-cultural identity remains unaltered, latent. Laila felt the harsh, essentially labyrinthine prosaic existence as hostile (place), purified of joys, and the search for the center (self) / ancestral call is made through music - a thread of Ariadne *sui generis* (*I had music in me, that's what I lived for.*)

The shipwrecked on an island (referring to the gypsy camp) is another metaphor that sustains the index of marginalization/ isolation: *„En sortant de l'immeuble, à la nuit tombée, j'ai vu pour la première fois le camp des Gitans, sur le terre-plein boueux, entre les voies de l'autoroute, pareils à des naufragés sur une île.”*

The conceptual index of despair / lack of perspective / future together with **the conceptual index of dispossession of everything** (of the soul, free expression of one's identity) transpires in the episode with the Museum of African Art. The reaction of Laila's friend Hakim to masks reinforces the idea that uprooting is perceived somewhat in a similar way. In fact, masks are also a metaphor for uprooting:

“Regarde, les masques fon. Il parlait d'une voix un peu sourde, étranglée. Regarde, Laïla. Ils ont copié, tout volé. Ils ont volé les statues, les masques, et ils ont volé les âmes, ils les ont enfermées ici, dans ces murs, comme si tout ça n'était que des colifichets, des panoplies, comme si c'étaient les objets qu'on vend au métro Tolbiac, des caricatures, des ersatz. Je ne comprenais pas bien ce qu'il disait. Je sentais sa main qui serrait la mienne, comme s'il avait peur que je ne m'échappe. Regarde les masques, Laïla. Ils nous ressemblent. Ils sont prisonniers, et ils ne peuvent pas s'exprimer. Ils sont arrachés. Et en même temps, ils sont à l'origine de tout ce qui existe au monde. Ils sont enracinés très loin dans le temps, ils existaient déjà quand les hommes d'ici vivaient dans des trous sous la terre, le visage noirci par la suie, les dents brisées par les carences.”

The above scene, although it functions as an epiphenomenon of uprooting, potentiates the idea that total, radical uprooting occurs when

your privacy is attacked (identity is a space of intimacy), when your beliefs that structure your being are dynamited. The metaphor of the masks is emblematic here, revealing the idea of authenticity - a certain awareness of the place and the inherent connection with sacredness. The dynamics of contemporary life imposes a rhythm of desecration of the being / world, an absolute detachment from the influence of a transcendental energy (especially, if we talk about the Parisian context). Masks in African culture are not objects of art as for Westerners who include them in art collections; they are sacred¹⁶ / ritual objects in which the spirit and forces of the Divinity are found. The metaphor of the masks refers to cultural depths that develop beliefs, visions / cosmo genesis related to the energies of the sacred, able to ensure an intrinsic balance, security and continuity in this world. Laila and her friends are the uprooted beings (torn masks) deprived of this defining axis/organizing/constructing / articulatory principle. The uprooted are beings devoid of the "sacred".

In the novel, Laila obtains a passport as a gift (a name and an identity as a gift!) which is seen as a metaphor, equivalent to recovering her own identity /freedom:

„Quand j'ai eu compris, j'ai senti mes yeux pleins de larmes, comme ça ne m'était pas arrivé depuis la mort de Lalla Asma. Jamais personne ne m'avait fait un cadeau pareil, un nom et une identité. C'était surtout de penser à lui, au vieil homme aveugle qui passait lentement le bout de ses doigts usés sur ma figure, sur mes paupières, sur mes joues”.

The conceptual index of freedom is appears in metaphors: *sky, a window to infinity, so much blue:*

„Ensuite, on est allés ensemble sur le toit de la tour, par le chemin secret, l'ascenseur jusqu'au trente et unième, puis la porte coupe-feu, l'escalier et l'échelle des pompiers. Le ciel découpait un carré bleu d'acier au-dessus de nous, comme une fenêtre sur l'infini. À ce moment-là, j'ai su que je devais partir. Sur le toit de la terre, le vent sifflait dans les haubans des mâts télé. C'était un bruit étrange, ici, au milieu de cette ville, si loin de la mer”.

¹⁶ In African culture “Masks revive at regular intervals the myths that come to explain the origin of daily habits. According to the symbols, ethics is presented as a replica of cosmogenesis. Masks fulfill a social function: mask ceremonies are true cosmogonies that regenerate time and space; they thus seek to save man and the values he embodies of the degradation that has left its mark on everything in historical time. But they are true cathartic spectacles during which man acquires the consciousness of his place or in the universe and sees his life and death inscribed in a collective drama and thus acquiring a meaning.”<https://www.vocativ-plus.com/cultura-africana-mastile-intre-magie-si-adevarate-cai-spirituale/>

The textual metaphors that build the concept of uprooting are, in fact, part of the dialectic of psychological metaphors¹⁷ (they are an extension of the psychic life of the character, or the psyche is “the invisible component of metaphor” (Avădanei: 99), which functions as a relationship between (a) an inner and (an) outer, as a transition from the unconscious to consciousness and language or as a means of establishing a personal human meaning in the universe (...))” (idem: 96). When we advance the idea that the textual metaphors of uprooting represent an extension of the psychic life¹⁸ of the character, we project on the approach the vision of Robert D. Romanyshyn¹⁹ (taken from St. Avădanei, according to which “the psychic/ psychological life is ‘a reality of reflection’ - a reality between material and mental, a metaphorical reality” (idem: 97).

As we have seen from the analysis of metaphors that build the artistic concept of uprooting in the novel, uprooting leads to profound negative consequences in the form of wounds/sequelae, emotional traumas that influence the perception of the world and the development of attitudes and behaviors. The metaphors constructed by Laila as personage become “visible vehicles of her behavior” as well as that of her entourage.

The artistic concept of uprooting in Le Clezio's novel *Poisson D'or* represents, as we could see from the analysis of metaphors, a multilayered and multilevel structure (palimpsest) that integrates multiple representations about this segment of reality, thus being a kaleidoscopic structure, in which various and multiple valences of meaning intersect.

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¹⁷ In this context, we mention that “psychological life cannot be analyzed as thought, nor as an object, nor as an idea or as a fact, nor as a philosophical or empirical phenomenon, but as a metaphorical reality. (...) such a reality, no matter how much weight and depth it may have, therefore, it is embodied for the purposes of analysis as a story, in literary form,.” (Romanyshyn apud Avădanei, 98)

¹⁸ Psychological life is a story, neither objective nor subjective, but with its own reality, a fairytale reality, in which the outer universe combines with the inner universe, but neither remains in the place of the other; both material and mental things become, in this symbiosis, psychological “things”, and the two worlds create a third world, of psychology (Avădanei, 97)

¹⁹ According to Robert D. Romanyshyn, “psychological life appears as a tertium between persons and things, man and world, subject and object, a reality of the relationship, therefore, which both terms at their ends” (apud. Ibidem)

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