

Subjectivity in the Poetry of Rain Case Study of *Never have I seen a caravan of camels so relentless*—by Abu Tammām

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of rain in ancient Arabic poetry through the lens of cognitive linguistics, focusing on the interplay of temporal forms, mental spaces, and emotional resonance. The research explores how poets construct meaning by blending past, present, and future into a single moment, merging drought, rainfall, and its aftermath. The analysis reveals that the poet's use of grammatical tenses functions as "instructions" for constructing mental spaces, enabling the blending of reality and imagination. Emotion plays a central role in this process, as metaphorical schemata connect images and feelings, creating poetic iconicity. The study also highlights the poet's ability to inhabit blended spaces, where desire and imagination intersect with reality, offering a comprehensive view of the world. By integrating cognitive and affective dimensions, this research provides a framework for understanding how temporal references and mental spaces shape the emotional and narrative impact of rain poetry in Arabic literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of temporal forms in language, especially the question of how grammatical tenses refer to time, is a fundamental topic in linguistics and cognitive science. Reichenbach (1947) and later scholars have demonstrated that grammatical tenses and temporal expressions function as relational constructs, guiding the interpretation of time in discourse. Building on this, Fauconnier's model, influenced by Dinsmore (1991), redefines grammatical tenses as tools for constructing mental spaces and defining relationships between them (Fauconnier, 1997). This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of discourse, requiring participants to actively monitor the creation of mental spaces, their connections, and the transitions between them. As Fauconnier (1997: 72) explains, discourse participants must dynamically navigate these configurations to maintain coherence and understanding as they progress through the narrative.

Despite its strengths, this model often neglects the role of emotion, which plays a vital part in shaping how mental spaces are formed and experienced. In poetry and other artistic forms, metaphorical schemata often act as the organizing principle, connecting forms and images through emotion to create what Susanne K. Langer (1953: 40) terms "forms symbolic of

human feeling." This poetic iconicity emerges from the interaction between cognitive and emotional processes, where emotions and sensations drive the creation of meaning. Freeman (2007, 2008, 2009) emphasizes that passion and emotion are essential to constructing iconicity, as they imbue linguistic and narrative structures with a sense of lived experience, allowing them to resonate on a deeper, more intuitive level.

Turner's insight that "we do not live in a single narrative mental space, but rather dynamically and variably distributed over very many" (Turner, *The Literary Mind*) further illustrates the complexity of mental space construction. In poetry, for example, characters and narrators often occupy alternative mental spaces shaped by the poet's imaginative and emotional inclinations. These spaces are fluid rather than fixed, reflecting the dynamic interplay of cognition, emotion, and imagination. By incorporating emotion into the analysis of mental spaces, we gain a deeper understanding of how poetic and narrative structures evoke emotional experiences, fostering a more immersive engagement with the text. This integrated approach bridges cognitive linguistics and the affective dimensions of art, providing a more comprehensive framework for analyzing temporal forms and their emotional impact.

1.1. Why This Study?

The portrayal of rain in ancient Arabic poetry, whether in descriptive passages or in poems dedicated solely to this theme, demands a closer examination. This depiction often blends past, present, and future into a single moment, merging the period of drought and famine before the rain, the act of rain falling, and its aftermath simultaneously. This temporal convergence raises questions about the objectivity of such descriptions. Are these descriptions objective, or do they reflect a subjective perspective? In this study, we aim to explore the role of subjectivity in the construction of meaning within rain descriptions by analyzing temporal references in relation to mental spaces. If it is established that these descriptions are subjective, this approach resolves the issue of condensed transitions or abrupt temporal shifts, offering a clearer understanding of how time is represented in these poetic contexts.

This study examines the poetic works of Ḥabīb ibn Aws al-Ṭā'ī, widely known as AbūTammām (أبو تمام) (188–231 AH), an influential Arab Muslim poet. The research investigates whether his depiction of rain evolved from pre-Islamic poetic traditions, particularly that of Imru' al-Qais, a renowned pre-Islamic poet and a key figure in the *Mu'allaqāt* (Al-Ṭā'ī, 9th century CE).

In his *Mu'allaqa*, Imru' al-Qais structures his imagery of rain in a dynamic, vertical progression—beginning in the sky and descending to the earth—illustrating the immediate impact of rainfall on the landscape, including rapid blossoming and fruition (Al-Ṭā'ī, 9th century CE). His portrayal captures a transformative instant, compressing the stages before, during, and after rain into a singular, fluid moment. This technique mirrors the fluidity of desire and dreams, transcending temporal constraints. His poetry frames the universe as perpetual motion, with humanity intrinsically linked to this movement (Al-Ṭā'ī, 9th century CE). Life itself is depicted as an unceasing flow, with the poet mastering its essence—even embracing drought as an inherent aspect of existence.

