

After the Brushstroke of Freedom: An Ecolinguistic Exploration of Pictorial Metaphors in Jimmy Liao's picture book, *A Fish That Smiled at Me*

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Abstract:

This study explores the dynamic relationship between language, visual metaphors, and the environment through an ecolinguistics analysis of Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me*. Using an ecolinguistic framework, it examines how Liao's pictorial metaphors construct and convey nuanced perceptions of freedom. Using image schema theory and the conceptual metaphor theory, the research identifies key metaphors such as FREEDOM IS SWIMMING, LOSING FREEDOM IS A FISH BEING TRAPPED IN A CONFINED AQUARIUM, and FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN. These metaphors illuminate the interconnectedness of freedom, environmental awareness, and personal agency, providing a holistic perspective on ecolinguistics dimensions. The analysis also connects these metaphors to Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualisation, framing freedom as a transformative process toward harmony within both ecological and personal contexts.

The protagonist's journey, reflecting Jimmy Liao's resilience during his battle with leukaemia, reveals freedom as both a personal and ecological liberation. Through the metaphor FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN, the study illustrates the healing power of letting go, capturing the protagonist's act of releasing the fish as a shared liberation of both the fish and himself. This research invites readers to explore their interpretations of freedom, particularly in adversity, while offering insights for visual artists and environmental advocates. By highlighting the role of visual and linguistic metaphors in fostering ecological awareness, it underscores the potential of storytelling to inspire harmony with the natural world and promote deeper environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Pictorial Metaphors, Visual Representation, Self-Actualisation, Freedom

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving field of ecolinguistics, the study of language's interplay with the environment opens new avenues for understanding the profound impact of literary and visual arts on our perception of freedom and environmental consciousness. This paper delves into the symbiotic relationship between linguistic expression, visual metaphors, and ecological awareness through an ecolinguistic analysis of Jimmy Liao's renowned picture book, *A Fish That Smiled at Me* (Liao, 2018). Liao, a celebrated Chinese illustrator and author, has captivated global audiences with his thought-provoking works since 1998, earning worldwide accolades for his unique storytelling approach that transcends age barriers (JIMMY S.P.A. OFFICIAL SITE, n.d.). His narrative in *A Fish That Smiled at Me* intricately weaves the themes of freedom, self-discovery, and ecological harmony, offering a rich tapestry for exploring the ecolinguistic dimensions of pictorial metaphors.

This study is anchored in the premise that pictorial metaphors in Liao's work are not mere artistic expressions but serve as conduits for deeper ecological and philosophical insights. By examining metaphors such as FREEDOM IS A FISH IN A VAST BLUE OCEAN and MAINTAINING ECOSYSTEM HEALTH IS RELEASING A FISH INTO THE OCEAN, this research underscores the intricate links between the concept of freedom, environmental stewardship, and individual agency. Through the lens of Abraham Maslow's (1943) self-actualisation, conceptual metaphor, and image schema theory, the paper further interprets the realisation of freedom, connecting it with the protagonist's journey towards self-discovery and ecological consciousness, mirroring Liao's own life experiences and resilience in the face of adversity.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate the beneficial roles of pictorial metaphors of freedom from an ecolinguistic perspective, grounded in the norms of ecosophy, such as valuing life, wellness, and environmental justice (Viridis, 2022). It aims to unravel the complex interrelations between the visual representation of self-actualisation and cultural and natural contexts, offering insights into how these relationships can foster environmental activism and positive societal change. By exploring how visual metaphors of freedom can inspire individuals and communities towards a more sustainable and liberated future, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the power of art in shaping ecological consciousness and action.

The structure of this article is meticulously designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. The literature review introduces various psychological conceptions of freedom, focusing on Maslow's (1943) definition of self-actualisation and its relevance to the notion of freedom depicted in visual metaphors. This is followed by an introduction to ecolinguistics from a visual metaphor perspective, establishing an ecosophy for analysing pictorial metaphors of freedom based on Viridis's ecological stylistics. The methodology section outlines the application of conceptual metaphor theory and image schema theory in identifying and interpreting visual metaphors in Liao's book. The findings section categorises the visual discourse of freedom metaphors into ecologically beneficial, destructive, and ambivalent, laying the groundwork for a discussion that juxtaposes these findings with established ecosophical principles. This comparative analysis highlights how visual metaphors contribute to the well-being of all living beings, ecological consciousness, and sustainability, ultimately encouraging a multimodal discourse on ecological and environmental activism.

Through this ecolinguistic exploration of Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me*, this paper endeavours to offer a holistic perspective on the intersections of

language, imagery, and environmental awareness, paving the way for future research and artistic endeavours that seek to promote harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

2. Literature Review

This article navigates the psychological construct of freedom, the interpretation of visual metaphors, and ecosophical analysis with Jimmy Liao's narrative artistry. It offers a multi-lenses approach to understanding how these elements converge to form a rich tapestry of meaning.

