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*Inverting the logic of catastrophe:
Elisabeth-Jane Burnett's narrative of directional metaphors*

ABSTRACT: In her narrative diary, *The Grassling*, the Anglo-Kenyan new nature writer, Elisabeth-Jane Burnett, transcends linear time and blurs the boundaries of geographical space. With a blend of poetry, timescapes, and an engaging style, *The Grassling* celebrates the marvelousness of both land and language, exploring the intersection of humans with the more-than-human world. In the framework of Ecolinguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theories, the analysis is conducted using Positive Discourse Analysis to highlight the presence of positive evaluations in metaphors which traditionally are appraised as negative. Burnett's work stands as a qualitative case study to reflect on the unusual directional evaluation DOWN IS GOOD, reversing the basis on which Western growthism has been built, when that growthism itself is leading to disaster. This alternative evaluation challenges the conventional association of UP with POWER and PROGRESS, thus emphasizing the value of DOWN as a source of NOURISHMENT, STABILITY, and REGENERATION.

KEYWORDS: New Nature Writing, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Ecolinguistics, Positive Discourse Analysis, DOWN IS GOOD.

1. Introduction

The present paper intends to discuss the unconventional use of a positive evaluation for downward movements in *The Grassling. A Geological Memoir*¹ by the contemporary writer of English and Kenyan heritage, Elisabeth-Jane Burnett². Both her work and research are focused on the natural world, in line with the New Nature Writing movement, which aims at finding meaning not only in rare and exotic places, but also in more ordinary ones, as well as in the unremarkable encounters with the more-than-human world. Nature writers blend scientific observation with intimate, wide-ranging prose that merges personal reflection with natural and cultural history, psychogeography, travel, folklore, and poetic language, defying simple categorisation³. As a nature writer and environmental activist, Elisabeth-Jane Burnett manages to write so touchingly about nature, thus making big issues more tangible; through an intimate engagement, she illustrates the importance of being amidst nature whilst describing the positive impact of elemental encounters – mostly earth and water – can counteract the psychological tensions and ethical disorientation generated by contemporary ecological crisis. Her vivid and descriptive language reveals how ecopoetics⁴ can both raise

consciousness by bringing the effects of climate change and pollution to life, and offer positive emotions, such as enjoyment and renewal, or healing and resistance – a chance to be (re)connected with ourselves, our origins and our planet, but most importantly with what lives underneath our feet. To illustrate this dynamic, the following extract from *The Grassling* demonstrates how Burnett foregrounds the complexity and vitality of soil ecologies while reflecting on the emotional and intergenerational resonances of her encounters:

A quarter of all known species live in the soil. Bacteria, fungi, plants, organic matter, nematodes, arthropods, animals. [...] What do I notice in my visit to the fields? In the time spent with a blade of grass in my father's acre? That I am often the beneficiary of these moments. The fields, in ways I am only just beginning to realize, connect me to my father, while the blade of grass leaves me, somehow, more graceful, more upright. While all I do is write of them. Yet there may be a value in this amplification, in bringing these characters into the foreground, in changing the way they are looked, or not looked, at. And this not looking is one of the hardest things to visualize, to make it possible to see. [...] While there is still so much to learn about the soil, we know that the interaction of organisms in the soil contributes to the cycles that make all life possible and that to help ourselves we must help the soil⁵.

This passage exemplifies Burnett's ecopoetic. She draws attention to the richness of below-ground life through taxonomic listing, a gesture reminiscent of scientific cataloguing, while simultaneously framing her observations in affective terms that foreground personal memory and embodied response. Burnett's approach can therefore be compared to that of a botanist and a zoologist insofar as she adopts modes of noticing characteristics of the natural sciences: careful observation, descriptive precision, and an interest in the interrelations among organisms. She is very concerned about anthropogenic gas emissions, and at the same time, she celebrates what exists under the earth's surface, as a way to glorify the interconnectedness between place and its inhabitants. This interplay becomes so immersive that, narratively, she moves toward a figurative metamorphosis into grass and soil, signalling a deep identification with the nonhuman world.