1.2. Research Hypotheses

From *Jāhiliyya* to *Muwalladīn* poets, ancient Arabs did not merely depict rain—they channeled their emotions through it, likening it to the things closest to their hearts and inviting readers to share their joy (Fauconnier, 1997). The poet's intensified imagery mirrors a deeper intensification of desire, demanding an analysis of the subjective dimension of this process (Freeman, 2020). This raises a critical question: Could the rain poems of pre-Islamic and *Muwalladīn* Arabic poetry—with their temporal connotations that collapse moments before, during, and after rain into a unified instant—reflect a form of temporal reference theorized by mental space theory? Or might they instead reveal a blending of worlds grounded in mental states like desire and dream, as suggested by Fauconnier (1991, 1997) and Langacker (2008)? By incorporating Freeman's (2020) framework on desire-driven cognition, we can explore and dream within text world theory, we can explore the interplay of description, variability, time, incidence, and motion across diverse mental states associated with desires and dreams in poetic texts.

The ancient Arab poet's focus was not on the rain itself but on the emotions evoked by the rain. He compared the rain to the things most dear to him, sharing his joy with the reader (Fauconnier, 1997). The intensification of images in these descriptions is, in fact, an intensification of desire, highlighting the need to consider the subjective dimension of this poetic procedure (Freeman, 2020). We propose that a usable framework can be developed within these theories—drawing on Fauconnier's (1991, 1997) mental spaces, Langacker's (2008) cognitive grammar, and Freeman's (2020) text world theory—to enable a more systematic analysis of temporal phenomena related to rain as a natural bounty in Arabic poetry. The subject of time and rain in this context can be understood as a form of thinking modality, reflecting the poet's mental and emotional engagement with the natural world.

2. METHOD

The theory developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (1991, 1997) introduces a dynamic perspective to the study of meaning construction, emphasizing the creation of mental spaces, their complex interrelationships, structuring, and fusion (Fauconnier, 1997). From this dynamic and evolutionary viewpoint, grammatical tenses, for instance, are not merely analyzed for their referential roles but are treated as markers that guide the unfolding of mental spaces. These tenses act as "instructions" for constructing meaning by indicating the specific point in the deployment of these spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 1997). The significance of Fauconnier's approach, particularly when combined with Turner's Conceptual Integration theory, lies in its ability to explain how meaning is dynamically constructed across interconnected mental spaces.

Conceptual Integration, as proposed by Fauconnier and Turner, must be understood within the broader framework of mental space theory. It represents one manifestation of the processes of projection and correspondence between spaces, alongside other cognitive mechanisms described by Fauconnier (1991). What sets Conceptual Integration apart is its high degree of generality, allowing it to resonate not only within linguistics but also in fields

such as cognitive psychology. For instance, Le Ny (2004, 2005) describes a similar process in cognitive psychology called the "assembly" of representations, which is central to verbal comprehension. This demonstrates that the theory of Mental Spaces has implications that extend across the broader cognitive sciences, highlighting its interdisciplinary relevance (Le Ny, 2004, 2005).

Poets possess the unique ability to mentally manipulate the unreal through the use of tenses, simultaneously running multiple mental scenarios and performing off-line cognitive simulations (Fauconnier & Turner, 1997). They construct mental spaces, establish interrelations between them, and create blended spaces, which provide meaningful insights into the complex narrative worlds they inhabit—worlds characterized by rareness, abundance, and plenty. This tendency to daydream and imagine mental spaces that diverge from their actual experiences is a recurring feature in rain poetry. Poets build parallel worlds that emerge from a narrative mind unconstrained by the limitations of the actual world, preferring instead to inhabit blended spaces that combine elements of reality and illusion. It is within these rich, blended mental spaces that poets find contentment, not as an escape from reality but as a means to construct intricate mental blends that offer a more comprehensive view of the world and themselves (Freeman, 2020).

To analyse this process, we can adopt Fauconnier's (1991, 1997) framework by distinguishing the following elements:

- a) A "basic space", which serves as the starting point of the construction and a viewpoint space from which other spaces are structured or accessed at any given moment in the discourse.
- b) A "focus space (F)", which undergoes "internal structuring" and is the space where attention is concentrated, with additional information being added to it from the current viewpoint space (Fauconnier, 1997).

Turner (2014: 103) further elaborates that the self in the moment of communication is a compression of a vast mental network encompassing time, space, causation, and positioning. This self can project multiple and shifting implied identities, speakers, and hearers, as well as the relationships between them. Meanwhile, by blending the world of nature with the consciousness of the self in a metaphoric fusion, the poet creates an iconic representation of existence. As Freeman (2007, 2008, 2009, 2020) explains, the meaning that emerges from such blending is inherently iconic, achieved through metaphorical fusion. This process allows the poet to create a poetic icon that encapsulates the essence of existence, blending the real and the imagined into a unified whole.

