Where the Meaning of Metaphor Comes From

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Metaphor, as an important linguistic phenomenon, has been studied by many famous scholars since ancient Greece. Following recent developments in pertinent research, it can be found that philosophers have begun to use the analytical method of philosophy to study metaphors, starting from a foundation provided by the results of linguistic research already conducted on metaphor. By reviewing the research of metaphor and previous studies on the connotations and extensions of the definitions of metaphor, this paper utilizes the analytical method of philosophy to analyze the meanings of metaphor and the ways to produce them. In fact, we do not have to literally translate the metaphorical sentence to understand the true meaning of the sentence, as the meaning of the metaphor was transformed from our own internal conceptual cognition. In general, the meaning of metaphors is generated through the interaction between our physical bodies and the external world. However, in communication, we found that the meaning of metaphor was generated through the "intimacy" between the communication participants.

Keywords: metaphor, the meaning of metaphor, intimacy

Introduction

Metaphor, as a linguistic phenomenon, exists in various aspects of our lives, and it is also widely used by speakers in conversations. In reality, metaphor can be easily found in literary texts, philosophical texts and scientific discourse. For this reason, metaphor has been the focus in rhetoric, philosophy and other fields since ancient Greece.

Aristotle, a pioneer in the metaphor study, asserted that metaphor should be used in debate. He believed that the use of metaphor, which was closely related to human intelligence could make rhetoric more clear. He tried to explore the truth of metaphor from comparative research, which was also a major theme of philosophical research in his time. However, Plato, John Locke and others argued that the use of metaphor affects an accurate interpretation of the truth, and excessive use of metaphor will therefore make us stray from the truth. Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the status of metaphor in academic fields was gradually downgraded until it was considered but as a rhetorical device.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the study of metaphor has been expanded from the rhetoric to the philosophy. In *Darstellung Der Antiken Rhetorik*, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (2001) stated that truth actually comes from changes produced by metaphor and rhetoric, and that human beings have never properly understood the essence of metaphor. Since the 1930s, the scope of metaphor research has been further expanded. Paul Ricoeur, a hermeneutic scholar, who has pushed the study of metaphor to the hermeneutics from the perspective of ancient rhetoric, semiotics and semantics. Logical positivism studies the meaning of

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metaphor from the perspective of distinguishing meaning from emotion. J. R. Searle used truth theory to explain the meaning of metaphors. Donald Davidson focused on the meaningless metaphor. From the above information, it can be seen that the meaning of metaphor remains the key point of many scholars' debates. However, these studies have explicitly neglected the meaning and cognitive content of metaphors, and do not pay attention to the mechanism of metaphor in communication. With the development of cognitive science, many scholars began to deny that metaphor is "non-scientific", which was defined by positivism. Scholars began to analyze the meaning and mechanism of metaphor from the perspective of cognition so as to promote the development of metaphor research.

In view of the problems in previous studies, this paper tries to analyze the meaning of the metaphor and gives more comprehensive consideration to the mechanism which generates metaphorical meaning by first reviewing the previous studies of metaphor.

The Connotation and Extension of Metaphorical Definition

In *Poetics*, Aristotle defined metaphor as "the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is proportion" (Trans. by Luo, 2004, pp. 318-320). From Aristotle's definition, it can be clearly seen that the essence of metaphor is the transformation of a name. In fact, he wants to draw a clear line between metaphor and other rhetorical devices from the perspective of rhetoric, since he believes that metaphor is indeed one of rhetorical devices. Although Aristotle's definition does not fully explain the essence of metaphor, it has influenced many researchers who work in the fields of rhetoric, philosophy and linguistics to explore metaphor. Since then, no matter what aspect one studies metaphor from, all can be traced back to Aristotle's research, which accordingly also motivates us to discover many questions about the essence of metaphor: what exactly is "the application of an alien name by transference"? How to define the connotation and extension of a metaphor?