The subtitle of her book, *A Geological Memoir*, reinforces this double perspective: on the one hand the scientific matter is presented to define and expose the environmental crisis, the derivation of place names, historical land usage, changing farming practices, and how climate change and urban societies have impacted small-scale farming on the British coast. On the other hand, the autobiographical approach – suggested by the word “memoir” – highlights the relevance of an intimate experience with nature, expressed by a first-person poetic narrative. A story

of her most intimate life experiences, Burnett's book records her visits from Birmingham, where she lives, to her father's field in Devon and it illustrates how she rediscovers the landscapes she knew as a child, using a guide of the local history written by her father. Going back to Druid's Hill – the fields where her father had lived – the narrative acquires a dimension that appears timeless, a dimension in which the contact with the land allows her to overcome the linearity of time, by slowing it down or accelerating it forcefully. In the latter case, the narrative suggests that the author can find herself transported into a liminal space between reality and imagination, where memory, place and ecological awareness converge.

In this regard, a reference to David Abram – a cultural ecologist and philosopher best known for *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) where he examines the entanglements of language, perception, and place – is productive. Abram's notion of landscape of language offers a useful conceptual parallel for thinking about Burnett's work, although it emerges from an entirely different cultural and philosophical tradition, highlighting how diverse cultures have articulated relational understandings of land and story. The linguistic terrain of the Dreamtime – also *Ngarranggarni*, or *Tjukula Jukurrpa* in Australian Aboriginal languages⁶ – a set of spiritual beliefs and creation stories shared among the Indigenous Australians. The Dreamtime is not just a mythological concept but a lived reality, and it is through their language and storytelling that the Aboriginals maintain a deep connection with the natural world. Abram points out that their interconnected worldview challenges the Western dualistic view of nature as separate from human beings, as «their relation with the sustaining landscape was direct and intimate»⁷. He also discusses the concept of *country*, which is a term used by the Aboriginals to describe their ancestral lands and their spiritual connection to them. Following this perspective, *The Grassling* may be classified among the atypical exemplars in Western literature, as its narrative is a fertile ground for a new conceptualisation of the metaphor down is good, reversing the basis on which *growthism*⁸ is conceptually structured. This original evaluation challenges the conventional association of up with power and growth, emphasizing here the value of down as a source of life, nourishment, reconnection, and regeneration. These concepts stand as a starting point in the identification of various types of evaluations, such as appreciation, admiration, and gratitude, which contribute to inspire the construction of positive and empathetic feelings for the planet.

2. Literature review

The Grassling (TG) is seeded with metaphors, where the boundaries between the human and more-than-human world are blurred, and time and space are overcome. In this context, my analysis primarily revolves around the identification of conceptual metaphors in Burnett's work, which gives an insight into the author's perception of the world and her relationship with nature, providing a single yet significant case study on the topic. The identification of unusual conceptual directional metaphors is particularly relevant to ecocultural humanities, as it allows us to understand the impact of language in shaping our perceptions and evaluations of the world.

2.1 Conceptual metaphors

The milestone of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is the seminal work by Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*⁹, where the authors explore the pervasive role of metaphors in our everyday language and thought. They argue that metaphors are not just a rhetorical device, but a fundamental mechanism by which we make sense of the world around us and structure our conceptual systems. As conceptual metaphors are grounded in correlations within human experience, it is necessary to bear in mind that «our experiences will (1) differ from culture to culture and (2) may depend on our understanding one kind of experience in terms of another, that is, our experiences may be metaphorical in nature»¹⁰. They identify the primary conceptual metaphor more is up and less is down, which is directly grounded in our everyday life experience – a combination of sensory-motor perceptions and subjective judgements. One example lies in the conceptualisation of amount (more/less) and verticality (up/down): changes in amount are understood by our physical experience in terms of verticality, e.g. pouring water into a glass causes an increase in the amount, so the water level rises. Therefore, this metaphorical system maps the vertical dimension onto various aspects of our experience, such as morality, power, and emotions. The metaphorical mapping is such that up is typically associated with positive valence and down with a negative one, thus translating into the conceptual metaphors up is good and down is bad.

