

Grammatical Metaphor: A Givónian Interpretation*

WANG Quan-zhi

Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Grammatical metaphor (GM) is a core concept in systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Nevertheless, there has been no universal consensus on its precise delineation so far. In this paper, a new approach to GM is proposed by applying the notion of markedness as put forward by Talmy Givón to its interpretation, thus avoiding some of the explanatory limitations of other approaches to GM. It is argued that GMs are not merely expressions which are structurally complex, cognitively demanding, and relatively infrequent in distribution, but also linguistic phenomena which are both context dependent and reader oriented. To be specific, GMs and their corresponding congruent expressions form a continuum, with no clear demarcation in between; the definition of GM should take account both of the audience towards whom the expression in question is targeted and of the context it is used in; and they should be addressed from a historical perspective.

Keywords: grammatical metaphor (GM), Givón, markedness, interpretation

Introduction

One of the most central concepts in systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL), grammatical metaphor (hereafter GM) has always been the object of discussion and exploration ever since its being proposed by Halliday in 1985. However, there is still no universal consensus with regard to the criteria on its definition and identification. Against this background, it is argued that Givón's markedness theory can be utilized to shed some new light on the definition and interpretation of GM.

A Brief Sketch of GM

GM, according to Halliday (1994), is a figure of speech where the variation in the expression of a given meaning is essentially in grammatical forms. In contradistinction to lexical metaphor, which uses the same word to express different meanings, GM expresses the same meaning by means of different wordings. For example, when we refer to a brave soldier in a battle as *a lion*, we are using the word *lion* as a lexical metaphor. In contrast, we are using a GM when we use the sentence "*The last century witnessed two World Wars*" to refer to the fact that there were two World Wars in the last century.

In any of the three editions of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), GM has been assigned an independent chapter, entitled "Beyond the Clause: Metaphorical Modes of Expression". A simple comparison between the second and the third editions reveals a significant

* The project is sponsored by the Scientific Research Foundation for the Returned Overseas Chinese Scholars, State Education Ministry and the Research Grant 11YJA740088 of State Education Ministry of China.

WANG Quan-zhi, associate professor, Ph.D., College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University.

difference in their respective treatment of GM. In the second edition, the chapter in question takes up only 28 pages, whereas in the third edition, it does 73 pages. This is a sure sign that the concept of GM has been assuming an increasingly important position in SFL.

In terms of semantic functions, GM in the clauses falls into two types: ideational metaphors and interpersonal metaphors, corresponding to the ideational metafunction and the interpersonal metafunction respectively (Halliday, 1994, p. 343). Besides, Martin (1993) proposed the third type of GM, namely textual metaphor, thus perfecting Halliday's GM theory.

The emergence of GM has greatly enhanced the explanatory force of SFL in that it not only tremendously promotes our understanding of language acquisition ontogenetically, but also sheds much light upon the language evolution and the cognitive development of mankind, hence deepening our knowledge about language phylogenetically. So far, the studies in GM concentrate on their identification in texts and how to distinguish between metaphorical modes of expressions and their congruent counterparts. Nevertheless, the following questions have rarely been touched upon: (1) What is the relationship between metaphorical expressions and their corresponding congruent ones? Are they diametrically opposed to each other? (2) Is it theoretically impermeable for us to turn a blind eye to the audience of the text in question when we determine what expressions qualify as GM? In other words, what is the underlying reason why some metaphors have to be unpacked for a smooth interpretation while others do not have to? (3) Should a historical dimension be introduced when we tackle GM? Why have the previous metaphorical expressions evolved into congruent expressions nowadays?

For SFL, these questions have been serious headaches for a long time and there is no escaping from them. This paper attempts to offer answers to these questions in a satisfactory manner by resorting to Givón's markedness theory.

Givón's Markedness Theory

The concept of markedness dates back to ancient Greek times, when Aristotle made some remarks on markedness in language in his classics. But not until the Prague school represented by Trubetzkoy (1969) elaborated on it did this concept become prominent and come to be known by linguists throughout the world. However, Trubetzkoy's elaboration on markedness is mainly confined to the studies of phonology. In modern times, it is T. Givón who has broadened the scope of markedness theory and has applied it to the analyses of a larger variety of linguistic phenomena as well as other related categories.

