

## Unlocking the Mental Space Image Through Cognitive Stylistics: Delineating the Namibian Autobiographical Texts

Lazarus Gawazah  
University of Namibia

**ABSTRACT:** This study evaluates Namhila's autobiography through cognitive stylistics theory, also known as the mental image space theory. It further sought to test whether the link, path and balance schemata were present and how they have been used in the autobiography. The schema theory in linguistics examines how "general" knowledge is needed to make sense of written texts. The study found out that the balance, link and path schemata are all present in Namhila's autobiography. The schemata assist readers to better understand the autobiography with a balance as mental and physical equilibrium, links to relationships and path as journeys from the beginning to the end. The study recommends the application of other theories of stylistics to the analysis of the different genres of literary texts.

**Keywords:** Cognitive stylistics, schemata, autobiography, liberation war.

*Submitted: 9 March; Revised: 22 March; Accepted: 26 March*

**Corresponding Author:** [lazarusgawazah@gmail.com](mailto:lazarusgawazah@gmail.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Namibian autobiographies are historical pieces rich with linguistic information that can be used to track changes in schematic language use. They are a source of historical events rich with actual liberation struggle experiences from the encounters of a Namibian war veteran. Readers can witness real life events in the life of the writer. Contemporary language is preserved in autobiographies. The purpose of an autobiography is to give you a first-hand account into the life of the person you are reading about, and to give you a better insight into how their experiences have shaped them as a person (Lejeune, 2014). In it, the language used at the time. Cognitive language is used to write events that can be remembered as reference to the future. Autobiographies are important literature because they capture details of life as it was before we were born. For example, when former female liberation fighters write, they inspire younger writers to write their own experiences.

A reader of a literary text uses knowledge that they have gained in the past to be able to understand and comprehend what the reader is reading about (Woldemariam, 2014). This prior knowledge is known as schemas. Schemas are mental pictures that are created to assist the reader in the process of reading (An, 2013). The ability to remember, reason and process this information is the cognition that stylistics examines. The basic aspects of the mental image space theory are balance, link and path. The linguistic, content and formal schemata are also other prominent tools that can be applied to analyse a literary text. Cognitive stylistics is a theory of language that was derived from neuroscience. The theory is a discipline adopted by linguists to gain a new insight in investigating how readers understand literary texts. The present study sought to evaluate Ellen Namhila's autobiography by the application of the mental image schema theory.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *The mental image schema theory*

Cognitive Stylistics has several strands of schema branches that can be used to interpret different types of texts. Some of these are the relevance, blending, contextual effects, implicature, reader response and the text world theory. This study applied the mental image schema theory to the analysis of an autobiographical text. The mental image schema was applied in the context of balance, link and path. Stylistics can be applied to both linguistics and literature. The goal of stylistics is not only to describe formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text; or to relate literary effects to linguistic 'causes' where these are felt to be relevant. (Culler, 2002). Stylistic analysis has two main objectives: first, to enable the readers to make meaningful interpretation of the text itself; second, to expand knowledge and awareness of the language in general. (khattak. et al., 2012). In other words, the theory address the cognate aspects which humans use to make sense of texts (Stockwell, 2002). That is to say, cognitive stylistics creates a platform for a reader to contextualise the contents of a written text using prior knowledge.

Schema Theory (Schank & Abelson, 1977) shows how “general” knowledge is needed to make sense of a text. Image schema brings back stored mental images to instantly address cognitive challenges (Burk 2005. p. 189). Schema theory is a cognitive information processing tool that facilitates language comprehension. Schemata (plural of Schema) are the mental structures which people use to process information through remembering. Schemas perceive the brain as a two-way traffic where new information can be processed while remembering existing information. This paper applied the three key types of schema to analyse Ellen Namhila’s autobiography. These are balance, link and path.

The theory of Cognitive Stylistics was developed from neuroscience. What is reflected in a speech comes from the brain, it is not always easy to fully understand the motives and meaning. Cognitive stylistics approach is a linguistic scientific field with many theories that can be applied to analyse and understand a literary text. It is always a challenge to determine the meaning of grammar and metaphor in a literary text, stylistics finds itself at the confluence of text, content and cognition. (Burke, 2004). Cognitive stylistics studies the mental contribution of a reader to a literary text for better understanding. It is a broad area of study with several well-read theories that can be applied to comprehend a literary text. These include Verbal Irony, Cognitive Metaphor and Text World Theory. Schema theory is defined as an explanation of how readers use prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text. The term ‘schema’ is used as singular, where ‘schemata’ is in plural form.