In this sense, Allbritton¹¹, discusses the effects on language and cognitive processes resulting from conceptual metaphors, which are involved in the construction of the so-called “metaphor-based schemas”. Since these structures may influence the way concepts are processed and perceived by the listener/reader,

they are considered as a tool to encapsulate knowledge. Therefore, conceptual metaphors can accomplish several cognitive functions, among which making new conceptual domains accessible through metaphorical entailments.

In *Metaphor: a Practical Introduction*, Kövecses further discusses the up-down metaphors as a common orientational metaphor that deals with basic human spatial orientation, as «their cognitive job [...] is to make a set of target concepts coherent in our conceptual system»¹². The up-down metaphors involve the mapping of physical downward movement onto abstract domains, such as emotions, social and power relations, or ideas. From a broader perspective, the down metaphor is used to express negative emotions, hierarchy, or states, such as sadness, low social status, or disappointment, as exemplified in the metaphorical expressions “I feel *down* today”, “She *falls* in love”, “He is my social *inferior*”. Despite this, the following research has brought in a new route. With *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*¹³, Kövecses marks a turning point: he states that universal experiences do not necessarily lead to universal metaphors and that sensory-motor experience may be not selectively used in the creation of metaphors, which in turn can be based on cultural considerations and different cognitive processes.

In this context, a work by Wnuk and Ito¹⁴ represents a parallel path to the present considerations. The authors investigate the sphere of affect metaphors, focussing on unreported cases of spatial metaphors mapping down with positive experiences and, on the contrary, up with negative ones. This study is conducted on emotional experiences in Mlabri, an Austroasiatic language of Thailand and Laos, making a novel contribution to the study of metaphor and Cognitive Linguistics. The paper provides a rich description and analysis of the spatial metaphors of affect in Mlabri, showing how they are grounded in sensorimotor experiences, cultural values, and linguistic structures. It also challenges the assumption that happy is up and sad is down are universal or near-universal metaphors, by demonstrating that there are alternative mappings that are equally motivated by bodily correlates of affect. They, finally, propose a different perspective on how cognitive metaphor research can benefit from using multiple sources of data and methods to investigate metaphorical phenomena.

Furthermore, Goatly has made seminal contributions to this topic, from *The Language of Metaphors*¹⁵ an extensive and detailed analysis of the linguistic appearance, functions and purposes of metaphors, to *Washing the Brain. Metaphor and Hidden Ideologies*¹⁶, an interdisciplinary approach to metaphor studies which combines both Cognitive Linguistics and Discourse studies. This latter study

appears relevant for the present research, as it «raise[s] awareness of these latent ideologies, and of how they may be structuring and influencing our personal, social, environmental, and political behavior»¹⁷, providing an in-depth knowledge of the so-called hidden ideologies in conventional conceptual metaphors and of how they are reproduced, perpetuating some social behaviors. In *Metaphor and Grammar in the Poetic Representation of Nature*¹⁸, Goatly critiques conventional grammar for encoding anthropocentric assumptions by depicting humans as agents and nature as passive. He argues that poetic discourse, through non-congruent grammar, metaphor, coordination, and personification, has the potential to disrupt this binary and reconfigure the human-nature relationship. Drawing on works by Wordsworth, Thomas, and Oswald, he demonstrates how poetic language may foreground the agency and vitality of the more-than-human world, offering ecologically resonant alternatives to dominant linguistic structures and challenging reductive human-centred paradigms.

2.2 Evaluation

As the main aim of the present paper is to underline the potential positive connotation of the conceptual metaphor down is good, this section includes a reference to the literature related to evaluation within the framework of analysis.

