

A Study on Defining of Metaphoric Competence: Problems and Strategies

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With the deepening of studies on metaphoric competence, the problematic definition of metaphoric competence has increasingly been becoming a barrier in the development of metaphoric competence studies. It is discovered that the relevant studies on the definition of metaphoric competence have ignored the essential differences between metaphoric thinking way and metaphoric competence. For the solution of the problem, the corresponding measures are proposed and the metaphoric competence is redefined as the ability that the cognitive subjects with metaphoric thinking way apply their theoretical knowledge on this thinking model into the better identification, understanding, and production of metaphor.

Keywords: metaphoric competence, definition, problems, strategies

Introduction

Metaphoric competence (MC) is considered as important as the linguistic and communicative competences (Danesi, 1992), and plays the crucial role in the development of the latter two, which has been explicitly or implicitly conveyed in the mounting studies in question (Pérez, 2019; Batoréo, 2018; Sabet & Tavakoli, 2016; Aleshtar & Dowlatabadi, 2014; Doiz & Elizari, 2013; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Gong, 2006; Liang, 2002; Cameron, 1996; Danesi, 1988; et al.). More and more focuses, therefore, have been attracted to the study of development of metaphoric competence in language learners, thereby “producing a dramatic growth in the number of research on metaphoric competence in recent years” (Shi & Liu, 2010, p. 10). However, the constant deepening of research on metaphoric competence has seen several problems in the development of this ability. One of commonly-acknowledged problems is the inaccurate or obscure defining of metaphoric competence (Chen, 2016; Yuan, Xu, & Wang, 2012; Xu & Yuan, 2012; Shi & Liu, 2010; et al.). It is a problem of origin or source, which will have a direct impact on the designing for developing this competence and its implementation. Accordingly, it is of high necessity to work out an accurate definition of metaphoric competence. This paper, based on the reviewing of the existing major definitions of metaphoric competence, attempts to put forward the strategies to deal with the specific problems in the defining of this competence.

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Collection of Major Definitions of MC

The theories and research suggest that metaphor, from the traditional linguistic figure, has developed into a thinking way in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and a competence parallel to the linguistic and communicative competences in Gardner and Winner (1978). As a cognitive way, it refers to understanding and experiencing one conceptual domain in terms of another one. Nevertheless, as a competence, its definitions are of variety (Sabet & Tavakoli, 2016). The following table lists the current major connotations of metaphoric competence.

Table 1

Previous Major Definitions of Metaphoric Competence

| Definitions of metaphoric competence | Sources |
|--|---|
| 1. "... researchers should begin by defining a set of competences—say, the capacity to paraphrase a metaphor, to explain the rationale for the metaphor's effectiveness, to produce a metaphor appropriate to a given context, to evaluate the appropriateness of several competing metaphoric expressions." | Gardner & Winner (1978) |
| 2. "the ability to understand and use metaphors in natural communication." | Danesi (1993) |
| 3. "MC is believed to consist of metaphor awareness, and strategies for comprehending and creating metaphors." | Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska (1997) (Cited in Aleshtar & Dowlatabadi, 2014) |
| 4. "...metaphoric competence consists of four components: (a) originality of metaphor production, (b) fluency of metaphor interpretation, (c) ability to find meaning in metaphor, and (d) speed in finding meaning in metaphor." | Littlemore (2001) |
| 5. "Metaphoric competence at least refers to the ability of cognitive subject to spontaneously establish the analogic relation between different cognitive domains." | Yan (2001) |
| 6. "Metaphoric ability refers to the ability of human beings to recognize, understand and create the analogic connections between conceptual domains, including the ability of passive understanding and learning of metaphor, the rich imagination as well as the active creative thinking ability." | Wang & Li (2004) |
| 7. "We use the term 'metaphoric competence', ..., to include both knowledge of, and ability to use, metaphor, as well as skills needed to work effectively with metaphor." | Littlemore & Low (2006), Low (1988) |
| 8. "... the ability to understand and produce metaphor." | Nacey (2010) |
| 9. "Metaphoric competence refers to the ability of L2 learners to establish the cross-concept analogic relation between the tenor and vehicle of noun metaphor." | Su (2012) |
| 10. "the ability of cognitive subjects to construct certain meaningful connections between two cognitive objects in different categories on the basis of their experiences." | Yuan, Xu, & Wang (2012) |
| 11. "Roughly speaking, metaphorical competence includes the ability to detect the similarity between disparate domains and to use one domain to talk about or to understand something about another domain." | Aleshtar & Dowlatabadi (2014) |

Features in the Definitions of MC

The observation and analysis of the 10 major definitions of metaphoric competence in the table above show that there are two main characteristics in the defining of this competence.