2.1 Psychological Conceptions of Freedom: An Ecolinguistic Perspective

Freedom, within the psychological domain, is a multifaceted concept influenced by various theoretical frameworks. It has been dissected and reassembled through the lenses of existentialism, humanistic psychology, and social cognitive theory, each providing a unique vantage point from which to appreciate its complexity. This literature review seeks to synthesise these diverse perspectives and forge a comprehensive understanding of ecolinguistic inquiries.

The existentialist perspective, championed by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre (2007) and Friedrich Nietzsche (Oaklander, 1984), posits freedom as the hallmark of the human condition. Existentialists assert that freedom is equivalent to being, with Sartre (2007) famously declaring that existence precedes essence. This suggests that individuals are born without predetermined essence and therefore have the innate ability to forge their own paths through choices, inevitably bearing the responsibility for these decisions. Nietzsche's (Oaklander, 1984) emphasis on will to power aligns with this view, framing freedom as a self-affirming act.

Humanistic psychology contributes to the discourse through Abraham Maslow's (1943) seminal concept of self-actualisation, which is achieved when a person realises their potential, accomplishing their quest for growth and fulfilment. Central to this achievement is the exercise of freedom, characterised by autonomy, authenticity, and creativity, allowing individuals to experience what Maslow refers to as peak experiences, moments of utmost joy and enlightenment. Carl Rogers' client-centred therapy further underscores the significance of an environment that offers unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and genuineness, facilitating a person's free pursuit of self-actualisation.

From the vantage point of Social Cognitive Theory, Albert Bandura (1977) propounds the principle of reciprocal determinism, where the interplay between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors informs the expression of freedom. In this light, freedom is not solely an individual's internal attribute but also a product of social context and interactions. Bandura's emphasis on self-efficacy underscores the belief in one's own capability to exercise control over personal and environmental factors, thus navigating the path towards freedom.

In ecolinguistics, freedom acquires an additional dimension that intersects with ecological consciousness. Recent analyses have underscored the importance of visual literacy in fostering an understanding of environmental issues (Stibbe, 2020). Robert Rois (2022) expands this view in the artistic realm, articulating how modern artists like Cezanne, Matisse, and Kandinsky redefine freedom through their revolutionary approaches to art, emphasising autonomy and innovation in expressing and perceiving

reality. Their efforts to transform artistic expression resonate with ecological narratives, where freedom involves reimagining and reshaping our interaction with the natural world.

Concluding this exploration of freedom from a psychological perspective, a unique definition emerges, synthesising the existential autonomy of choice, the humanistic pinnacle of self-actualisation, the social cognitive ability to shape one's milieu, and the ecological integration of oneself with the broader environment. Freedom is thus conceptualised as the realisation and fulfilment of one's inherent capabilities, entailing personal growth, creative expression, and a pursuit of meaning and purpose. Self-actualised individuals are motivated by an intrinsic yearning for personal evolution and the manifestation of their unique talents. This concept of freedom is not static but continually evolves as one engages with the world, embodying an ecological mindset that recognises interdependence and values the flourishing of life in all its forms.

2.2 Visual Metaphors and Identification Processes

In the exploration of visual metaphors, it becomes apparent that these are not merely decorative elements but are pivotal to our cognitive and perceptual processes. The study of visual metaphors originates from conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that our understanding of abstract concepts is grounded in concrete experiences. This theoretical paradigm, established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), suggests that metaphors allow us to comprehend one aspect of our experience in terms of another, typically more tangible, element.

Expanding upon the conceptual metaphor theory, pictorial metaphors present one entity in the guise of another through visual representation, drawing on similar characteristics that relate to the images' scale, space, and physicality (Dent-Read et al., 1994). Forceville's work on verbo-pictorial metaphors illustrates how images emphasise non-literal qualities that reflect tangible realities, embodying a multimodal metaphor that can encompass a range of sensory experiences beyond the visual (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009).

Johnson's image schema theory is a crucial tool in identifying pictorial metaphors. An image schema is a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence to our experience. These schemas are embodied, pre-linguistic structures that shape not only our physical interactions but also our conceptualisations (Johnson, 1987). By analysing the image schemas that underlie our experiences, researchers can discern the foundational patterns that inform the creation and interpretation of visual metaphors. Recent studies have employed image schema theory to dissect and comprehend the metaphorical underpinnings of visual narratives, demonstrating this approach's efficacy in various contexts, including environmental communication and education (Rohrer, 2005).