Within the field of ecolinguistics, Stibbe¹⁹ emphasises the significance of the appraisal framework²⁰, highlighting how evaluative language reveals underlying ideologies and value systems. Metaphorical evaluation, in particular, functions ideologically by framing certain experiences or entities as desirable or undesirable. Stibbe illustrates this through examples of morphologically marked evaluative pairs (e.g., *unhappy* vs. *happy*), where the unmarked forms typically carry positive connotations. He further examines evaluative polarity in metaphorical oppositions such as *ahead/behind* and *up/down*, noting that such pairs often encode implicit hierarchies. Even though he acknowledges the culturally entrenched preference for *up* as positive, he critically notes the limited capacity of unmarked expressions to consistently generate positive appraisals, thereby opening a conceptual space to challenge these normative metaphorical alignments.

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

Since language plays an active role in constructing meaning, ideologies and realities²¹, it can be argued that through linguistic analysis we gain fresh insights into

the possibilities of beneficial discourses for effecting positive (social) change. In order to do so, the theoretical and ethical framework is provided by Ecolinguistics and the data are examined by Positive Discourse Analysis approaches.

Ecolinguistics²² broadly examines how language shapes human perception and behaviour toward the environment, particularly amidst the current ecological crisis. As Stibbe notes, language can reduce nature to exploitable resources, but it can also foster care and respect for life-sustaining systems. This study adopts ecolinguistics as a framework to explore how linguistic choices reflect and promote a sense of reconnection with the soil. Drawing on Stibbe's conceptualisation of *evaluation*²³, the study investigates how discourse encodes values and ideologies. Metaphorical expressions often function as ideological cues, triggering positive or negative appraisal, such as *unhappy* vs. *happy*, or *behind* vs. *ahead*. As Stibbe argues, seemingly neutral terms carry evaluative weight, revealing implicit value systems.

The analysis also engages with Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA)²⁴, a development within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which highlights constructive, life-affirming discourses. While not without limitations (Bartlett 2012), PDA shifts the focus from critique of domination to the identification of discourses that envision and enable positive ecological change.

According to this theoretical framework, the methodology I have applied cannot disregard the definition of an ecological philosophy – or *ecosophy*²⁵, which is a set of values, norms, and reflections based on ecological awareness and consideration. This is crucial: an explicitly defined ecosophy underpins the analysis, serving both as a guiding ethical framework and evaluative lens. My ecosophy has been defined following Stibbe's structure and guidelines and it can be summarized in one word: *Interconnect!*. I use this term to refer to interconnectedness as the way in which Nature, humans and *more-than-humans* interact with one another to form a complex whole, and it is chosen for the specific meanings it entails, and can be explained as follows:

- Values: *Interconnect!* implies values such as communion, belonging, care and respect. These values are fundamental in re-shaping human common sense and behaviours toward the natural world. The interconnection with the earth and all her inhabitants originates a deep sense of care and respect for what is around us. Thus, humans, as part of a wider system have the responsibility of their impact on it.
- Environmental connections: *Interconnect!* is syntactically an imperative sentence indicating “to feel to be part of the web of Nature”. This web

represents metaphorically the delicate relationships among all the biotic and abiotic entities that constitute the Planet, and that can benefit from the association.

- Legitimation: *Interconnect!* puts all the species on the same level, all the biotic and abiotic entities which are intertwined and together constitute the Earth. Hence, they all have equal rights and responsibilities in supporting the system on which life depends.
- Now and the future: the goal of the ecosophy is to seed its values in order to promote future behaviours which will be more and more conscious and caring toward the web we live by.

Both the discussion and the analysis are developed according to my ecosophy.

The methodology is qualitative, and the data are gathered manually from a physical copy of *The Grassling. A Geological Memoir*. Representative examples have been selected by a deductive approach – namely noticing, collecting, and thinking – followed by the analysis and the discussion of the results. The discussion begins by addressing the initial approach to the dataset. The investigation did not originally aim to identify specific metaphors; rather, it began as a manual Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) of a contemporary work of nature writing non-fiction. However, an unexpected pattern emerged: frequent representations of downward movement were consistently associated with positive outcomes. This was particularly striking given that “downward” trajectories are conventionally associated with negative connotations. This observation prompted a shift in the data collection strategy, which subsequently focused on linguistic features that contribute to meaning-making and salience, with particular attention to orientational conceptual metaphors involving downward motion. These were analysed through the lens of my ecosophy *Interconnect!*, which served as the evaluative framework.

