



Linguistic Innovations in a Globally Interconnected World

TALC 8 2025

The 8th Białystok-Kyiv
Conference on
Theoretical and Applied
Linguistics

Book of Abstracts

4-5
December

Białystok, Poland

talc.uwb.edu.pl



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A PUPPETEER OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A GLIMPSE INTO IMAGE SCHEMA ANALYSIS

Elina Paliichuk

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University

This paper is part of the Changing Young Minds: Student Awareness of Human Trafficking under War Conditions initiative, implemented at the French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES, Prague). It focuses on analysing the “trafficker-as-puppeteer” metaphor in anti-trafficking discourse through the lens of Mark Johnson’s image schema theory. The research question is how image schemas shape representations of victims’ agency and the framing of intervention. The aim is to uncover how recurrent bodily-rooted schemas such as CONTROL, FORCE, LINK, CONTAINER, and PATH organize perception and ethical reasoning in texts addressing human trafficking. The study material is Barnardo’s report “Puppet on a String” (2011) alongside selected UK media and NGO campaigns. Passages describing children “groomed by ‘boyfriends’,” “controlled by networks,” and “cut free from exploitation” illustrate embodied spatial and kinetic oppositions: UP/DOWN, BOUND/RELEASED, CENTRE/PERIPHERY. These linguistic patterns activate physical experiences such as tension, manipulation, and rupture, transforming complex systemic abuse into concrete bodily imagery that the audience can feel and morally appraise. The results reveal that the puppet frame encodes asymmetrical force dynamics: traffickers exert downward pulling control, while rescuers enact counterforce by “cutting strings.” The PATH schema traces the victim’s motion from captivity to freedom, while CONTAINER structures mark hiddenness (“kept out of sight”) versus exposure (“brought to light”). In conclusion, it can be assumed that image schemas shaping the puppeteer metaphor possess the conceptual potential to sustain affective narratives of coercion, control, and liberation. In further research, it can be hypothetically assumed that such metaphors do more than dramatise: they can cognitively condition readers’ empathy, which opens a vista onto further empirical studies of readers’ responses and predetermine their prosocial value as raising student awareness of manipulative traffickers’ speech behaviours through critical media readings in class.

Keywords: human trafficking, image schema, cognitive linguistics, prosocial, metaphor

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