The identification process for pictorial metaphors requires the observer to communicate the necessary information to distinguish between the source and target domains at a glance (Forceville, 2002). This rapid cognition is partly informed by an individual's background, such as their educational level, age, and cultural influences, which align with ecolinguistics' acknowledgement of the ecological and environmental context of language and its interpretation.

In the analysis of Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me* (Liao, 2018), the pictorial elements will be at the forefront. Elements such as the fish, aquarium, woods, cities, bridges, and dreams will be scrutinised for their metaphorical significance. Additionally, the use of swimming, the sea, and the array of colours within the

illustrations will be assessed for their contribution to the overarching metaphors present within the narrative. This focus on the pictorial allows a deep exploration of the visual language that communicates complex themes and narratives.

In summary, the identification and analysis of pictorial metaphors are integral to understanding the layered meanings in visual narratives. Employing theories such as conceptual metaphor theory and image schema theory provides a robust framework for dissecting the nuanced metaphorical content of images. This study will utilise such theories to systematically decode the pictorial elements in Liao's work, revealing the rich metaphorical tapestry woven through his illustrations.

2.3 Ecosophy in the Analysis of Visuals

Incorporating an ecological perspective into the semiotic analysis of visual narratives enriches the interpretation with an ecological consciousness that is increasingly pertinent in contemporary scholarship. Ecosophy, a term coined by Arne Naess, embodies a philosophical framework that emphasises the intrinsic value of the natural world and the interconnectivity of all life forms (Naess, 1995a). It is a holistic approach that integrates environmental values with broader existential questions, resonating deeply with the interdisciplinary analysis of visual metaphors.

Recent scholarly discourse has begun to recognise the profound impact of visual media on ecological consciousness. The visual representation of nature and human interactions with the environment can profoundly influence public perception and values (Fahmy et al., 2007). By applying an ecosophical lens to the analysis of visual metaphors, researchers can unpack the often subtle messages about ecological relationships and environmental stewardship conveyed through imagery.

Building upon this foundation, this study employs Virdis's (2022) ecological stylistics framework, which provides a comprehensive set of norms to guide the interpretations of text and visuals from an ecological perspective. Virdis's framework is derived from the premise that ecological concerns should be at the forefront of linguistic and semiotic analyses, which in the context of visuals, prompts a deep reflection on the depiction of natural and urban environments, as well as the interplay between the two.

Virdis's framework (2022), with its roots deeply embedded in environmental ethics, begins by valuing living, urging an appreciation for the diverse forms of life depicted in visuals, thus foregrounding the intrinsic values of biodiversity. The norm of well-being extends this notion to the flourishing of ecosystems, inviting an exploration of how visual narratives portray the vitality or distress of natural habitats. The norm of now and the future directs our attention to the temporal aspects of ecological narratives, considering the immediate impact of human actions and their long-term implications. The principle of care emphasises the ethical engagement of humans with their environment, resonating with the empathetic elements within the illustrations.

Environmental limits are crucial in recognising the finite nature of our resources and habitats, an understanding that often manifests in visual cues denoting boundaries and scarcity. Social justice extends the ecosophical perspective to encompass fairness and equity in environmental stewardship, probing the visual narrative for representations of ecological parity or disparity. Lastly, adaption acknowledges the evolving nature of ecological systems and the human capacity for resilience, visually portrayed through the changing scenarios and transformations the protagonist and the fish experience.

The ecosophy then addresses social justice, challenging analysts to uncover how pictorial metaphors engage with the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and

burdens. Lastly, adaptation and change underscore the necessity for resilience in the face of environmental flux, with visuals often serving as a canvas for depicting the transformative challenges faced by both natural and human systems.

By distilling these norms into a single analytical framework, this study aligns itself with an ecological stylistic approach that is as reflective as it is critical, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between visual metaphors and ecological narratives. This approach promises a comprehensive analysis of the visual elements, offering insights into how they communicate and influence our ecological consciousness.

This part sets the stage for an intricate exploration of pictorial metaphors, bridging human psychology with ecological imagery. This foundation supports a deeper analysis of Liao's work, promising fresh insights into the entwined narratives of individuality and nature.

3. Method: Analysing Pictorial Metaphors of Freedom with Image

Schema

This study employs image schema theory as the primary lens for identifying and interpreting the pictorial metaphors of freedom in Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me*. Rooted in embodied cognition, image schemas are cognitive structures derived from recurrent physical and sensory experiences that provide a template for understanding abstract concepts (Hampe, 2008; Johnson, 1987).

To systematise the analysis, the picture book is divided into five narrative segments, each signifying a different phase in the protagonist's interaction with the fish, and symbolically, with the concept of freedom:

- i.) Initial Meeting and Desire (Figure 1 to Figure 5, this study combines them together in one picture): The story opens with the protagonist's encounter with the smiling fish, culminating in his wish to own her.