3. THE POEM

*Never have I seen a caravan of camels so relentless—
Ceaseless in their journey, marching through day and night,
Beyond exhaustion, beyond the clamor of the world.
At dawn, they emerge from the fertile east,
Noble in lineage, yet riderless, their long necks arched*

*Like the stretched shadows of night,
Or like meat swirling in a boiling pot,
Or bees drawn to an unfamiliar hive.
Like devoted Shi'a turning to their imam,
They yield to the south's command,
Defying the sting of adversity,
Silencing the blade of hardship,
Erasuring drought's curse—
As the Black Stone absolves sin.
When the earth drew near,
It thirsted for the rain's embrace
Like an ailing soul for the healer's touch,
Like a lover's heart leaping at the beloved's sight,
Like scribes rejoicing in shared words.
Then the true rains came,
And thunder roared like a preacher's cry,
While the wind wailed like an old camel's groan.
The sun, shrouded in veiled light,
Hung between setting and dusk,
As the earth donned its emerald cloak,
Adorned in the jewels of newborn rain.*

*Longing for snow and rain,
Like an old man yearning for his youth,
Now his legs are bent, his hair turned grey.*

*How many strangers have you consoled?
How many streams have you stirred,
Bringing life to the thirsty earth?
And how many lands have you subdued,
Leaving them motionless beneath your touch?*

*You have soothed the distressed soil,
Tamed the raging southern winds,
And quenched the thirst of a longing land—
A land that keeps its promise of rain at dusk.*

*The taste of raindrops lingers on the tongue,
Like a downpour upon waiting hearts*

(Diwan-abu-tammam explained by Al-Khayyat, Muhyiddin, pp (413-414))

We begin by distinguishing a “basic space A,” which, at this stage, also serves as the initial viewpoint and default focus. This space, indicated by the past tense, is considered the "anchor for the configuration" (Fauconnier, 1997), functioning as the starting point to which one can always return. Additionally, we identify a “space B,” where the preterite tense corresponds to

the narrative tense. In the basic space A, the poet uses the past tense to emphasize events occurring in the present, blending all tenses into a single "here and now" moment, merging truth-values and metaphors (Fauconnier, 1997). This demonstrates the creative potential of language and the mind, as the poet inhabits blended spaces, enabling him to reinvent the world imaginatively. His vision of rain as a blend of reality and imagination satisfies his desires, dreams, and fantasies. However, his intense focus on the present moment and the dynamic motion within the poem may also reflect an attempt to maintain control over his thoughts and emotions.

Through identification mapping, the "I" in the poem represents both the poem itself in its concrete form and the poet's declamation of it. The poem evokes a sense of temptation and revelation, creating a tangible connection between the rain, the poem, and the poet. This connection is foregrounded by the vivid imagery of nature, which aligns the poet's perspective with the natural world, emphasizing the brightness of the earth and the poet's identification with existence (Freeman, 2020). Understanding rain as an iconic element requires constructing a "Speaker space" and an imagined "Receiver space" as part of the "SELF space". This involves appreciating the processes of compression and decompression behind such constructions. As Langacker (2008) notes, tense and modality are intimately linked, with the implied self -sharing the imagined speaker's viewpoint. The poem shifts between "you," "we," and "they," representing a viewpoint space that embodies desires and aspirations for a world of plenty, contrasting with the world of scarcity.

Like ancient Arabic poems, this poem accompanies the transition from drought to rain, symbolizing the shift from scarcity to abundance. The clouds, described as "walking all day like camels in the morning," deictically refer to a blend of "here" and "now," flooding the place in a short time. This imagery aligns with familiar representations of clouds in the Arabic environment, which are often depicted as vast and beyond human scale. The poet uses camels and night imagery to evoke these presences, which are dispersed across time and space, requiring an intuitive perspective to grasp their enormity (Turner, 2014). Through visual and animal imagery, the poem conveys the weight and urgency of the gathering clouds, filling the recipients with a sense of impatience and haste to meet the rain.

The poem simultaneously invokes the metaphor of nature's power as both a poetic dominant and a force addressing the recipients as members of the "world." By blending the world of nature with the consciousness of the self in a metaphoric fusion, the poet creates an iconic representation of existence, making the poem itself an icon of reality (Freeman, 2007, 2020). The present progressive tense serves as the *Focus space*, where "internal structuring" is examined. This structure reveals aspectual and force-dynamic elements that trigger the blending of corporeal and medium modes. The force-dynamic schema is comparative,

realized through fictive motion that contrasts the seen and unseen, the inner and outer, as the rain descends (Langacker, 2008).