The origin of schema as a theory is not clearly known. Several scholars contributed to the development of the theory. Some of the contributors are discussed in this part. Bartlett (1932) discovered that past experiences help us make sense of new experiences by supplying us with expectations and frameworks for action. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was credited as first to create a cognitive development theory which included schemas. New information is added or assimilated into current schemas. The term schema refers to representations of knowledge of the world other than knowledge of text or language. Schemas can restructure knowledge; that is, new schemas are created based on older ones. (Vosniadou, & Brewer, 1987). Schemas can be preserved when incoming facts fit existing schematic knowledge and have been encountered previously. That means background knowledge is needed to process new information. There is schema accretion, which happens when new knowledge is added to an existing schema, thus broadening its scope. Schema can be disrupted when there is a conceptual deviance which produces a challenge to readers. Schema can be refreshed when the same information is processed over and over again (Stockwell, 2005). The diagram below presents a summary of the schema theory.

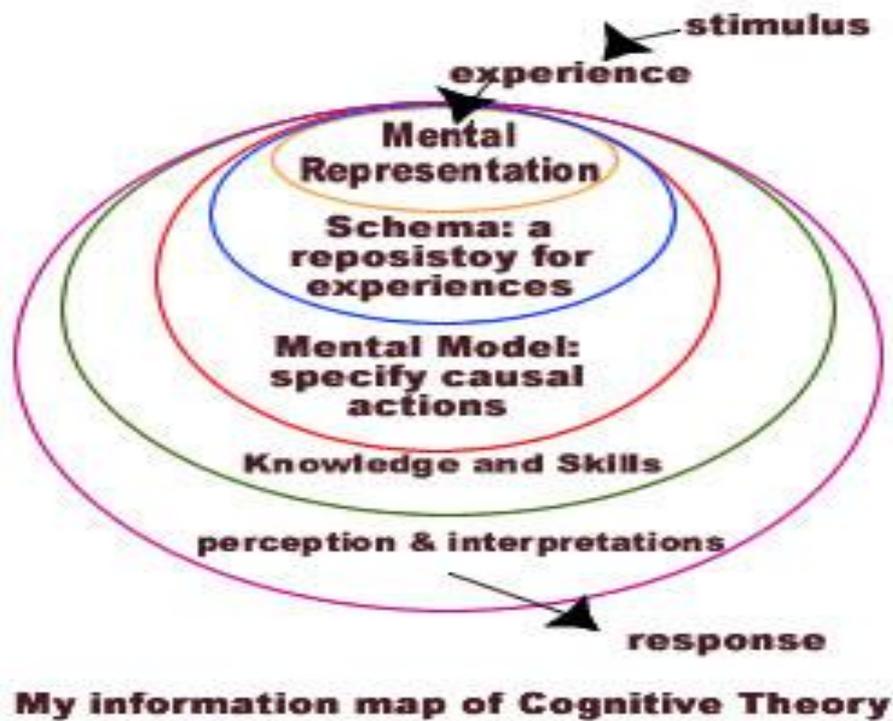


Figure 1. Mental Image Schema Theory: Mental Frameworks That Help Organise Information

## METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The data were collected from the autobiography as written text and analysed thematically. This means that related themes were coded and grouped together according to the study objectives. A content analysis checklist in Applied Linguistics was developed as a guideline that addresses the study objectives. In addition to that, text selection criteria were used as the rationale behind choosing Namhila's autobiography among any other biographies or literary genres. One of the reasons was that the autobiography addresses all aspects of cognitive stylistics exhaustively. The table below is the content analysis checklist used in this study:

Table 1: Content Analysis Checklist in Applied Linguistics

Aspects of Mental image		
<b>Balance</b>	It is the equilibrium that seeks to balance the author/reader's mental and the physical balance.	✓
<b>Link</b>	These are the relationships which the author/reader had with family and friends throughout her journey.	✓
<b>Path</b>	Journeys that the autobiographical author/reader travelled during the liberation struggle.	✓

At this point, it is important to state the objectives of the study. The the main objective of the study was to evaluate Namhila's autobiography through cognitive stylistics analysis. The three specific objectives were to:

- investigate the three types of schema in the text
- evaluate the schemata found present in the text
- demonstrate the applicability of the schemata through mapping

## RESULTS

### *The balance schemata*

#### *A) Mental and physical balance*

In the autobiography titled *The Price of Freedom*, Namhila's endeavors reflects several events of the balance schema. Balance schema is also known as an equilibrium schema, is a balance schema that involves physical or metaphorical external and internal pressure on container-like objects. It is like a blindfolded lady holding a two-pan scale. (Woldemariam, 2014). When Namhila left Namibia, into Angola, she was a young girl who did not understand the balance between the actual physical going to join the liberation struggle and her emotional strength. As she was an ordinary civilian girl with no experience in travel and war, she needed to mentally prepare herself to balance to accustom with any challenges or encounters that she will face until the end of her liberation struggle journey. As Namhila discussed with other members of the liberation war contenders, she was advised the following:

*"He said we were too young to face the journey especially as there was war in Angola. He also told us if we were to go on that when we would get there we would have no role to play except to act as wives to the soldiers in the bush. This prospect so terrified us that we even considered taking his advice. I was twelve years old."* (Namhila, 1997. p. 8).

Here Namhila clearly show that the mental and physical balance schemata would come into her actions. She had to prepare to balance between the actual going, the prospects of war and her age, for which she was only twelve years old at the time and too young to be ready to fight the liberation struggle.

*B) Crime and punishment balance*

When an individual or society commits an offence, they are disciplined in the form of a punishment. This can be done through payment of a fine in modern civilised communities or physical beating as it was done in the past. In the text *The Price of Freedom*, crime and punishment is told:

*“One day one Namibian girl was found with our boys with a Gambian whom they suspected of being her boyfriend. They asked this boy to leave and then started beating the girl up. She was beaten so badly that we girls decided to take the matter to the local police station. The policeman in charge called the boys to explain why they had beaten up the girl. They explained that the girl had misbehaved and caused an embarrassment to the Namibian community, so they beat her up. The policeman was satisfied with this response, saying when he studied in Britain five years previously he had experienced similar problems with Gambian girls. However, he took down the names of the boys and warned them that beating up people was not allowed in a Muslim society. They were told that they would be punished by law if they repeated the offence.” (Namhila, 1997. p.71)*

The above excerpt shows that when the Namibian girl caused embarrassment to the Namibian community, this was a form of a crime. She was beaten up by her fellow Namibian boys because of her wrong doings. This was the form of punishment that the girl received. The policeman who handled this matter at the station also narrated a similar event where a girl he studied with in Britain committed a similar offence and was punished by her fellow countrymen boys. This event is an exemplary explanation of crime and punishment balance schema.

*The link schemata*

These are the relationships between two or more people. Link schema is an image connects two or more mental images to form a new experience. In this case, the connection between relationships. It springs from the bonding relations with our mother. This parental relation is extended to relatives, families, in-laws and the society. It is naturally biconditional because A is linked to B and only if B is linked to A (Rumain, Connell & Braine, 1983). Namhila had several relationships, the one between her and her biological family, which includes relatives and extended family members.

*“I am the third of seven children of my family.” (Namhila, 1997. p. 14).*

In the above quotation, Namhila is related to her siblings. In addition, she had links with her uncle whom she witnessed being beaten up and arrested by the South African apartheid police during the liberation struggle. They first set

their dogs on him in a savage attack, and then loaded him in their vehicle. When he was finally returned to his family, he was a broken man. This is a relationship between uncle and niece. Namhila also relates to her seven siblings. The bond between siblings cannot easily be forgotten. These two relationships were significant to carry her throughout her life as a young female liberation war fighter.

### *The path schemata*

The journeys encountered by Namhila in her autobiography are known as path schemas. Path schema: entails such salient features as opening and terminal marks and sequences of location that connects the beginning and the end. Freeman's research shows that the fundamental sources of cognitive metaphor in King Lear are understood analyzing these schemas. (as cited in Woldemariam, 2014).

