

# STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF LATVIAN CHARACTER: A STUDY OF GATIS ŠĻŪKA'S CARTOONS

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the article is to study a variety of cartoons by the famous Latvian cartoonist Gatis Šļūka who often represents Latvia and Latvians, capturing their very character and spirit. The main objective of this study is to examine diverse stylistic patterns and their visual and verbal interaction.

The frequent use of stylistic patterns implies that Latvian thinking is naturally figurative. The cartoons often mock various predicaments in different domains of life. To appreciate the complete meaning of a cartoon, it is crucial to understand the historical and social context of the cartoon, especially if it is not analysed around the moment of its creation.

The most recurrent stylistic pattern that appears in nearly all analysed cartoons is metonymy, thus it can be concluded that metonymy plays the most important role in meaning construction. There are other significant stylistic techniques such as personification, allusion and pun. In most cases it is possible to state that interaction of stylistic patterns is evident in the cartoons.

**Keywords:** *cognitive stylistics, humour, metonymy, metaphor, stylistic pattern.*

The aim of this article is to analyse the role of stylistic techniques and their interaction in the visual and verbal representations in a selection of collected empirical material<sup>1</sup> of Gatis Šļūka's cartoons that portray Latvia and Latvians. The main **research question** concerns the type and frequency of stylistic techniques used in rendering the character of Latvians and their country.

**Theoretical framework** of the article is based on a cognitive stylistic and cognitive linguistic approach following different research findings in cognitive linguistics and studies on multimodal metaphor, metonymy and other stylistic techniques

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<sup>1</sup> More than 200 cartoons have been collected from 2008 to 2018. A selection of the most salient examples has been analysed in this article.

[Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Gibbs 2002; Goodman 1996; Kövecses 2002; Forceville 2009; Naciscione 2010; Veinberga 2014]. Since cognitive linguistics and cognitive stylistics consider *stylistic techniques* not merely decorations of language, but patterns of thought, the terms *stylistic technique* and *stylistic pattern* are used interchangeably. Both terms denote figurative use. There are other terms with the same meaning that are considered dated, especially in the view of cognitive stylistics, for example, *trope* or *stylistic device*. In this article the role of stylistic techniques as patterns of thought, natural phenomena that form the basis of the way we think is explored.

**Research methods** applied to the analysis of stylistic patterns observed in the cartoons are based on Anita Naciscione's **four-stage method**. The four-stage method includes recognition, verification, comprehension and interpretation [Naciscione 2001: 33–46; Naciscione 2010: 43–55]. At the stage of recognition, it is established whether the given representation has a figurative meaning. Verification stage helps to confirm the figurative meaning and to determine which stylistic technique it is, for instance, a metonymy, metaphor, pun, allusion, etc. During the phase of comprehension, it is ascertained whether there is any interaction of stylistic patterns. It is important to observe the figurative meaning construction that is a case of discursal use [Naciscione 2010: 50]. The interpretation stage is the analysis that is conducted based on the interaction of the verbal and visual representation; and it is viewed in the political, social, and cultural context the cartoon has been created. Since the cartoons present non-verbal examples, they are analysed as both patterns of visual thought representation and language units. It is also possible to call it a **four looks method** when recognition is the **first look** detecting the figurative meaning; verification is the **second look** in which the stylistic pattern is identified; comprehension is the **third look** to reveal the figurative meaning construction and interaction of stylistic patterns; and interpretation is the **fourth look** when the particular case is considered in its social, political and cultural context [Veinberga 2016]. Discourse analysis is applied when language is studied together with extra-linguistic factors [Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2010: 1–10].

A **cartoon** is a simple drawing showing the features of its subjects in a humorously exaggerated way, especially a satirical one in a newspaper or magazine [EOLD 2018]. Cartoons are used to satirically portray and thus deride people's folly or wickedness, which is especially topical to discuss current politics and raise other recent concerns. It could mean that the representations of Latvians would not be very favourable in the cartoons.

**Latvians** are often stereotypically seen as reserved, envious, conservative and very practical. They talk a lot, especially when they have to complain, unfortunately, they are not very active when it comes to actually improving their situation [Boldāne 2011: 171–220]. Many of these features lend themselves to mockery. It has to be

taken into account which generation of Latvians is referred to because those who belong to the young generation are often more open-minded, tolerant and confident.