*Defying the sting of adversity,
Silencing the blade of hardship,
Erasuring drought's curse—
As the Black Stone absolves sin.
When the earth drew near,
It thirsted for the rain's embrace
Like an ailing soul for the healer's touch,
Like a lover's heart leaping at the beloved's sight,
Like scribes rejoicing in shared words.
Then the true rains came,
And thunder roared like a preacher's cry,
While the wind wailed like an old camel's groan.
The sun, shrouded in veiled light,
Hung between setting and dusk,
As the earth donned its emerald cloak,
Adorned in the jewels of newborn rain.*

The interplay between the “viewpoint space” and the “focus space” unfolds through the poet’s use of perception (often expressed in negative forms, such as “I have not seen”) and movement. For the poet to fully embrace his felt reality, the act of “seeing” must be linked to “moving”. This connection is established through the concept of “possibility,” which is realized via metaphorical schemas. These schemas blend the poem’s real images with emotionally charged, affective images, some of which disrupt the poem’s spatial patterns. The poet appears to inhabit a “blended space”, a complex and conflicted mental space that involves a range of cognitive operations: mapping features from input mental spaces, blending them, and integrating them into a new, activated blended space. This blended space is robust and fundamental to human thought, as it generates new information not present in the original input spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 1997). Thus, the poet does not reside in either of the input mental spaces but in the blend of the two. Given the disparity between the mental space projected by the poet’s world and the imagined scenario, only the blended space can reconcile these differences. This highlights the poet’s entangled cognitive functioning, which is not confined to a single mental space but is dynamically distributed across multiple spaces (Turner, 2014).

The expression “I have not seen” transitions from mere reporting to suggestion, signalling the poet’s state between reality and dream, reality and imagination. For instance, the poet imagines clouds as camels, propelling him into a realm of imagination. This duality means the poet exists simultaneously in reality and imagination, ensuring that neither truth nor imagination is lost. If truth were entirely absent, the poem would risk becoming nonsensical. The degree of truth maintains reasonableness, a crucial condition for poetry in Arabic tradition. The source of the poet’s imagery—camels—stems from his natural environment and Bedouin lifestyle, which are integral to his identity, imagination, and creative process.

Imagination, therefore, is not detached from reality but involves the composition, amplification, or transformation of realistic elements. Through metaphor, governed by movement, the poet creates an imaginary world shaped by desire rather than the principles of reality. This world of desire, however, remains connected to reality, as rhetoricians argue that an image loses its value when severed from its realistic context (Freeman, 2020).

Imagination is driven by desire, as it allows individuals to momentarily escape their material reality and fulfill unmet aspirations. Freud observed that desires are often more satisfying in imagination than in reality. In the poem, the metaphor of camels bridges the gap between imagination and reality, anchoring the image in a specific time and place. Imagination, therefore, is not a complete separation from reality but a window into it. The poet's description of successes, which are not entirely real, reflects a struggle between life and death, joy and misfortune. Rain, symbolizing life, erases the erasure caused by misfortunes, embodying the victory of life over death. This interplay of opposites—life and death—highlights the poet's goal: not to construct pure imagination but to approximate a realistic, material idea, where water symbolizes life. The poem's tension lies in the coexistence of these opposing forces, which do not harmonize but instead create a dynamic struggle (Langacker, 2008).

4. CONCLUSION

Arabic rain poetry, analyzed through Fauconnier and Turner's blending theory, redefines subjectivity as a dynamic negotiation of desire, time, and cosmic unity. The poet's fragmented imagery clouds as camels, rain as existential joy reveals a subjectivity not bound by objective reality but constructed through mental spaces where self and world merge. Cognitive linguistics uncovers the "hidden unity" in these seemingly disjointed metaphors, showing how the poet's immersive desire dissolves the ego into nature (rain, storms, camels), transforming subjectivity into an expansive, participatory act.

Temporal blending (past/present/future) collapses linear experience into a singular affective moment, where rain symbolizes both memory and prophecy. This fluid temporality mirrors the poet's subjectivity—neither fixed nor solitary, but woven into collective cultural imaginaries of abundance and loss. Emotion, via Freeman's schemata, becomes the scaffold for meaning: the "caravan of clouds" is not mere description but a metaphorical embodiment of longing.

Here, subjectivity is language itself; a parallel world where the self, unmoored from reality, rides composite imaginations. Unlike passive dreamers, the poet wills their dissolution into these blends, redefining subjectivity as active desire. Thus, cognitive linguistics dismantles the illusion of objective description, exposing Arabic poetry's core: a subjectivity that thrives in the gaps between sign and sensation, where rain is never just rain, but a mirror of the psyche's boundless hunger to merge with the cosmos.

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