Narrative Segment 1: Initial Meeting and Desire - Encounter and desire to own the fish



Figure 1 to Figure 5: Adapted from A Fish That Smiled at Me (Liao, 2018). This book doesn't show the page number.

- ii.) Companionship and Routine (Figure 6 to Figure 13): This section showcases the development of their relationship through shared daily activities and intimate moments.

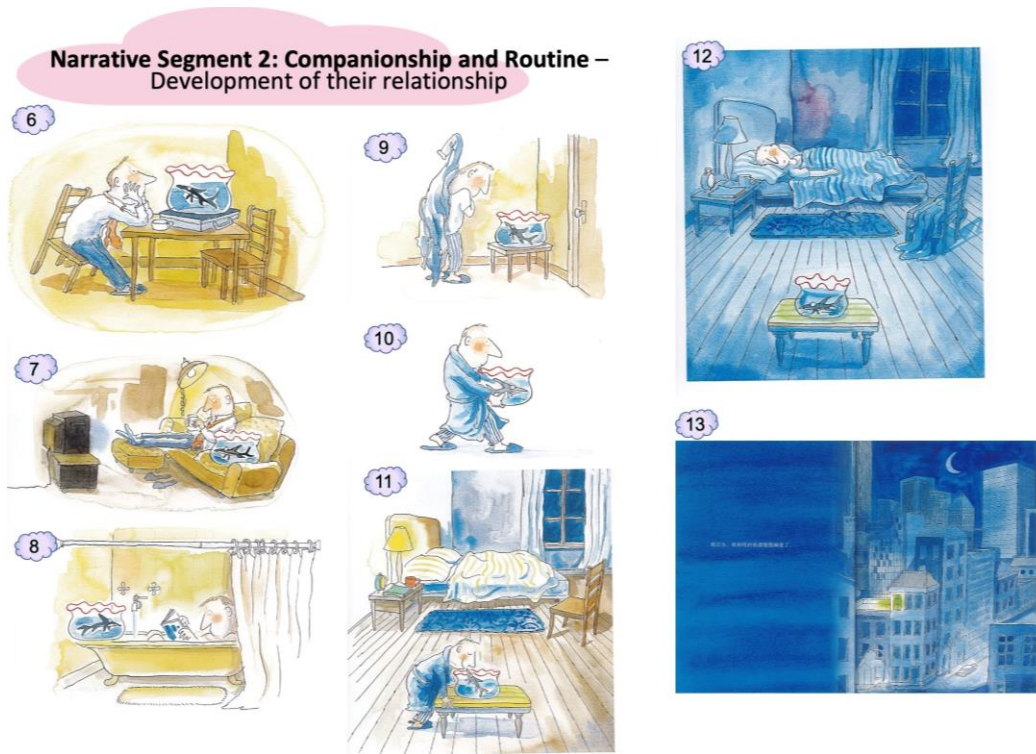


Figure 6 to Figure 13: Adapted from *A Fish That Smiled at Me* (Liao, 2018).

iii.) Dream and Discovery (Figure 14 to Figure 31): In a dream led by the fish, the protagonist navigates through a series of environments that symbolise both escape and pursuit, leading to an awakening.

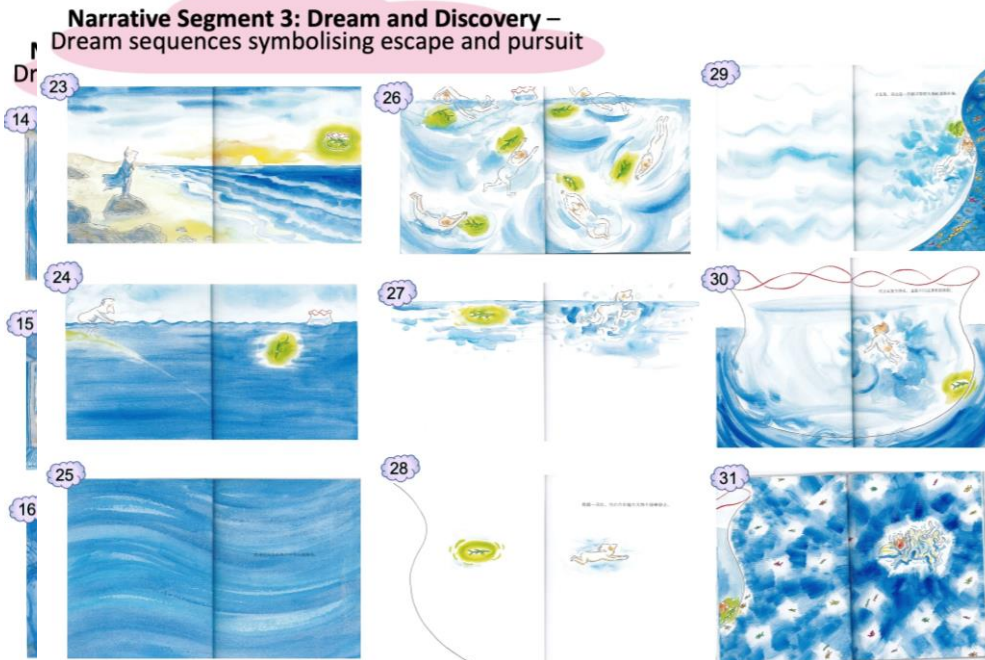


Figure 14 to Figure 31: Adapted from *A Fish That Smiled at Me* (Liao, 2018).