**Gatis Šļūka** is one of the leading Latvian cartoonists. He has a master's degree in art; and he has published several books of contemporary cartoons. His cartoons concern many themes that are important for most Latvians: culture, our country, nature, migration, money, Europe, various festivities and others. Gatis Šļūka depicts the country of Latvia as a personification of an old woman who has suffered a lot; nevertheless, she is vigorous and resilient. An average Latvian is depicted as a singer, whiner, ice fisher, mushroom gatherer, arsonist of last year's grass, admirer of Kristaps Porziņģis, etc. [LSM 2018a].

These days any discussion on figurative language mostly starts with the question of **metaphor**. It is very common to state that metaphor can be expressed by using this formula: **A is B**. However, it is not always clearly explained what A and B stand for. It would be fair to say that these letters were first used in writing that has survived to the present day by the father of theory on rhetoric and poetics, Aristotle. He claimed that *metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy* [Aristotle 2001: 1476]. Aristotle used four letters: A, B, C and D to explain the essence of metaphor [Aristotle 2001: 1476–1477]. Apparently, A and B have stood the test of time. When defining metaphor, it is defined as an instance of understanding one thing (thing A) in terms of another (thing B), and usually an abstract thing (A) is conceived in terms of a concrete or physical thing (B). A and B belong to different *conceptual domains*<sup>1</sup>, and they are based on similarity. We think in metaphors and live by them [Lakoff and Johnson 2003]. For instance, if a heterosexual woman utters a statement “Andrew is hot. When we meet, there are sparkles”, we can identify a *conceptual metaphor* LOVE IS FIRE<sup>2</sup>. In cognitive linguistics, stylistic techniques such as metaphor and metonymy are regarded as natural phenomena that form the basis of the way we think [Gibbs 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 2003].

### Case studies

Seven topical cartoons that show Latvia and Latvians drawn by Gatis Šļūka from 2008 to 2018 have been chosen for the case studies.

The first selected cartoon was created in 2008 when the State of Latvia celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Latvia is shown as a **personification** of an old woman (see Figure 1).

<sup>1</sup> *Conceptual domain* is a segment of our memory for preserving certain types of experience, e. g., education, journey, knowledge, light, love, life, work, etc. If we imagined that all our memories were stored in a cabinet, one conceptual domain would be one shelf of this cabinet.

<sup>2</sup> Conceptual metaphors are typically emphasised by the use of capital letters.

According to the theoreticians of stylistics and cognitive linguistics personification is a stylistic technique and a pattern of thought *in which an inanimate object, animate non-human, or abstract quality is given human attributes* [WDS 2001: 294]. Personification is an ontological metaphor when different abstractions: activities, emotions, or ideas are denoted as something concrete or physical, for instance, objects, substances, containers, or people [Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Gibbs 2002; Kövecses 2002]. In the following cartoon Latvia as an abstract entity is shown as a person, i.e. an old lady.



Figure 1. *What would you like to have for your centenary?*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2008.

Latvia is engaged in a conversation with her leaders:

- What would you like to have for your centenary?
- First of all, to blow up all those whiners!
- Well, as usual, the main thing: fireworks.

One can tell that the old woman is Latvia by her head scarf that bears the colours of the Latvian flag and the word “Latvia” written on it. The head scarf with the name of Latvia is a **metonymy** for the country. The definition of metonymy can be derived from the definition of metaphor. Instead of similarity metonymy is based on associations of contiguity or closeness, and instead of two conceptual domains, metonymy functions in the same conceptual domain [Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Gibbs 2002]. If conceptual metaphor can be expressed by the formula **A is B**,

metonymy uses a formula **A** stands for **A<sup>1</sup>** or **A<sup>1</sup>** stands for **A** [Krasovska 2013; Veinberga 2014]. If we imagine that Andrew who was mentioned in the example of a metaphor has red hair, the metonymy example could be this “if you do not know where the library is, ask the red hair”; here the hair stands for the person who has it as an important feature.

The briefcase is a metonymy that stands for a minister of the government. The Latvian expression *sadalīt ministru portfeļus* means “to distribute cabinet posts of the government”. Both men in the cartoon are wearing suits, and a suit metonymically stands for a serious job of an official.