Firstly, metaphoric competence tends to be defined in an elementary way. In other words, it is categorized by the way of being divided into different sub-competences. For example, Gardner and Winner (1978) defined it by dividing it into four ability elements of paraphrasing, explaining, producing, and evaluating metaphors. The other researches in question are Danesi (1993), Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska (1997), Littlemore (2001), Wang and Li (2004), Littlemore and Low (2006), Nacey (2010), and Aleshtar and Dowlatabadi (2014). It seems that this type of definition emphasizes the operation process of metaphoric competence.

As what Yuan, Xu, and Wang (2012) pointed out, these definitions of metaphoric competence were given mainly on the basis of its specific operation and thus not able to be qualified as the theoretical definition reflecting its nature. This way of defining leads to the result that the cognition of metaphor itself is misunderstood as that of metaphoric language, i.e., the recognition, understanding, explanation, and production of metaphoric language. In other words, the skills involved in the implementation of metaphoric competence come to be taken as the theoretical definition of metaphoric competence. They therefore argued that the researches in question did not distinguish the theoretical definition of MC from its operational definition. Accordingly, they defined metaphoric competence as “the ability of cognitive subjects to construct a certain meaningful connection between two cognitive objects in different categories on the basis of their experiences” (Yuan, Xu, & Wang 2012, p. 4).

This actually reflects the other newly-emerging tendency in the defining of metaphoric competence, that is, characterizing it in a holistic way. In other words, it is regarded as a complete rather than dividable ability. For more examples, from the holistic perspective, Yan (2001) regards cognitive subjects’ ability to construct the inter-cognitive-domain analogic connection as metaphoric competence, and Su and Yuan (2012) defined it as L2 learners’ capacity to build the cross-concept similarities between the metaphoric tenor and vehicle. This type of definition profiles the nature of metaphoric competence as a cognitive way and the role of cognitive subjects.

Problems in the Definitions of MC

For pointing out the problems in the definitions of MC, we first need to understand the essential difference between metaphor as a cognitive thinking way and as a cognitive thinking ability. As we all know, metaphor had traditionally been considered as a rhetorical phenomenon in language. It is until 1970s when cognitive linguistics emerged that the view of metaphor as a cognitive thinking way was widely accepted by metaphor researchers. The mechanism for the cognitive thinking way of metaphor is “the conceptualization of target concept is based on the source domain according to the similarities established between the two domains and through the way of mapping” (Wu & Xiao, 2016, p. 7).

According to three basic principles of embodiment philosophy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), the cognition is unconscious and the thinking is metaphoric. That is to say, the cognitive thinking way of metaphor is unconscious and pervasive. It is one of the basic features of our humans’ thinking (Wang, 2011, p. 21). As a thinking way pervasively existing in our daily life, it is what we humans are born with. In other words, it is innate. Therefore, it could be concluded that a person with normal thinking will definitely have metaphoric thinking way because thinking is metaphoric in nature.

Now that the metaphoric thinking way is unconscious, innate and pervasive, there are not the issues of whether it could be used or developed. On the basis of this point, the tentative inference could be further made that it is “carry coals to Newcastle” to discuss the issue of developing metaphoric thinking widely in the academic circle because our humans are born with it. It is evidently out of necessity to develop metaphoric thinking.

Nevertheless, whether on earth does metaphor need to or could be developed? Answering this question requires the examination of the nature of metaphor as a cognitive thinking ability. We believe that as a kind of ability, metaphor could be nurtured and promoted. This is why huge number of studies on the development of metaphoric competence are performed. Specifically, metaphor, as a cognitive thinking way, is one of cognitive

principles widely existing in our human mind. With this cognitive principle, we humans usually avail ourselves to know unconsciously new things through those familiar things. However, when we know and master this principle, we could make use of it to better know, transform and even create the world. This is in accordance with the dialectical relation between the objective principle and the subjective initiative. That is to say, although we humans' metaphoric thinking way is unconscious, innate, and pervasive, we have the ability to play our subjective initiative to discover the cognitive principle underlying in the metaphoric thinking way and to utilize this principle to better understand metaphoric thinking way and to create more metaphors. It is this ability that could be developed and strengthened. Therefore, metaphoric competence, putting it in a more accurate way, refers to the ability that humans use the cognitive principle generalized from the metaphoric thinking way to know and create metaphor.

Based on the elaboration of metaphoric thinking way and metaphoric thinking ability, let's look at the major definitions of metaphoric competence in the table above. Just as analyzed above, one of practice in defining metaphoric competence is elementary, regarding it as being composed of a series of sub-abilities such as metaphor recognition, understanding, and production. It profiles the feature of metaphor as a thinking ability, but does not embody the nature of metaphor as a thinking way, thereby ignoring the fact that metaphor at first is cognitive thinking way. The other practice in defining metaphoric competence indeed emphasizes the essential feature of metaphor which is primarily a cognitive thinking way, but ignores its feature as a thinking ability. The two defining practices do not distinguish the essential difference of metaphor as a cognitive thinking way and a thinking ability, or they may simply regard them the same and hold the viewpoint that it needs not to be distinguished. If it is true, they will plunge themselves into the dilemma of "whether metaphor could be developed or used".