The following section presents and discusses a selection of representative orientational metaphors – chosen to exemplify key patterns – alongside a broader examination of the author’s language, stance, rhetorical choices, and underlying ecological concerns.

4. Analysis and discussion

The Grassling (TG) testifies to a specific reframing of the non-morphologically marked word *down*, which is used not only as an adverb, preposition or adjective, but also as a reference in meaning construction for the orientational metaphors

relating to the idea of verticality and of going downward. Here, the latter is a movement meant as comfort, relief and consolation, thus completely reversing its common usage and intrinsic connotation. As a matter of fact, the source frame of down is normally considered evil/negative, as opposed to the one of up, which is good/positive. This is usually reflected in the polarity of human emotions, positions of power and social relations.

As a result of close reading, the distinctiveness in Burnett's writing is the metaphorical construction of space-time motion on the vertical axis: rooting, going downward, diving, are all actions represented and perceived beneficially as a renewed attitude towards the external world, an elemental return to earthly origins and also a way to reconnect with the past lives of the ancestors: «Not for the first time, I think of how my travels into the soil, the past, my father's imprints, are opening up new kinds of living to me, are making me live a wider life. [...] it seems the perfect metaphor for privilege»²⁶.

Therefore, both space and time metaphors are involved in the construction of new and more beneficial *stories-to-live-by*. Burnett achieves an overthrow of the negative connotation of the source frame down, creating a prosodic pattern of appraisal choices across her text, which is down is good, when related to the (inter)connection with the natural world.

To provide an exemplification of these assumptions, Table 1. shows some of the most relevant metaphors identified in *TG* during the analysis. In the segments, trigger words are in bold. Then, correspondent conceptual metaphors are proposed.

page	(n) segment	CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR(S)
45	(1) Let me burrow down , through th topsoil . Let it fall over me and hold while deep-rooted clover opens me to water .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HUMAN ANIMAL IS NON-HUMAN ANIMAL • DOWN IS NOURISHMENT
71	(2) As I brush the soil I am called to, I travel deeply into the earth's fields , its tremors and ripples ; notes , trills , trickles .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CONNECTION WITH THE SOIL IS A JOURNEY • SOIL IS MUSIC
87	(3) It is as though the elements are reversed: sky is ground and ground is sky , and I am running on the pinheads of constellations , leaping from star to frosted star [...].	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOWN IS UP • UP IS DOWN

Table 1

The instances included in Table 1. are just three of the most representative metaphors related to the aspects previously discussed. A detailed discussion on the metaphorical meaning and the consequent meaning construction of the whole work follows:

(1) Let me **burrow down**, through the **topsoil**. Let it **fall** over me and hold while **deep-rooted clover** opens me to **water**.

Some of the terms in the sentence trigger different frames. First, the animal frame is triggered by the verb 'burrow down'. It establishes a comparison between the author and a non-human animal, since it is a verb used for referring to animals who dig a hole in the earth to live in, generating the conceptual metaphor of Human is non-human animal. Then, 'burrow down', 'topsoil', 'fall' 'deep-rooted clover', 'water' are terms which trigger a physical motion downwards into the topsoil, which allows a deeper level of understanding or connection with nature, producing the metaphor Down is nourishment. The feeling of nourishment or rejuvenation is based on the embodied experience of being connected to the soil and its life-giving bounties, creating no distinction between human animals and non-human ones: through these metaphors, the author expresses a positive attitude towards the flora and fauna that sustain life. She also implies a sense of humility and gratitude for the natural world, as well as a willingness to learn from it.

Both metaphors align with all the meanings of my ecosophy *Interconnect!*, as they promote ecological awareness and appreciation, a great sense of equality among all the species living on Earth, as well as a challenge to the dominant metaphors that favour growth, progress, and domination over nature.

(2) As I **brush** the **soil** I am called to, I **travel** deeply into the **earth's fields**, its **tremors** and **ripples**; **notes**, **trills**, **trickles**.

