

The Cognitive Study of Metaphor and its Application in English Language Teaching

L'ÉTUDE COGNITIVE DE LA MÉTAPHORE ET SON APPLICATION DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS

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Abstract: Metaphor in cognitive linguistics is not only a rhetorical device, but an important mental facility and cognitive instrument. Metaphors provide people a new perspective of perceiving the world and the application of cognitive theories of metaphor creates a new field of research to English teaching. After a brief analysis of the cognitive view on metaphor, this paper mainly focuses on how to apply the cognitive theories of metaphor to English language teaching.

Key words: cognitive linguistics; metaphor; conceptual metaphor; English teaching

Résumé: La métaphore dans la linguistique cognitive n'est pas seulement une figure rhétorique, mais aussi un instrument mental important et un outil cognitif. Les métaphores offrent aux gens une nouvelle perspective du monde et l'application des théories cognitives de la métaphore créent un nouveau champ de recherche pour l'enseignement de l'anglais. Après une brève analyse de la vue cognitive sur la métaphore, le présent document se concentre principalement sur la façon d'appliquer les théories cognitives de la métaphore à l'enseignement de la langue anglaise.

Mots-clés: linguistique cognitive; métaphore; métaphore conceptuelle; enseignement de l'anglais

1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor is a ubiquitous phenomenon in natural languages and has been studied by philosophers and linguists all along. From Aristotle in ancient Greek, people had already explored the mystery of metaphor from the angle of rhetoric and metaphor is viewed as a set of extraordinary figurative expressions. While at present, the study of metaphor hasn't been confined to the rhetoric field, but has extended to linguistics and cognitive psychology. And the study about metaphor has reached its most prosperous stage in the 1970s, which is known as a metaphormania or Metaphoric Revolution. In 1980, the publication of Lakoff and

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Johnson's *Metaphor We Live By*, symbolized the all-round beginning of metaphor study from a cognitive view. Metaphor is no longer regarded as a figure of speech, but a way of thought. From that time on, the cognitive approach to metaphor has grown into one of the most exciting fields of research in the social science. The study of metaphor has been so abundant and so hot, people have become more and more aware of its significance. Scholars begin to realize that the study of metaphor can be connected with a lot of other subjects, that is, metaphor can be applied in a lot of other fields, such as linguistics, philosophy, pragmatics, semantics, psychology, literature criticism, translation, language teaching and so on. One of its significant practicabilities lies in its application in the field of language teaching.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars and linguists both at home and abroad all hold that the cognitive study of metaphor has set a good platform for language teaching and learning. Lin Shuwu (2002), in his article *Studies on Metaphor: State of Arts, Focuses, and Trend*, gives a comprehensive summary of the study of metaphor abroad as well as at home and induces seven themes of the contemporary studies on metaphor, ranging from the theoretical study to their application to language teaching. He points out that it is one of the seven trends of modern study of metaphor to employ the finding of metaphor in cognitive linguistics in language teaching. Actually many foreign scholars have done the researches in this regard. Kuse (1986) regards the correct understanding of metaphor as a very important reading skill; Cameron (1996) confirms that metaphor can help children's acquisition of languages and enrich their expressions; After many experiments Ortony (1984) states that the focus of metaphor study should be put on the exploration of the cognitive function of metaphor in language learning and teaching. Moreover, many other scholars (Danesi, 1988; Low, 1988; Littlemore, 2001) even put forward the concept of "metaphorical competence" or "metaphorical intelligence" and stress that "metaphorical competence" enjoys equal significance with "communicative competence" and "language competence" in language study and communication.