iv.) Contemplation and Decision (Figure 32 to Figure 36): The morning light brings introspection and the realisation that possession is not akin to freedom, prompting a decision.

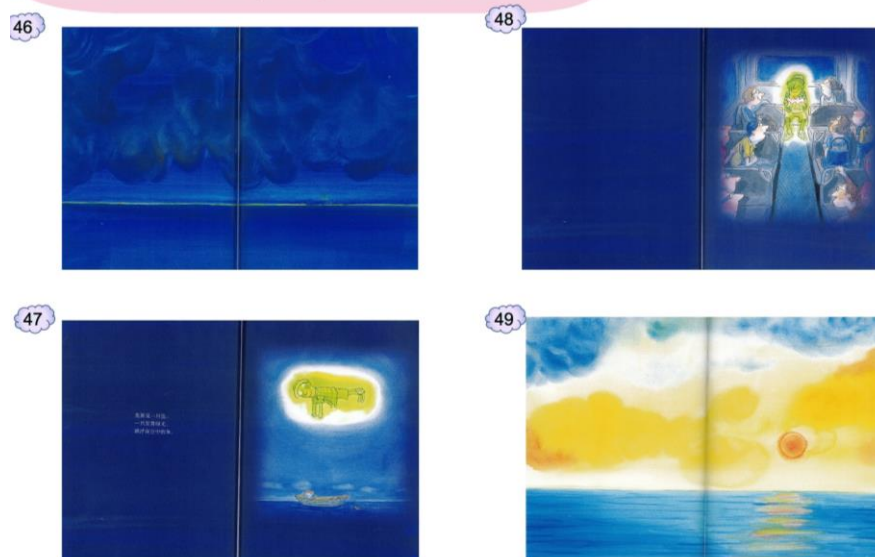
Narrative Segment 4: Contemplation and Decision -
Realisation about freedom and decision to release



Figure 32 to Figure 36: Adapted from A Fish That Smiled at Me (Liao, 2018).

v.) Resales and Reflection (Figure 37 to Figure 49): The narrative concludes with the release of the fish into the sea and the protagonist's contemplative return home, a visual metaphor for liberation and the closure of a personal journey.

Narrative Segment 5: Release and Reflection –
Release of the fish and protagonist's reflection on freedom



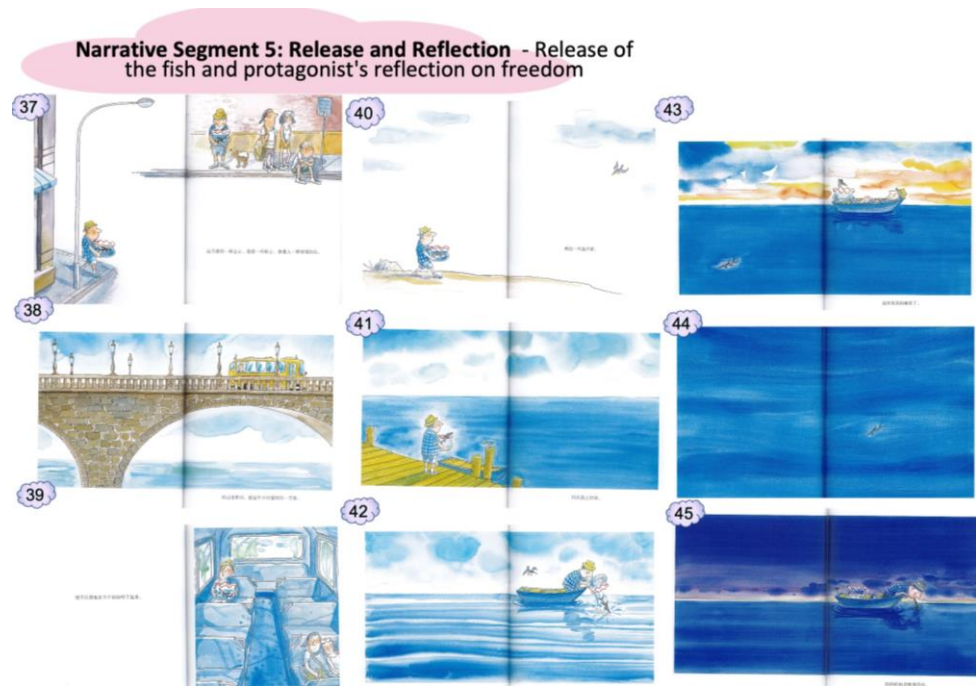


Figure 37 to Figure 49: Adapted from *A Fish That Smiled at Me* (Liao, 2018).