Namhila's journey are deliberated from the start, when she first took her liberation journey until she returns to Namibia. The following account shows Namhila's path:

### *Namnhila's journey during the Namibian liberation struggle*

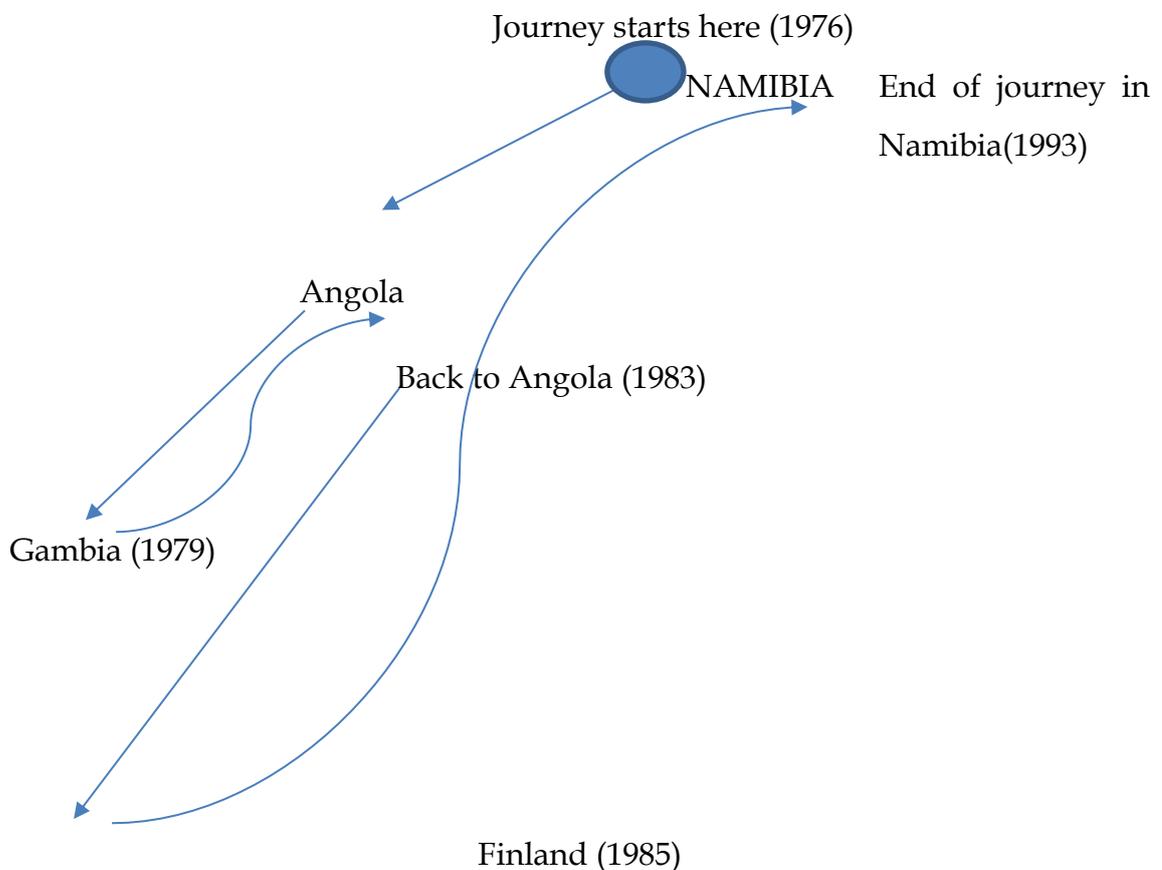


Figure 2. Presentation of the Three Schemata

The above diagram illustrates the beginning of Namnhila's liberation war journey. The journey starts in Namibia in 1976 where she went to Angola to live in the liberation war camps. She then moved to The Gambia in 1979 where she pursued her secondary education while she lived with foster families. She returned back to Angola at the Kwanza Sul refugee camp in 1983 and taught fellow refugees for two years while she waited to a scholarship to pursue her further education in Finland. She was then selected to go for her university studies in Finland in 1985 where she earned a Master's degree in Library and Information Science. Along the way she got pregnant and had a child during her studies. Namhila then finally returned to Namibia to mark the end of her Journey in 1993. Her journey lasted 19 years, according to her mouth "in exile.

## DISCUSSION

Considering that most African countries went through the liberation struggle to gain independence from the western countries, the study of autobiographical writing through cognitive stylistics becomes relevant. Cognitivism permit readers of literary texts to negotiate comprehension through remembering, envisioning, visualisation and reasoning as they reflect on their past present and future experiences. This is the point when the author or reader of a literary text use their sense of mental and psychological balance within their mind to negotiate literary texts for easy understanding and comprehension. This view is in agreement with the findings of Woldemariam, (2014), that the reader of a literary text must have partial or substantial background information to understand a literary text.