According to Givón (1995, p. 27), markedness is a context-dependent phenomenon. The very same structure may be marked in one context and unmarked in another. For example, subject noun phrases are characteristically definite, referential, and highly topical, while instrumental noun phrases are characteristically non-definite, non-referential, and non-topical.

One important corollary of Givón's argument is that if a convincing judgment is to be obtained on the markedness of a given structure, the context in which it is used must be taken into account. If the context itself is a marked one, the marked structure as used in it will not be regarded as marked any longer. That is to say, the form of a linguistic structure alone cannot be taken as the sole and decisive factor of its markedness. What should also be taken into consideration includes the historical background of the context in which a structure is used, the

cognitive levels of the audience, and so on. The underlying reason is that, thanks to the development in science and technology as well as in human cognition, what used to be marked structures in the past may have turned into unmarked ones and that what are marked structures for elders may be unmarked for younger people. In order to distinguish between marked and unmarked structures or categories more persuasively, Givón (1995, p. 28) put forward the following criteria:

- (1) structural complexity: The marked structure tends to be more complex than their unmarked counterpart;
- (2) frequency distribution: The marked structure tends to be less frequent, thus cognitively more salient than the corresponding unmarked structure; and
- (3) cognitive complexity: The marked structure usually poses a greater challenge to its target audience for its correct comprehension than the unmarked one in terms of mental effort, attention demands, or processing time.

Givón (1995, p. 29) pointed out that the markedness of a structure or category is not merely identified by the presence or absence of a single criterial feature. Rather, it is defined by the clustering of central features. In other words, markedness is a concept of degree. It is just like a continuum, with some items more marked than others; and there is no clear-cut distinction between a marked item and its unmarked counterpart.

In brief summary, Givón's markedness theory consists in three points: (1) Marked structures are cognitively more complicated, less frequent; (2) the text in which they are used and the target audience must play a role in the identification of the markedness of a structure; and (3) the historical background must be turned to for a substantive understanding of markedness. These points can be utilized to provide a feasible solution to the problems that SFL researchers are confronted with in defining GM.

Interpreting GM in Light of Givón's Markedness Theory

This section is devoted to a tentative exploration into the nature of GM within the theoretical framework of Givón's markedness theory. All the examples to be analyzed are taken from popular masterpieces in the circle of SFL both in China and abroad.

A Continuum Between Metaphorical and Congruent Expressions

As pointed out by Givón, the markedness of a particular linguistic item is dependent on three factors: structural complexity, cognitive complexity, and frequency distribution. Since a linguistic item is rarely marked in all the three factors, its markedness in one aspect can be offset by its unmarkedness in another aspect. Hence, a structure, when used in different contexts, can be marked to different degrees, which forms a continuum from being unmarked to being marked. Examples (1)-(9) are taken from Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 601).

- Example (1) She did not know the rules. Consequently, she died.
- Example (2) She did not know the rules, so she died.
- Example (3) Because she did not know the rules, she died.
- Example (4) Her ignorance of the rules caused her to die.
- Example (5) Through ignorance of the rules, she died.
- Example (6) Her death was due to ignorance of the rules.
- Example (7) Her ignorance of the rules caused her death.
- Example (8) The cause of her death was her ignorance of the rules.
- Example (9) Her death through ignorance of the rules

Obviously, these sentences are different descriptions of the same event. However, they are in no way identical to each other, because there is a gradual increase in markedness from Example (1) to Example (9). Although there is a steady decrease in structural complexity from Example (1), which is a combination of two sentences, to Example (9), which is a sentence fragment, they are becoming increasingly difficult to understand. The cognitive complexity finds expression in the escalation of lexical density, from 3.5 in Example (1) to 8 in Example (8). In terms of frequency distribution, they tend to be increasingly rare.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 601), the first three are classified as congruent expressions, while the others metaphorical expressions. Even if we agree to their claim, there are still distinct differences between the sentences within the same subgroup. In a particular context, only one of them is a preferred choice. Even the examples within the congruent subgroup also express a tinge of metaphoricity in that the words *because*, *so*, and *consequently* are all lexicalizations of logical relations, hence, they are GMs in essence. In particular, *consequently*, a word of Latin origin, is rarely used when we talk to a child. Therefore, it is safe to say that there are no impassable differences between metaphorical expressions and their congruent counterparts, and the difference between them is only a matter of degree rather than a matter of yes or no.