Using Johnson's core categories of image schemas, such as FORCE, CONTAINER, and PATH, we will analyse how visual elements in these segments metaphorically express the protagonist's psychological and emotional states. For instance, the CONTAINMENT schema is pertinent to scenes where the protagonist or the fish are depicted within bounded spaces, offering insights into the themes of possession and autonomy.

Identifying pictorial metaphors across the five segments will culminate in a charted representation that aligns with Virdis's ecosophical framework, ensuring an organised and ecologically sensitive categorisation of the data. This approach allows for a nuanced assessment of the metaphors' evolution throughout the book, providing a coherent understanding of Liao's portrayal of the multifaceted nature of freedom.

This method thus integrates cognitive linguistics and visual semiotics, using image schema theory to decipher the metaphorical language of Liao's illustrations. It is a meticulous process that acknowledges the cultural and ecological contexts that shape the interpretation of these visuals.

4. Results

Table 1: The results of the Pictorial Metaphors of Freedom

Narrative Segments of the Picture Book	Pictorial Metaphors of Freedom
1. Initial Meeting and Desire	FREEDOM IS ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY; FREEDOM IS SWIMMING; LOSING FREEDOM IS A FISH BEING TRAPPED IN A CONFINED AQUARIUM;
2. Companionship and Routine	IMPOSING LIMITS ON FREEDOM IS CARRYING THE FISH HOME; PERSONAL FREEDOM IS WEARING SLEEPWEAR;
3. Dream and Discovery	YEARNING FOR FREEDOM IS DREAM OF ESCAPE; FREEDOM IS LOOKING UPWARDS TOWARD THE SKY; FREEDOM IS CONNECTING WITH THE WOODLANDS; EXPERIENCING JOY IN FREEDOM IS DANCING ON A PATH IN THE WOODS; IMMERSION IN FREEDOM IS SWIMMING NAKED IN THE SEA; THE BOUNDARY IN THE SEA IS THE LIMIT OF FREEDOM; FREEDOM IS CROSSING A BRIDGE;
4. Contemplation and Decision	THE MASK OF FREEDOM IS THE FISH'S SMILE;
5. Release and Reflection	FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN.

The results section (see Table 1) of this study delineates a series of pictorial metaphors derived from a detailed analysis of Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me*, as interpreted through the lens of image schema theory and ecological stylistics. This comprehensive examination reveals how the embodiment of freedom, encapsulated in the movements and environments of a fish, serves as a metaphorical narrative that parallels the human experience.

Our findings are segmented according to the narrative flow of the picture book, with each segment portraying a different aspect of freedom. The selected metaphors represent typical examples within their respective narrative segments, providing insight into the protagonist's journey and the ecological and emotional themes of the story. However, this selection does not diminish the significance of other metaphors in the text, which also contribute to the broader narrative and thematic depth.

4.1 Narrative Segment 1: Initial Meeting and Desire

Jimmy Liao vividly illustrates the metaphor FREEDOM IS SWIMMING (see Figure 1) through dynamic compositions of fish gliding effortlessly in a vast oceanic scene. Using the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, these depictions emphasise smooth, unrestricted movement, symbolising liberation and boundlessness. This contrasts starkly with the metaphor LOSING FREEDOM IS A FISH BEING TRAPPED IN A CONFINED AQUARIUM (see Figure 4), where the fishbowl embodies the CONTAINER schema, visually representing confinement. Liao's juxtaposition of the expansive ocean with the limited space of the aquarium underscores the stark loss of autonomy and freedom imposed by human-made boundaries.

4.2 Narrative Segment 2: Companionship and Routine

In this segment, the metaphor PERSONAL FREEDOM IS WEARING SLEEPWEAR (see Figure 9) is depicted through Liao's intimate domestic scenes. The CONTAINER schema is reimagined to contrast societal constraints with the protagonist's personal freedom, shown in his relaxed routines like wearing sleepwear and bathing. These visuals symbolise emotional liberation, while the fish's confinement in its bowl highlights the tension between freedom and restriction. Liao's compositions subtly juxtapose the protagonist's vulnerability with the fish's captivity, reflecting both affection and the limits of imposed boundaries.