To answer the questions above, first we need to analyze the word "metaphor" in terms of etymology. Linguistic research reveals that the English word "metaphor" appeared in the 16th century, and it evolved from the ancient Greek word *metapherein*. In Greek, *meta* equates to "beyond" in English, while *pherein* means "to bring" in English. It can be known that the most basic connotation of metaphor is to express the "transformation of meaning", and that it is used to name a figurative rhetoric, which also confirms Aristotle's research from the original meaning of the English word. What, though, is the extension of metaphor? Many scholars believe that the carrier of metaphors can be flexibly replaced by words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters or texts. However, these flexible denotative carriers cause trouble for us when we want to distinguish the subject and modifier of metaphor, as we cannot completely rely on grammar to distinguish them for us. For example, nouns can be both the subject of a metaphor and the modifier of a metaphor. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1921) put forward the idea of "metaphorical logic space" and stated that logic is the main body of the metaphor while the space is the modifier. In addition, there are many philosophers who put forward different views on this same issue: some people believe that the semantic field is the carrier of metaphorical meaning, and metaphor thus belongs to the category of conceptual transformation from the perspective of semantics. Thus, at present, the core of the study on the essence of metaphor is still "transformation", which only implies a transformation from the original form of language to an internal conceptual cognition.

Researchers have tried to create a perfect explanation for metaphors from existing researches. However, there is no perfect definition of the essence of metaphor at a deeper level. As Paul Ricoeur (2004) put forward

that metaphor should be discussed in a metaphorical way, so all the definitions of metaphor are repetitive and cannot highlight the integrity of the definition of metaphor.

The Meaning of Metaphor

Although, at present, we cannot give a perfect definition of metaphor, we still attempt to take the definition of metaphor as it appears in Chen's book *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Philosophy of Language, a Concise Course* (2013) and other dictionaries and monographs as the basis for our research and analysis, after having read numerous other authoritative books and dictionaries. This paper tries to explore the meaning of metaphor in contrastive analysis and obtain the ways of generating the meanings of metaphor based on related researches in cognitive science.

In history, metaphor has always been viewed as a rhetorical device. Aristotle highly praised the metaphor and believed that metaphor, as a rhetorical device, made speech vivid and broke the stereotypical nature of expression. He spent a great amount of energy distinguishing metaphor from other rhetorical devices, especially from simile and emphasized that a metaphor is an unarticulated simile, and a simile is an articulated metaphor. For example, the sentence "John is a dog" is a metaphor, while the sentence "John is like a dog" is a simile.

In fact, academics held the view that metaphors can be further divided into simile and metaphor, with the word "is" indicating metaphor and the word "like" and other figurative words indicating simile. Since then, many philosophers have studied the meaning of metaphor along the lines of Aristotle. For example J. R. Searle (1979) believed that using "is" and "like" can be used to distinguish metaphor from simile, but he did not believe that simile is a metaphor that has already been claimed. Searle used truth theory to explain that the case of "John is like a dog" may be true, but the case of "John is a dog" must be false. This means that the truth conditions of metaphor and simile are different. According to this, Searle also concluded with a formula: if the speaker said "S is P", it means "S is R". Obviously, in a metaphorical conversation, the speaker did not truly want to say "P", but something else.

Donald Davidson holds the same view as Searle. He also used the truth conditions of metaphors to distinguish metaphors from similes, and he thought most metaphors were false but similes were true. After deliberating on the study of Davidson's theory, it can be found that he considered that the meaning of the metaphor was the literal meaning of the word. In *What Metaphors Mean*, he explained with an example: "The spirit of God moved upon the face of the water." "Face" in this sentence refers to the face of the water, and Davidson believes that if "face" has an implied meaning of "the face of water", then "the face of water" is no longer a metaphor. Furthermore, according to Davidson, metaphors draw our attention to things that are not only indeterminate in scope, but also not propositional in content. Even in the simplest metaphors, we cannot make the cognitive content clear.

In fact, the cognitive meaning and content of the metaphor cannot be confused. When we understand the meaning of a metaphor, we do not have to translate the metaphorical sentence for understanding the true meaning of the sentence. On the contrary, it is precisely the metaphor which shows us the original meaning of the words and the sentence, and the original meaning is thereby transformed from internal conceptual cognition. The reason we use metaphors is because there is no one statement in the real world that we can use right away.