Compared with the studies abroad, metaphor studies in China attract our attention relatively later and the studies about metaphor are much weaker. But from the year 2000, the study of metaphor in China has also made great progress. Since 2000, the number of the published essays on metaphor study has outnumbered the total number in the past ten years. . And from the literature collected at present, it is not hard to find that many studies have already been done on the application of metaphor to language teaching. For example, Wang Yin and Li Hong (2004) calls for further emphasis on the significance of cultivating the metaphorical competence of students; Liang Xiaobo (2002) and Gong Yumiao (2006) look into the application of cognitive metaphor study into English vocabulary teaching and points out the necessity and importance of raising language learners' metaphor awareness. Cai Longquan (2004) proposes that metaphoric expressions should be set up as a target in foreign language teaching, and argues for its operationalisation from perspectives of metaphoric ubiquity, metaphoric functions and immediate needs of teaching metaphoric expressions in FLT.

With no doubt we can conclude that the application of metaphor theories in foreign language teaching will be of great significance and will have precious practical value. This paper will first introduce the cognitive view on metaphor, and then discuss how to apply cognitive theories of metaphor in English language teaching.

3. THE COGNITIVE VIEW ON METAPHOR

Lakoff & Johnson are firm advocates of cognitive study of metaphor and their work *Metaphors We Live By* has marked the establishment of the cognitive approach to metaphor. They think that metaphor is omnipresent and a prevalent phenomenon in ordinary language. Our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, and our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have made a penetrating systematic analysis of metaphorical concept system which exists in our thought system and made a distinction between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors (or metaphoric expressions).

Conceptual metaphors are usually abstract notions such as “LIFE IS A JOURNEY” while metaphoric expressions are actual linguistic phrases that realize or instantiate those notions in one way or another. For example, in English, we can talk about the concept of life in the following ways: He’s without direction in his life. /I’m at a crossroads in my life./He’s gone through a lot in life. All of these expressions are acceptable just because people in English have the concept of LIFE IS A JOURNEY. So here, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, a general belief held by people is a conceptual metaphor, while all of the expressions that have to do with life and that come from the domain of journey are linguistic metaphors or metaphoric expressions. Conceptual metaphor allows us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. Thus it is likely for us to make use of relatively familiar, tangible domain of experience to deal with relatively unfamiliar, less tangible domain of experience. Cognitive linguistics also views metaphor as a cognitive instrument, which means that metaphor is not just a way of expressing ideas by means of language, but a way of thinking about things (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001:118). For instance, when we are using the English sentence “You are wasting my time.”, we are not just exploiting the metaphor TIME IS MONEY linguistically, we are actually thinking of, or conceptualizing the target category TIME via the source category MONEY, which is a valuable commodity and a limited resource.

4. THE APPLICATION OF COGNITIVE METAPHOR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Cognitive linguistics holds that metaphorization is a natural feature of language, which results from conceptual metaphorization. It is vividly and objectively displayed in formation of words, semantic changes of words, collocation of words as well as learning of cultures. Therefore, this characteristic of language brings us a great deal of enlightenment in English teaching and learning. In the following we will explore how the theories of metaphor can be applied in English teaching and learning.

Firstly, teachers should make their students aware of the ubiquity and significance of metaphors in our daily life. Let them understand the nature of cognitive metaphor, the differences between metaphoric expressions and conceptual metaphors in general and realize the significance of conceptual metaphors in language learning.

Secondly, teachers can use metaphorical theories to explain the existence of some word formation. The philosophical basis of cognitive study of metaphor is experientialism, which characterizes meaning in terms of embodiment. According to experientialism, there is no concept which is objectively reflected on people’s mind and all concepts are structured on the basis of one experience. The experience is a product of our body or interactions between us and physical environment or other people within our culture. Cognitive science research shows that early human beings began to recognize the world by themselves, and they regard themselves as the standard to measure the universe. People often take advantage of similarities between things, form bodily metaphors with their most familiar parts of the body organs to acknowledge, experience and feeling in other areas. That is why there are many words about body organs, which not only have rich metaphorical meanings but strong word-forming ability. For example, we have “the mouth of a river (a pocket, a bottle, a tunnel)”, “the tongue of a bell (fire)”, “the teeth of a saw (a comb)” and also we can find expression like “face-to-face meeting”, “light-fingered maid”, “three-legged table”, etc. In actual language teaching, teachers can use the cognitive theory of metaphor to analyze the relation between word forms and meanings, so that the students can have a general idea of word motivation. Actually in English, plenty of words were formed through the mode of metaphor and most of them are compounds and converted words. Words like “dog-ear”, “ice-old”, “snow-white”, “stone-hearted” and “breakneck” are vivid in expression and easy to understand.