Reader-Orientation and Contextual Consideration in the Definition of GM

Since markedness is a context dependent phenomenon, the same structure shows different degrees of metaphoricity when it is used in different contexts and aimed at different readers. In light of this, Halliday (1994, p. 342) seems to have oversimplified the definition of GM when he claimed that metaphorical modes of expression are characteristic of all adult discourse and the only examples of discourse without GM are in young children's speech. Thanks to the huge gap in cognition between children, average adults, and sci-tech professionals, it is unlikely for us to come up with a universally-accepted set of criteria for GM which is feasible for various audiences. Thus, a more feasible definition of GM has to be reader-oriented as well as context-oriented. What is a marked expression or structure for a child may well be unmarked for an adult. By the same token, what is a GM for a layman may well be a congruent expression for an expert. In order to clarify this issue, Halliday and Matthiessen made some attempts to address the difference between metaphorical modes of expression and congruent ones, as can be seen from their analysis of Examples (10)-(15) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 257).

Example (10) The truest confirmation of the accuracy of our knowledge is the effectiveness of our actions.

Example (11) The fact that our knowledge is accurate is best confirmed by the fact that our actions are effective.

Example (12) What proves that we know things accurately is the fact that we can act effectively.

Example (13) The best way of telling that we know what is happening is to see that what we do is working.

Example (14) You know you've got the right idea because you can do something and it works. Like watering plants: you water them, and they grow.

Example (15) Look—wasn't it good that we watered that philodendron? See how well it's growing?

Example (10) is taken from a philosophical text, and Examples (11)-(15) are different paraphrases for it. According to Halliday and Matthiessen, Example (11) is intelligible to a 15-year-old, Example (12) to a 12-year-old, and Example (13) to a 9-year-old. It is self-evident that Example (10) is the one with the highest

degree of metaphoricity and there is a steady decline in metaphoricity from Example (11) to Example (15). In this case, the sentence that can occur in the philosophical text is none other than Example (10). Even so, it would be too strong a claim to make that it can be universally accepted as a GM. This is because different readers will make different cognitive efforts when interpreting the same sentence. Although it can be cognitively demanding for laymen, it is by no means challenging for philosophical professors. Therefore, this neglect of reader-orientation in defining GM contributes to the lack of persuasiveness in Halliday's citation of Example (10) as a typical example for metaphorical expressions.

It goes without saying that there is a huge gap between adults and children in cognition. By the same token, cognitive discrepancy within adults can also be very tremendous, due to their division of labor and varying educational background. For instance, scientific professionals are more proficient at the interpretation of GMs than men on the street. Therefore, if no account is taken of the life experience and educational background of the target audience, there will be no way of deciding whether a particular structure is a GM for them. A reading experiment conducted on English-majoring juniors at a renowned Chinese university indicates that what are usually treated as GMs greatly facilitates, rather than creating obstacles to, their understanding of the text in question (JIN & CHEN, 2004). The result of this experiment testifies to the fact that what are normally considered GMs to average adults are not necessarily always so treated by other adults. It is for this reason that the definition of a metaphorical mode of expression has to be oriented to readers' cognitive levels.

Closely related to reader-orientation is the role of contextual factors in the definition of GM. Since everyday communication is usually unmarked while the context of scientific discourse is marked, then what are generally considered metaphorical modes of expression should be treated as congruent forms in scientific discourse. That is to say, GMs in a general sense as occurring in scientific discourse will be treated as congruent, rather than metaphorical, forms by scientists, because GMs are the standard means for scientists to transmit knowledge and share scientific innovations with their peer researchers. Thus, these expressions, despite their discernable metaphoricity to the general audience, should be not treated as GMs any longer when they are used in scientific discourse.