Here, two conceptual metaphors have been identified. First, terms such as 'brush', 'soil', 'travel', 'earth's fields' trigger the frames of the touch and the journey; while, 'tremors', 'ripples', 'notes', 'trills', 'trickles' are all referring to the music sphere. Hence, the conceptual metaphors mapped are connection with the soil is a journey, and soil is music.

The experience of brushing the soil and being called by it suggests a downward motion. By journeying into the earth's fields and experiencing its tremors, the author is gaining a deeper understanding of the soil and its qualities, much like

exploring a new place. The use of musical terms adds a sense of exploration and discovery even through other senses.

These conceptual metaphors reinforce the sense of communion and direct participation expressed by the ecosophy *Interconnect!*. Conceptualising the soil as a journey and music, somehow creates in the mind of the reader an exciting drive towards discovery, in which one participates with one's senses. This kind of rediscovery of things (we usually take for granted) is even more desired because it happens in an uncommon way: it is through a downward movement that one sets off on a journey as unusual as it is intense, which produces as a result positive emotions.

(3) It is as though the **elements** are reversed: **sky is ground** and **ground is sky**, and I am running on the **pinheads** of **constellations**, leaping from **star** to frosted **star** [...].

The main conceptual metaphors down is up and up is down are triggered by the terms 'elements', 'sky', 'ground', 'pinheads' and 'constellations', which evoke the frame of the natural elements, namely earth and air; here, they are used to create a sense of equality, where the concept of *up* is similarly beneficial as *down*.

These metaphorical expressions represent a shift in the way the author perceives and experiences the external world. The reversal of the expected spatial relationship between natural elements (commonly earth is associated with *down*, while air with *up*) suggests the experience of a new perspective, in which everything is reciprocal. The description of 'constellations' and 'stars' as the surface on which the author runs implies a sort of metaphorical navigation onto a celestial landscape – but physically embodied by the ground.

Therefore, the reciprocal relationship and equal value given to natural elements, namely earth and air, which are conceptually related to experience of bodily movements, presuppose a positive awareness of both upwards and downwards movements. For this reason, these metaphors are considered as charged with positive value, since they perfectly align with the ecosophy *Interconnect!*: being everything interconnected and equally important, we should reconsider our behaviour towards what lies under our feet. The use of these metaphorical concepts implies the attempt to access something that is not immediately apparent on the surface level, and that it may require effort or a change in perspective to connect with, suggesting a willingness to engage with the world in a deeper and more meaningful way, beyond just what is visible or tangible.

Burnett resists and opposes the Western prevailing cultural evaluation up is good, which could be considered ecologically damaging as it entails a series of conceptual connections with power, social status, economy. This is certainly connected to the growthism debate in Linguistics, since M.A.K. Halliday²⁷ pointed out how impacting the perception of the positive connotation of “growth” is, both in our grammar, and, consequently, in our ideology. The issue of *growthism* raises further reflections that concern both the positive connotation attributed to the growth in languages and cultures, and the extent such growth can be perceived as positive. According to Halliday, the quantitative issue is linked to the limited natural resources present on Earth, and the understanding of this limit is a socio-cultural problem rather than purely a linguistic one. The lexicalized and/or grammaticalized idea in such a vast number of different languages and cultures is not to be considered harmful: in fact, a conceptual metaphor growth is good is highly productive and valid in overcoming cultural barriers that often hinder mutual intelligibility among speakers with different backgrounds. The problem is linked to the fact that humans do not always perceive long-term risks; in this sense, Halliday refers to what Paul Ehrlich claims:

We are good at recognizing and responding to sudden, catastrophic changes; but bad at recognizing and admitting to ourselves what he calls 'slow motion crises' formed by gradual trends and shifts of probabilities. Even a massive change, provided it takes place slowly enough, will simply pass us by²⁸.