The humorous effect of this cartoon is based on misunderstanding of the literal and figurative meaning of the word combination *uzspert gaisā*. It is a phraseological unit in Latvian [LFV 2000: 341–342], and it literally means “to kick up in the air”, but the metaphorical meaning is “to blow something up”. It is a verbal **pun** as it is the case of a disagreement between different meanings of a word or expression. Geoffrey N. Leech calls pun a *foregrounded lexical ambiguity, which may have its origin either in homonymy or polysemy* [Leech 1991: 209]. “Lexical” typically relates to words, and in this example, it is the ambiguity of a phraseological unit. Latvia, personified as an old but vivacious and resilient woman, is annoyed by people who are whining and wishes she could blow them up while the official who is taking notes does not understand it. Ironically, he reinterprets what the old woman has said, based on metaphorical similarity of the phraseological unit *uzspert gaisā* to literal meaning of the expression “to blow something up”.

It takes a rather lengthy explanation to identify and describe all the stylistic patterns in one use of a cartoon (see Table 1), however, in reality they all interact, and the viewers understand them together, after reading the caption. A cognitive psychologist Raymond Gibbs talks about *on-line comprehension* and *immediate moment-by-moment* understanding of figurative meaning that functions automatically [Gibbs 2002: 306, 447–448].

Table 1. Stylistic patterns of Figure 1 “What would you like to have for your centenary?”

Stylistic pattern	Visual elements	Verbal elements
<b>personification</b>	old woman with a head scarf with the Latvian flag	head scarf with the text “Latvia”
<b>pun</b>	–	<b>to blow up</b> all those whiners as usual, the main thing: <b>fireworks</b>
<b>metonymy</b>	head scarf with the flag and text “Latvia” → Latvia (the country)	briefcase → minister suits → officials

The next cartoon is another example of personification of Latvia (see Figure 2), and it illustrates one of the stereotypes associated with Latvians.



Figure 2. *Darn it! I am lost...*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2011.

This old woman can be identified as a personification of Latvia by her skirt that has the colours of the Latvian flag and the text “Latvia” written on it. The skirt is a metonymy for Latvia.

Gathering mushrooms is considered to be a stereotypical occupation of different generations of Latvians during the summer and autumn. The basket is a metonymy for a mushroom gatherer who is a typical Latvian. The basket is full of mushrooms, nevertheless there is one mushroom outside the basket. This is a fly agaric which is not edible, most probably it indicates that all the edible mushrooms have been picked by the industrious gatherer. This situation might happen to people who go into the forest and gather the mushrooms without noting their course. Gatis Šļūka says that his auntie Latvia *is more of the countryside, a little bit naive, believes in everything, and sometimes she gets lost in the forest. But she has got resilience and she has got guts* [LSM 2018a]. This cartoon is often used by different internet portals when they discuss confusing political issues, for example, the lustration process that involves publishing of the KGB files containing information about the index cards of the Soviet secret police agents. In such a use the bear looming behind the tree could be recognised as a metonymy for Russia since it is often conceptualised as a bear.

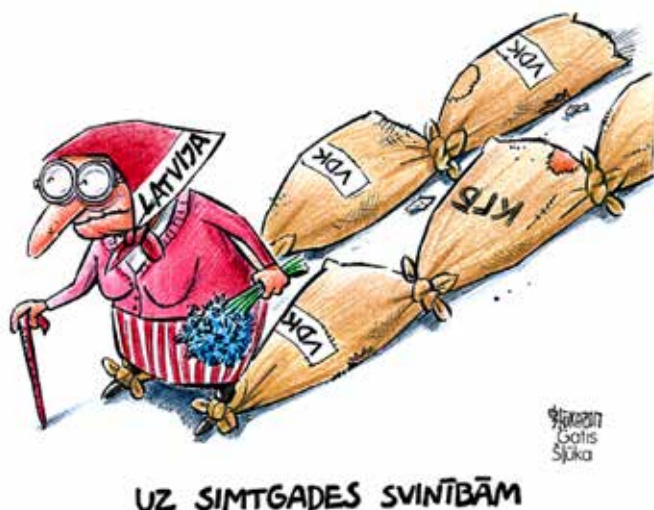


Figure 3. *To the celebration of centenary.*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2017.