4.3 Narrative Segment 3: Dream and Discovery

The metaphor IMMERSION IN FREEDOM IS SWIMMING NAKED IN THE SEA (see Figure 26) is richly conveyed through ethereal depictions of the protagonist and the fish immersed in the vast ocean. Using the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, Liao illustrates a fluid journey toward liberation, with the protagonist's uninhibited movements representing a release from societal constraints. The BALANCE schema is reflected in the harmony between the protagonist's nakedness and the natural environment, visually emphasising reconnection with essence and equilibrium. The dreamscape's luminous and expansive composition symbolises a transformative journey toward ecological and personal freedom.

4.4 Narrative Segment 4: Contemplation and Decision

The metaphor THE MASK OF FREEDOM IS THE FISH'S SMILE (see Figure 33, Figure 34) is depicted through detailed close-ups of the fish's unchanging expression. Liao employs the SURFACE schema to emphasise the tension between appearance and reality, with the fish's smile masking its inner longing for freedom. The confined room's boundaries visually parallel the fish's captivity, mirroring the protagonist's own mental constraints. This visual interplay highlights the deceptive nature of outward appearances and prompts the protagonist to reflect on the deeper implications of confinement and autonomy.

4.5 Narrative Segment 5: Release and Reflection

The metaphor FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN (see Figure 42) is portrayed through the protagonist's journey to the seaside and the act of releasing the fish. The JOURNEY schema is evident in the protagonist's progression across an old bridge, symbolising transition and renewal. Liao's depiction of the green light enveloping the fish and protagonist adds a symbolic layer of hope and transformation, bridging dream and reality. The visual crescendo of the fish's release captures the mutual liberation of both the fish and the protagonist, emphasising themes of ecological harmony and emotional healing.

By aligning Jimmy Liao's pictorial representations with image schemas, the results reveal a nuanced portrayal of freedom that bridges ecological and personal liberation. Each narrative segment contributes to the protagonist's evolving understanding of freedom, companionship, and harmony with the natural world,

illustrating a transformative journey toward self-awareness and ecological consciousness.

4. Discussion

This discussion examines *A Fish That Smiled at Me* across its five narrative segments, focusing on how freedom is metaphorically represented and how the protagonist transforms through his relationship with the fish. Each segment explores key metaphors and their ecological and cultural implications, highlighting the protagonist's journey from ownership and control to empathy and liberation. Additionally, a cultural focus on the symbolism of the bridge offers deeper insight into themes of transition, renewal, and balance.

5.1 Segment 1: Initial Meeting and Desire

The opening segment of *A Fish That Smiled at Me* introduces freedom through the metaphor FREEDOM IS ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY (see Figure 1), depicted by vibrant fish swimming in a massive aquarium. This illusion of oceanic diversity underscores the artificiality of human-made boundaries, encapsulated in the metaphor LOSING FREEDOM IS A FISH BEING TRAPPED IN A CONFINED AQUARIUM (see Figure 4), where the aquarium symbolises both physical and conceptual restrictions. The metaphor FREEDOM IS SWIMMING (see Figure 2) further emphasises liberation as unrestricted movement, contrasting the fish's natural grace with its distorted role as a display for human observation.

The protagonist's initial desire to possess the fish reflects a human-centric perspective that commodifies nature, yet his growing admiration for its smile hints at an emerging connection. Liao critiques this notion of ownership, portraying the fish as a being with intrinsic value. This segment lays the foundation for the protagonist's evolving understanding of freedom and ethical responsibilities toward the natural world.

5.2 Segment 2: Companionship and Routine

In this segment, the protagonist's relationship with the fish evolves from ownership to companionship. The metaphor IMPOSING LIMITS ON FREEDOM IS CARRYING THE FISH HOME (see Figure 5) highlights the restriction of the fish's autonomy as it becomes a part of the protagonist's domestic life. However, shared activities like talking to the fish (see Figure 6), watching TV (see Figure 7) together, and kissing it goodnight (see Figure 11) transform the fish into a close companion, reflecting the protagonist's desire for harmony and connection.

The metaphor PERSONAL FREEDOM IS WEARING SLEEPWEAR (See Figure 9, 10 and 11) illustrates the protagonist's shedding societal roles and embracing vulnerability through casual routines, such as bathing or relaxing in sleepwear. The fish's constant smile becomes a source of comfort and reflection, inspiring the protagonist to confront his own emotions and consider the ethical implications of confinement. This segment marks a significant step in his growing awareness of freedom and evolving bond with the fish.

5.3 Segment 3: Dream and Discovery

The dream sequence serves as a profound exploration of freedom and ecological awareness. The metaphor YEARNING FOR FREEDOM IS A DREAM OF ESCAPE (see Figure 14, 15, and 16) captures the protagonist's subconscious longing for liberation. Contrasting daily life with the vastness of nature, the metaphors FREEDOM IS LOOKING UPWARDS TOWARD THE SKY (see Figure 19, 21, and 22) and FREEDOM IS CONNECTING WITH THE WOODLANDS (see Figure 19, 20, and 21) highlight rediscovery and reconnection with nature. The woods symbolise a return to natural freedom and a sanctuary for self-reflection, emphasising coexistence and respect for life's intrinsic value.