From a linguistic standpoint, it is crucial to reshape the ways in which humans conceptualise the world —shifting away from notions of unlimited growth toward a more integrated relationship with the environment and the more-than-human world. This re-conceptualisation can help counter what Halliday termed the “grammatical syndrome,” a set of linguistic patterns that construct a reality increasingly detrimental to human and ecological wellbeing. The dominant cultural narrative that «economic growth is good»²⁹ drives an insatiable pursuit of more — at the expense of planetary health — ultimately fostering ecological degradation through the relentless exploitation of natural resources.

In *The Grassling*, therefore, the narrative brings together an observational approach that draws on scientific modes of inquiry with the personal experience of the writer, whose heartfelt relationship with nature often becomes a journey of extraordinary self-discovery: “I am a wider thing, with strange beatings. I have swallowed the light of flowers and breathed it out. I have listened to the light of grass and typed it out.”³⁰. Burnett’s experience with and in nature allows her to

expand the limits of sensorial experience: the compelling images described in the quotation that rely on metaphorical and synaesthetic occurrences illustrate how contact with nature is a means to transcend the limits of being human. In Burnett's view, we do not end with our physical body, but we can expand into the surrounding world, or we can absorb it, and finally become one with it.

In this spatio-temporal flow, Burnett blurs the boundaries of the geographical setting, jumping from Devon to Embu, Kenya. There are disruptions and discrepancies in the narrative time, mostly by the presence of analepsis as in the following example:

But the thought of coffee has pulled me back twenty-five years and I'm in Embu, in the coffee plantation, racing my cousins down to the river where the sugar cane grew. [...] The adults used to laugh at us: me speaking only English, she only Kikuyo. It didn't matter, we always got each other's gist; lost each other in coffee, found again in sugar.
'What's Kinjo doing now?'
'She passed away. Hadn't you heard?' her eyes roam back over years, continents.³¹

In this passage, the thought of a recurrent element of her childhood (coffee) provokes nostalgia and activates a digression, which significantly starts with a present tense: «I am in Embu». The events described are not mere memories, but they are lived in first person at the time of the narration, as if she really was in that distant place. Moreover, the discovery of her beloved relative's death causes another disruption within the linearity of time, and the boundaries of the topological sphere: «roaming through years and continents» dilutes the time-space dimension, thus reaching a sort of *neutral*³² condition able to provide a sense of relief for the loss of her father:

I lie back in the wet grass, and my eyes close into his image. At the sea, where he taught me to swim; in Kenya, in the long savannah; at the races, in the coat I am wearing; young digging in the garden at home. [...] I feel this too: the grass rooting in the soil. [...] and I feel the moment that the ancestors of these plants arrived, perhaps 400-350 million years ago in the Devonian period, pulling up from water to land³³.

Thus, the contact with the soil originates a series of flashbacks that bring the author close to her father, even after his demise. The use of flashbacks is constant throughout all her work: this literary device is used not only to break the chronological order and geographical setting, bringing the reader to a different place and time, but also to offer a way to alleviate her grief.

These aspects introduce Michail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope³⁴, literally *time-space*, and the idiosyncratic view of temporal and spatial relationships that Burnett expresses in her narrative. The importance lies in the fact that they are considered intertwined, and time is perceived as the fourth dimension of space. Time, as it is, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. As Bakhtin states,

The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative. We cannot help but be strongly impressed by the representational importance of the chronotope. Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence³⁵.

In Burnett's lines, time becomes observable in the physical encounter with her family's space, in her contact with the land, the grass, the soil: the chronotope lies in the coincidence between her presence in her father's fields and the immediate activation of memory – not only memories of her personal childhood experiences, but also imaginary stories of her ancestors who inhabited that land. Most significantly, I identified the chronotope of the soil which expresses itself at lexical level throughout the whole narrative, as in the made-up word *Grassling*, which embodies the sense of becoming and time duration thanks to the use of the *-ling* formation. This seems the highest moment of interconnection between time and space, as the author transcends her human sensorial limits, becoming a blade of grass rooted in the soil. The chronotope of the soil also takes form by the presence of downward movements that abound in her narrative and that are a starting point for further reflections about the construction of conceptual directional metaphors.