The succeeding cartoon features another personification of Latvia; and it is related to the abovementioned KGB files (see Figure 3). *Known colloquially as the ‘Cheka bags’, because they were discovered stashed inside cloth bags, the KGB files are a document trove that was found during the 1991 barricades inside the KGB building on Brīvības street 61 currently housing the Stūra māja KGB museum [LSM 2018b].* The texts on the bags are “KGB” in Latvian and Russian. Personification of Latvia is identified by her head scarf with the flag and text: metonymy that stands for the country. The flowers in her hand stand for a celebration (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Stylistic patterns of Figure 3 “To the celebration of centenary”.*

Stylistic pattern	Visual elements	Verbal elements
<b>personification and metonymy</b>	old woman with a head scarf with the Latvian flag	head scarf with the text “Latvia”
<b>metonymy</b>	<i>Cheka bags</i> → KGB archive	KGB in Latvian and Russian → KGB archive
<b>metonymy</b>	flowers → celebration	celebration

The *Cheka bags* are instances of metonymy: they stand for the KGB archive that is to be publicised<sup>1</sup>. The reason why they are tied to Latvia’s feet is the protracted

<sup>1</sup> The archive was made publicly available on December 20, 2018 online: <https://kgb.arhivi.lv/>



process that lasted for 27 years. At the time when the cartoon was created it was not apparent when and whether the files would be made available.

The subsequent cartoon features the already mentioned mushrooming. Three baby boys metonymically stand for their nations (see Figure 4); and the meaning is constructed via interaction of the verbal and the visual part (see Table 3).

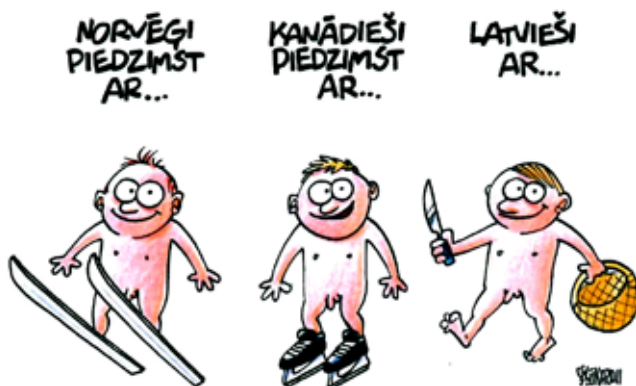


Figure 4. ... are born with.  
Gatis Šļūka, 2011.

- Norwegians are born with...
- Canadians are born with...
- Latvians with...

Table 3. Stylistic patterns of Figure 4 “are born with”.

Stylistic pattern	Verbal elements	Visual elements
<b>metonymy</b>	Norwegians are born with...	skis → skiing
<b>metonymy</b>	Canadians are born with...	skates → skating → ice hockey
<b>metonymy</b>	Latvians [are born] with...	a knife and a basket → gathering mushrooms

The successive cartoon (see Figure 5) is an **allusion** to the Latvian play for children *Sprīdītis*<sup>1</sup> (Tom Thumb) by Anna Brigadere (1903) and its film adaptation

<sup>1</sup> Theoretically *Sprīdītis* can be translated as Tom Thumb, however, the English and Latvian folk tales are different. Tom Thumb is someone who can trick others and kill them because he is smart. The Latvian *Sprīdītis* does not kill his enemies, he is special for the kindness of his heart. His heart is said to be like a diamond. He is a romantic traveller who goes on an adventure to find happiness and ultimately returns home because home is the happy land.



(1985). Mother Fortune (*Laimes māte*) gives *Sprīdītis* a ring as a thank you gift for helping her. She tells him that in order to go to the happy land, he has to turn the ring and say, “Swan, swan, move your feet and take me to the happy land”. Most people in the Latvian community are familiar with the character of *Sprīdītis* and the text of the play and film.



Figure 5. *Take me to the happy land.*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2009.

- Take me to the happy land!
- Are you kidding me?

When *Sprīdītis* says that he wishes to go to the happy land, it means that the adventure is over, and he is going home; however, he does not know it yet. Conversely, the swan knows that the happy land is home. Since the year 2009 is marked by The Great Recession during which Latvia has suffered greatly, returning home is a glum prospect instead of a happy one.

**Allusion** should have a reference to something that can be recognised by the linguistic community; the familiar phenomenon should be important in the cognitive basis of this community; and it should start a dialogue between the creator and the audience on the basis of their specific associations [Veinberga 2015]. In this case the community, i.e., Latvians recognise the verbal expression “Take me to the happy land!” as the one associated with *Sprīdītis* and identify with the situation of the economic crisis.