Historical Perspective of GM Definition

Even though we subscribe to Halliday's claim that GMs need unpacking for a precise understanding, it is still impossible for us to get a completely pure congruent expression for any GM, no matter how much efforts we make to unpack it. This is because language is a product, as well as a carrier, of knowledge accumulation. What used to be marked and metaphorical expressions have gradually lost their original metaphoricity, thus evolving into unmarked and congruent ones with the lapse of time. This process is called demetaphorization (Halliday, 1994, p. 348; YAN, 2000). The Examples (16)-(17) are taken from ZHANG (2005, pp. 238, 239).

Example (16) Competition from shopping malls and discount stores, coupled with a torpid response by Sear's own management, forced a retreat to the company's core retail business, which analysts predicted would not prosper.

Example (17) The company's competed against shopping malls and discount stores, and Sear's own management responded torpidly. This forced the company's core retail business to retreat. Analysts predicted that this would not prosper.

Example (16) contains several nominalizations such as *competition*, *response*, and *retreat*. In syntactical structure, it is a clause complex with a lexical density of 11.5. In contrast, Example (17) is composed of three sentences, the first being a paratactic clause complex and the third a hypotactic clause complex. Its lexical density is 5. Clearly, Example (16) is a metaphorical expression while Example (17) is a congruent expression. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis shows that the phrases such as *shopping mall*, *discount store*, *management*, and *core retail business* are all instances of nominalization, a common kind of GM. In spite of this, we do not treat it as a metaphorical expression. The reason consists in the fact that in comparison, Example (16) has a much higher degree of markedness. It is highly probable that the recent emergence of Example (16) contributes to the demetaphorization of Example (17). The distinction between these two examples points to the necessity of adopting a historical perspective in defining GMs.

In fact, the general public as well as men of letters are constantly striving for novel and even idiosyncratic expressions to score a deeper impression on their audience, as revealed from a Chinese saying, which goes that a successful man of letters should never stop short of taking his readers by shock. The reason why the Analects by Confucius, a Chinese classic written more than 2,000 years ago, still enjoys such a high popularity around the globe, is that, besides its time-tested wisdom, it is also an unsurpassable masterpiece languagewise, with large numbers of unmatched rhetorical flourishes. With frequent refreshments on linguistic forms, we have to consider only the fresh and recently emerging expressions to be GMs. As for those dated ones which used to be marked, they have to be treated as congruent forms. The reason is that people's cognition has been elevated to such a high level that the expressions which were anomalous in the past have lost their anomaly now (WANG, 1980, p. 158), thus posing much less challenge to their cognition.

Conclusion

The notion of GM is a remarkable contribution made by SFL to contemporary linguistics in that it has provided a brand new perspective to linguistic analysis. As highly-condensed linguistic expressions, GMs are loaded with a multitude of information. For this reason, there has been no consensus with regard to issues related to its definition. Taking Givón's markedness theory as a tool, this paper has attempted a novel interpretation for GM. It is confirmed that Givón's markedness theory is of great benefit to the revelation of the nature of GM in pointing out that (1) metaphorical expressions and their congruent counterparts are at the different ends of a continuum, thus not totally different from each other; (2) the definition of GM must involve the target audience and contextual factors; and (3) the historical perspective is indispensable for a precise definition of GMs.

References

- Givón, T. (1995). *Functionalism and grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar* (1st ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (1999). *Construing experience through meaning: A language-based approach to cognition*. London: Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.
- JIN, N., & CHEN, Z. (2004). Cognitive effects of grammatical metaphor. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, (1), 25-30.
- Martin, J. R. (1993). Life as a noun: Arresting the universe in science and humanities. In M. A. K. Halliday & J. R. Martin (Eds.), *Writing science: Literacy and discursive power* (pp. 221-267). London: The Falmer Press.

- Trubetzkoy, N. (1969). *Principles of phonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- WANG, Z. (1980). *Papers in English stylistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- YAN, S. (2000). *On metaphor*. Soochow: Soochow University Press.
- ZHANG, D. (2005). *Language: Function and styles*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.