Finally, the bodily downward movement towards the ground triggers the process of rooting which enables the author to feel the connection with nature, with her ancestors and with her father; by touching the soil, and pressing her fingers into it, Burnett can transform herself into a plant, her body contains both blood and chlorophyll, grass, and flesh, human and *more-than-human*. The feeling of becoming part of the space, the fact that skin can merge with soil, and that the time-span has no limits whatsoever contributes to define her chronotopic vision embodied by the soil: «All the skin of me [...] is called to the soil. [...] All the heart of me is called to the pulsing outside: the grass, the birds, the insects; [...] and further, to the beating that continues beyond the earth: to my father's fathers»³⁶.

5. Conclusion

Highly charged with metaphorical meaning, Burnett's narrative depicts a chronotopical dimension in which the grass, the soil, and the whole earth contribute actively to her unexpected transmutation into *more-than-human*, creating a moment of magic, a sense of enchantment and wonder conveyed by her descriptive and immersive writing. The results of the analysis confirm the present case-study as beneficial discourse, as it corroborates each point of my ecosophy *Interconnect!*. Moreover, they suggest that *The Grassling* challenges the traditional mapping of directional metaphors, specifically the conceptualisation of *down*, as it implements the salience of Nature as actor, and it is used to describe a positive transformation: lowering down to the soil brings relief and inner peace.

Furthermore, the evaluations of such metaphors are influenced by the degree of biases and creativity in their use, which can both challenge the conventional associations, proposing new positive meanings. I would suggest, then, the relevance of a conscious use of the downward metaphor in the context of environmentalism, in which it may spread beneficial values such as conservation and respect of, and reconnection with the natural world.

Burnett's dream-like writing seems to be a way to face the impending environmental crisis, by challenging some established stories of anthropocentric Western society for the better, and by providing a new positive perspective, which starts from the reconsideration of downward movements. Recalling inevitably Jane Bennett's vibrant matter, the *more-than-human* world can «act as agent or force with its own trajectories, propensities or tendencies [...]»³⁷ and the power in *The Grassling* is the recognition of a therapeutic function to the earth, to its appeal and vitality.

Note

¹ E. J. Burnett, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir*. London, UK: Penguin, 2019.

² Burnett's publications include the collections of poems *Of Sea* (2021) and *Swims* (2017), and the monograph *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager and Poethics* (2017). She is Associate Professor in Creative Writing at Northumbria University and was recently awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship (2021-22) for her research on Creative Writing and Climate Change.

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- ²¹ N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- ²² *Inter alia* A. Fill, P. Mühlhäusler (eds.), *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*. London, Continuum, 2001; P. Mühlhäusler, *Language of Environment, Environment of Language: A Course in Ecolinguistics*, London, Battlebridge, 2003; A. Fill, H. Penz (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*. London, Routledge, 2018.
- ²³ Based on the evaluation proposed by Stibbe (2021) as a cognitive process in people's mind about whether an area of life is mainly good or bad; its linguistic manifestation, analysed through appraisal theories (Martin and White 2005), is the appraisal pattern, a cluster of linguistic features used to represent that area.
- ²⁴ *Inter alia* J. Martin, *Positive Discourse Analysis: Solidarity and Change*, «Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses», n. 49, 2004, pp. 179-200; F. Macgilchrist, *Positive Discourse Analysis: Contesting Dominant Discourses by Reframing the Issues*, «Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines», vol. I, n. 1, 2007, pp. 74-94; T. Bartlett, *Towards Intervention in Positive Discourse Analysis*, in *Applied Linguistics*

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- ²⁷ M. A. K. Halliday, *Op. cit.*, pp. 175-202.
- ²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 192.
- ²⁹ A. Stibbe, *Op. cit.*, p. 85.
- ³⁰ E. J. Burnett, *Op. cit.*, p. 178.
- ³¹ *Ivi*, p. 58.
- ³² I am referring here to Roland Barthes's definition of the neutral which is a condition that "outplays [...] the paradigm, or rather [...] that baffles the paradigm", where the paradigm is "the opposition of two virtual terms". See R. Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans by R. E. Krauss and D. Hollierm, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 6-7.
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