The image of *Sprīdītis* is sustainable, and it stretches beyond one representation (see Figure 6). Despite the fact that *Sprīdītis* looks happy in this cartoon, the circumstances are not favourable for Latvia.



Figure 6. *Why do you choose to live and work abroad?*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2014.

The newspaper *Latvijas Avīze* has conducted a questionnaire to find out the reasons of leaving Latvia. *Over the last ten years, some 220,000 Latvian residents have left to live abroad. Young people aged between 18 and 35 are most likely to leave Latvia for a better life. Nearly 11,000 Latvian young people aged 25 to 29 have gone abroad* [Marķitāne 2015]. The majority of these people have left Latvia because of The Great Recession.

The current representation yields a visual allusion to *Sprīdītis*, an eponym for someone who is unhappy at home therefore goes away in search of happiness. *Sprīdītis* can be recognised by his hat, shovel and *pastalas* (simple footwear made of one piece of leather); the three elements are metonymic. *Pastalas* also stand for a traveller, especially a Latvian traveller; thus the image of *Sprīdītis* can be viewed as personification. The suitcase is a metonymy for travelling and the stickers on the suitcase represent all the countries the traveller has visited: Sweden, Norway, Germany, Ireland, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. All the stickers are metonymies that stand for the countries.

The last illustration features an event that is great source of pride in the Latvian culture. The year 2018 was very significant for Latvia not only because of its centenary but also because of the Song and Dance Celebration. *The Song and Dance Celebration is the greatest cultural masterpiece of the Latvian people, and has withstood the test of time. The Celebration has become an event of national and international importance,*

bringing together people of different generations and nationalities, and uniting Latvians throughout the world [The Song and Dance Celebration 2018]. It is a very noble event, however, the cartoon is incongruous as it might prove difficult for men to sing peacefully with the ongoing football championship (see Figure 7).

*Sit, Jānīti, vara bungas* is a line from a Latvian folk song for summer solstice, it means “beat the brass drums” although the word *sit* is polysemantic, and it can be applied when discussing various objects. *Sit* can mean “hit”, i.e., score in sports.



Figure 7. *Sit, Jānīti, vara bungas...*  
Gatis Šļūka, 2018.

*Jā* means “yes”. *Sit, Jānīti* and *Sit! Jā!* is a pun based on homophones, the words that sound similar. People say *Sit! Jā!* when some is about to score a goal. This expression sounds exactly the same as the beginning of *Sit, Jānīti*, thus it is a foregrounded lexical ambiguity or pun.

## Conclusion

The most frequent stylistic pattern that is present in almost every analysed cartoon is metonymy: there are 22 different metonymic elements<sup>1</sup> in the analysed cartoons. Metonymy plays a leading role in visual representations of powerful images

<sup>1</sup> Seven cartoons have been analysed in this article, however, there are a number of metonymic elements in every cartoon. For example, in “Figure 6. *Why do you choose to live and work abroad?*” there are 11 metonymic elements: *Sprīdītis’s* hat, shovel, *pastalas* and suitcase, and the stickers of seven countries on the suitcase.

depicting Latvia and Latvians in Gatis Šļūka's cartoons. The next most frequent stylistic pattern is personification: five cases; and there are two cases of allusions and two cases of puns.

In five out of seven examined cartoons there is more than one stylistic technique present demonstrating the interaction of different stylistic patterns, most often that of metonymy and personification, thus leading to a conclusion that interaction appears to be a natural phenomenon in visual representations of cartoons. Although the amount of studied cartoons is not vast, they have been carefully chosen and are representative of a larger quantity of both political and non-political cartoons in general.

The analysed cartoons mostly deride troubles and wrongdoings in various spheres of life. If the cartoon is studied later than it has been created, it is essential to identify the historical and social context of its creation in order to understand its aim.

Gatis Šļūka's cartoons are striking and benevolent at the same time; they prove that contrary to the stereotype Latvians do not find it hard to laugh about themselves. Cartoons are published almost every day, and they are loved by the Latvian people as a daily measure of humour.

The cartoonists naturally aim at a general audience, thus they employ the techniques that are generally recognisable and understandable. The extensive use of stylistic patterns suggests that our Latvian thinking is inherently figurative.

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