The metaphors EXPERIENCING JOY IN FREEDOM IS DANCING ON A PATH IN THE WOODS (see Figure 19, 20, and 21) and IMMERSION IN FREEDOM IS SWIMMING NAKED IN THE SEA (see Figure 24, 25, 26, and 27) further explore liberation, as the protagonist follows the fish into the sea, shedding societal constraints and reconnecting with his essential self. However, THE BOUNDARY IN THE SEA IS THE LIMIT OF FREEDOM (see Figure 28, 29, 30, and 31) introduces a sobering realisation, as the protagonist confronts invisible constraints in his life, paralleling the fish's captivity. This segment deepens his empathy for the fish and understanding of freedom as shared and interconnected.

5.4 Segment 4: Contemplation and Decision

The metaphor THE MASK OF FREEDOM IS THE FISH'S SMILE (see Figure 33, 34, and 35) reveals the tension between appearances and reality. The fish's smile symbolises constrained freedom, masking its silent suffering and yearning for the ocean. This realisation evokes empathy in the protagonist, who sees his own emotional suppression mirrored in the fish. The pace back and forth (see Figure 33) visually represent his mental struggles, emphasising his ambivalent feelings between connection and respecting the fish's autonomy.

5.5 Segment 5: Release and Reflection

The metaphor FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN (see Figure 42) encapsulates mutual liberation. For the fish, it represents a return to its natural state; for the protagonist, it signifies emotional release and a rejection of control. Crossing the old bridge (see Figure 38) with the fish tank serves as a metaphorical passage through memories, while the green light (see Figure 23, 24, 26, 27, 47, and 48) symbolises renewal and transformation, connecting the dream and reality.

The kiss goodbye is a moment of reconciliation, both with the fish and himself, as he acknowledges the importance of letting go. The protagonist's peaceful sleep (see Figure 43) following the release reflects his acceptance and inner calm. This final act demonstrates that freedom and healing come through coexistence with nature and the ability to relinquish attachments, completing his journey of self-awareness and ecological consciousness.

5.6 Cultural Focus: *The Bridge as a Symbol of Transition*

In Chinese mythology, the Naihe Bridge symbolises transition, where crossing it represents letting go of attachments and beginning anew. In *A Fish That Smiled at Me*, the bridge (see Figure 18, and 38) reflects the protagonist's transformation, as he moves from control to coexistence. For the fish, it marks a return to natural freedom. The bridge symbolises growth, renewal, and hope, connecting the protagonist's structured world with the boundless freedom of nature. Rooted in both the narrative and cultural tradition, it underscores the power of letting go as a pathway to personal and ecological harmony.

The discussion demonstrates that *A Fish That Smiled at Me* is a profound exploration of freedom, empathy, and ecological awareness. Through its five narrative segments, the story reveals the protagonist's journey from possession and control to a deeper understanding of liberation and coexistence. The metaphors employed by Jimmy Liao underscore the shared struggles of humans and nature against imposed constraints and emphasise the ethical responsibility to respect and protect life's intrinsic value. Rooted in ecological and cultural perspectives, the narrative ultimately suggests that true freedom and healing arise from empathy, letting go, and living in harmony with the natural world. This transformative journey offers valuable insights into the interconnectedness of all life, inspiring readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and themselves.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate pictorial metaphors in Jimmy Liao's *A Fish That Smiled at Me* through an ecolinguistic framework, uncovering a compelling narrative of freedom, ecological awareness, and personal transformation. Using image schema theory and ecological stylistics, the research highlights how Liao's illustrations transcend visual storytelling, offering profound insights into human-nature relationships. Metaphors such as FREEDOM IS SWIMMING (see Figure 26, 27) and FREEDOM IS RELEASING THE FISH INTO THE OCEAN (see Figure 42) illustrate the protagonist's journey from control to empathy, mirroring broader ecological and societal themes.

The protagonist's transformation, paralleled by Liao's own experiences, reflects the interconnectedness of all life and the need for harmony between humanity and the natural world. The narrative invites readers to reflect on their ecological responsibilities and embrace a more sustainable, compassionate ethos.

While the interpretive nature of this study reflects the researcher's perspective (Forceville, 2018), future research could incorporate diverse cultural and interdisciplinary approaches to deepen the understanding of visual metaphors and their impact. By continuing to explore the intersections of art, ecology, and personal transformation, such work could further illuminate how visual narratives inspire ecological consciousness and foster sustainable behaviours.

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