Family ties are an important link for most people. There are very few people who can live in isolation without succumbing to a mental and physical state of collapse. Therefore, maintaining and remembering family links assists the reader of a text to navigate through challenges especially when they remember about their childhood memory relationships (Zlatev, 2014). Namhila also recalls the brutality of the South African apartheid police when they attached her uncle during her young. This implies to her cognition skills to link her relationship with her uncle.

During a war, people migrate from the danger zone to become refugees in other countries where there is no war. These people become refugees. The process of migrating can be remembered as the path after the war has ended. Readers use the path mental image schemata to visualise what the author went through in the struggle for independence. Some of the routes followed are more challenging than others. The present study agrees with the findings of Hedblom, Kutz & Neuhaus, (2015) that the path that a person takes during the liberation war determines their chances of their journey's success. Mental schemata help the reader of a literary text to make sense of difficult texts.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The interpretation of a text can be studied by linguists to help readers make sense of what they are reading. Namhila's autobiography can best be analysed using the balance, link and path schemata. A reader who employs cognitive skills such as reasoning, remembering or envisions the future are highly likely to understand and comprehend a written text. The balance schema

was evaluated. Namhila encountered mental and the physical suffering during her journey from Namibia to Angola until the time of her return at independence. The link schema was analysed where Namhila's relationships with her biological. Namhila was the third out of seven siblings. Finally, the path schema was investigated and explained using a map that is labelled. Namhila's journey starts in Namibia in 1976 and ends back in Namibia in 1993 at independence. The study recommends the application of other theories of stylistics to the analysis of the different genres of literary texts.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

This study provides insight assumed to be a limitation partial to the study of autobiographical and biographical texts through the application of cognitive stylistics. Future studies can be conducted using other theories of stylistics at a broader population scale with several related texts. This allows different results and conclusions to be drawn as they contribute to the body of knowledge in the study of Applied Linguistics.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Credit goes to my two supervisors for sharing their knowledge in my Master's and Ph.D. studies at the Namibia University of Science and Technology and the University of Namibia respectively. Thank you Professor Haileleul Zeleke Woldemariam and Dr Collen Sabao.

### **REFERENCES**

- An, S. (2013). Schema Theory in Reading. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 3(1).
- Burke, M. (2004). Cognitive stylistics in the classroom. *Style*, 38(4), 491-509.
- Cook, G. W. (1990). *A theory of discourse deviation: the application of schema theory to the analysis of literary discourse* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds).
- Culler, J. D. (2002). *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature*. London: Psychology Press.
- Hedblom, M. M., Kutz, O., & Neuhaus, F. (2015). Choosing the Right Path: Image Schema Theory as a Foundation for Concept Invention. *J. Artif. Gen. Intell.*, 6(1), 21-54.
- Khattak, et al. (2012). *The Role of Stylistics in Interpreting Literature*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cityuniversity.edu.pk/curj/Journals/Journal/Jan%202012/11.pdf>
- Lejeune, P. (2014). Autobiography and New Communication Tools. *Identity technologies: Constructing the self online*, 247-58.
- Namhila, E. N. (1997). *The Price of Freedom*. Windhoek: New Namibia Press.

- Pankin, J. (2013). *Schema Theory*. Retrieved from: [http://web.mit.edu/pankin/www/Schema\\_Theory\\_and\\_Concept\\_Formation.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/pankin/www/Schema_Theory_and_Concept_Formation.pdf)
- Rumain, B., Connell, J., & Braine, M. D. (1983). Conversational comprehension processes are responsible for reasoning fallacies in children as well as adults: If is not the biconditional. *Developmental psychology*, 19(4), 471.
- Stockwell, P. (2002). *Cognitive poetics: An introduction*. London: Routledge Press.
- Vosniadou, S., & Brewer, W. F. (1987). Theories of knowledge restructuring in development. *Review of educational research*, 57(1), 51-67
- Woldemariam, H. Z. (2014). The teaching and learning of poetry at postgraduate level: A cognitive stylistics approach. *Asian Journal of African Studies*, (34), 127-172.
- Zlatev, J. (2014). Image schemas, mimetic schemas and children's gestures. *Cognitive Semiotics*, 7(1), 3-29.