Strategies for Defining MC

Metaphor, as an unconscious cognitive way, is essentially different from it as an ability which can be consciously developed. Nevertheless, the current definitions of metaphoric competence do not embody this key difference. In other words, they have confused metaphoric cognitive thinking way with metaphoric cognitive competence. This will directly influence the subsequent planning for developing metaphoric competence and its effectiveness. We therefore believe that the definition of metaphoric competence should consider two natures of metaphor. Specifically, it first needs to embody the essential nature of metaphor as a cognitive thinking way, and then that of metaphor as a cognitive competence. Accordingly, we rename metaphoric competence as "metaphoric cognitive thinking competence" (MCTC) and redefine it as follows: "the ability of the cognitive subjects with metaphoric cognitive thinking way to apply their own rational knowledge about metaphoric cognitive thinking way to better recognize, understand and produce metaphor".

As for this definition, there are four key concepts needed to be further elaborated, i.e., the cognitive subjects with metaphoric cognitive thinking way, the rational knowledge about metaphoric cognitive thinking way, metaphoric cognitive thinking way and metaphoric cognitive thinking ability, and the components of metaphoric cognitive thinking ability.

The Cognitive Subjects with Metaphoric Cognitive Thinking Way

The concept of "cognitive subjects with metaphoric cognitive thinking way" is used in the definition of MCTC is to salience the unconscious and pervasive natures of metaphoric cognitive thinking way. We humans,

as cognitive subjects, are born with metaphoric thinking which we take very much for granted and are usually not aware of its existence. It is not until the relevant scholars notice and generalize its features and operation mechanism for us to study that we know its presentation. It is very like Newton's Law of Gravity which does objectively exist. If Newton had not discovered and generalized this principle, we humans might just see forever the phenomenon of apple falling onto the ground.

The Rational Knowledge of Metaphoric Cognitive Thinking Way

This concept refers to the features and operation mechanism generalized by researchers in question on the metaphoric cognitive thinking way. The use of the concept in the definition can avoid the problem of self-contradiction. Specifically, now that metaphoric cognitive thinking way is unconscious, it does not exist so-called "use", because the use of the word "use" implies that metaphoric cognitive thinking way is conscious. The word "use" itself means "to do something with a machine, a method, an object for a particular purpose". As a consequence, the expression of "using metaphoric cognitive thinking way" itself is self-contradiction. In order to avoid this problem, the concept of "the rational knowledge about metaphoric cognitive thinking way" is used, because it demonstrates clearly that what is used is the rational knowledge on this thinking way rather than the unconscious thinking way itself. Evidently, knowledge can be applied or used.

Metaphoric Cognitive Thinking Way and Metaphoric Cognitive Thinking Ability

As elaborated at the beginning in this part, metaphoric cognitive thinking way and metaphoric cognitive thinking ability are two different concepts. They cannot be interchangeably employed. Here we emphasize again that metaphor, as a kind of cognitive thinking way, is innate, but as a type of cognitive thinking ability, it needs to be nurtured and can be promoted. They should be regarded as two different concepts of nature and nurture.

The Components of Metaphoric Cognitive Thinking Ability

Better recognizing, understanding and producing metaphor is based on the premise of the learning and mastery of rational knowledge of metaphoric cognitive thinking way. Accordingly, metaphoric cognitive thinking ability should include four elements: (1) the ability to master the rational knowledge of metaphoric cognitive thinking way; (2) the ability to apply this rational knowledge to better recognize metaphor; (3) the ability to apply this rational knowledge to better understand metaphor; (4) the ability to apply this rational knowledge to better produce metaphor.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the analysis of key problem in the defining of metaphor on the basis of the reviewing of current major definitions on metaphor and on working out the corresponding strategies to deal with it. This problem is that the essential difference between metaphoric cognitive thinking way and metaphoric cognitive thinking ability is not distinguished. It is ignored. This paper points out the essential difference between these two concepts and concludes that they are the issues of nature and nurture, i.e., metaphor as a cognitive thinking way is unconscious and innate, but as a cognitive thinking ability, it could be nurtured and promoted. An inclusive definition should consider these two essential features of metaphor. This paper therefore renames metaphoric competence as metaphoric cognitive thinking competence (MCTC) and redefines it as "the ability of the cognitive subjects with metaphoric cognitive thinking way to apply their own rational knowledge about metaphoric cognitive thinking way to better recognize, understand and produce metaphor".

The new definition integrates organically the two essential features of metaphor, saliences the role of our humans as cognitive subjects, and avoids the potential dilemma implied in the previous definitions. We assume here that this new definition, being clear and distinctive, will play better roles in the promotion of learners' metaphoric cognitive thinking competence, linguistic competence, and communicative competence. The future research work could be extended to testify this assumption.

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