Thirdly, metaphor can be used to explain the reasonableness of the collocation of words. According to cognitive linguistics, the structure of one concept can be used to form another concept. Therefore, many aspects of a word can be used to talk about another concept. For example, “Time flows”, “currents of history” are derived from the same conceptual metaphor “TIME IS RIVER”. A variety of words originally used to talk about river can naturally be used to talk about time. The use of metaphor can help students understand more easily the reason why “flow” and “time” can be collocated. The same is true with the

following expressions. Based on the structure metaphor of TIME IS MONEY, all the words (“save, give, spend, and cost”) that are commonly used to describe money can be used to collocate with “time”.

This gadget will save you hours.
How do you spend your time these days?
That work cost me an hour.

Fourthly, with the help of conceptual metaphor, many language phenomena that are hard to understand find their theoretical basis and language learning becomes a much easier and more enjoyable job. For example, English learners find that the following expressions are often used by English speakers to express their feelings and emotions, but most of them do not know why they are used in this way.

1. I'm feeling up.
2. My spirits rose.
3. You're in high spirits.
4. I'm feeling down.
5. He's really low these days.

In language teaching, teachers can tell students that all the above metaphoric expressions are based on the Orientational metaphor of HAPPYNESS IS UP, SADNESS IS DOWN. Orientational metaphors usually have a basis in people's physical and cultural experiences. Just from the fact that drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression, erect posture with a positive emotional state; people gained the metaphor HAPPYNESS IS UP, SADNESS IS DOWN.

Of course, in teaching practice, teachers can also offer some metaphorical expressions and ask the students to explore the internal conceptual metaphor rather than let them receive knowledge passively and rote mechanically.

Lastly, metaphor serves as a new perspective for people to know different cultures. In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff & Johnson pointed out that “conceptual metaphors can be universal or culture specific.” Metaphor, as a kind of common language phenomenon, reflects different cultural models used in different languages, which is usually called cognitive models. Since metaphor is so pervasive a phenomenon in different cultures, and the structure of metaphor varies from culture to culture, special attention should be paid to the understanding of metaphor in cross-cultural communication. For example, both English and Chinese have the conceptual metaphor of SADNESS IS DOWN, SADNESS IS DARK, and SADNESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER to express people's sadness. Therefore, underlying these metaphors we can observe the following conventional expressions:

English	Chinese
He's feeling down.	這幾天老李情緒低落。
She is in a dark mood.	見他黯然神傷地坐在那裡，一句話也不說。
They were immersed in sorrow.	老吳心中充滿傷悲。

But, the sentences like “She looks blue today.”/ “Mary was in blue mood.”/ “I know she has been in the blues these days.” can also be found in English to show one's sorrow. Therefore we can conclude that SADNESS IS BLUE is a special metaphor in English to express one's sad feelings.

The application of metaphorical concept shows that the metaphor cognition is universal across cultures, but at the same time, it has some differences in their application because of their different social and cultural backgrounds. When understanding metaphors in cross-cultural communication, we should not transplant our own cognitive mode of a metaphor into another; otherwise, misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication will surely occur.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, metaphor, according to cognitive linguistics, is fundamentally conceptual rather than linguistic in nature. As the bond of cognition and language, metaphor always plays an important role in the process of vocabulary acquisition and the development of thought. The mastery of metaphoric mode used

frequently in English can simplify the acquisition of English language and is helpful for students to master the skills of enlarging vocabulary. English teaching under the guide of metaphor theory corresponds to cognitive rules and can overcome the limits of traditional vocabulary teaching.

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