The Generative Mechanism of Metaphorical Meaning

After analyzing the meaning of metaphor by distinguishing metaphor from simile, it can be found that metaphor does not exist beyond the rhetorical field and the literal, but rather between them. We have to consider from where the meaning of metaphor actually originates.

In the 1960s, Lakoff and Johnson's discussion on the role of metaphor in cognition motivated philosophers to begin to study the mechanism of metaphor and its meaning as well as the problem of metaphor conceptualization, and metaphor consequently became more prominent in philosophical discourse. According to Lakoff and Johnson's research, we always connect with the world and understand the world through metaphor. We have to regard metaphor as a method with which to obtain the meaning of the most abstract concepts as well as certain concepts that cannot be directly determined by experience. From this perspective, metaphor is not only a simple linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive form, which helps us to explore the truth.

Under the current theoretical framework of cognitive science, this paper used an interactive embodied cognitive research theory to analyze and understand the mechanism of metaphor and its meaning. In other words, it studied the essence of metaphor as it exists between our physical bodies and cognitive activities, and as it exists in the interaction between human beings and the environment. According to *Metaphors We Live by*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believe that most of human cognition operates through metaphor. Metaphor and experience are relative and not based on similarity. They also integrated Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory which stated that our minds are embodied and that cognition is unconsciousness. The most important thing is that they maintained that the concept of natural language is metaphorical and embodied in essence and that the truth is not absolutely objective, but related to our understanding. According to these theories, computational cognitive science would be questioned if Lakoff and Johnson's theory proved correct. This is because we cannot simply transmute concepts into symbols, and the vast amount of background knowledge involved in these concepts cannot be used to implement machine coding through symbolic logic reasoning.

Based on Lakoff and Johnson's research and through the above comparison, it can be seen that metaphor is not only a simple symbol, but also a conceptualization. The conceptualization of a metaphor is embodied, and because humans also rely on embodied experiences to interact with the outside world, these embodied experiences give birth to metaphorical meaning. In addition, it can be found that the investigation of truth cannot be undertaken only by our own brain or body, but by our body's long-term interaction with the outside world. Metaphors are retained in our mind and communication in this way.

Metaphors are frequently used in daily conversation consciously or unconsciously. It is worth noting that there is an "intimacy" allowing us to understand metaphors faster and more easily. Ted Cohen (1978) put forward the most prominent opinion on the relevant studies of metaphor in social communication: the use of metaphor in communication presupposed and increased the "intimacy" between both sides of the communication. Although Ted Cohen did not continue to discuss this idea, his opinion still provided strong support for David E. Cooper's research.

In *Metaphor*, David E. Cooper (1986) states that the application of metaphor can automatically trigger a sense of intimacy, or that metaphors make the communicator "feel at home". He also discussed the intimacy of metaphorical communication in different situations: first, a "dead metaphor" refers to speech produced in a

metaphorical way which has been gradually stabilized in language and widely used in our daily life. In this case, even when separated by thousands of miles, people will maintain a certain degree of intimacy in their conventions. Secondly, the phenomenon of "fresh metaphors" are highly personal and active among groups with common cultural backgrounds and similar interests. When we share a metaphorical sentence in our social circle, the friends who have received the correct information have "shared feelings" with the speaker. At this moment, the intimacy of the social circle brought by the metaphor begins to be apparent. Therefore, there is a kind of intimacy in real communication, which can adjust the operation of metaphor in real communication to a certain extent and make metaphor widely present in our daily communication and usages. Furthermore, the "intimacy" is what gives birth to the metaphorical meaning. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that not every communicator intentionally cultivates intimacy with the listener, and not every metaphor successfully contains such intimacy.

Conclusion

From the analysis above it can be found that we can neither separate metaphor and simile by "is" and "like", nor can we translate a metaphorical sentence into another "literal" sentence. Metaphorical meaning is not contained in any certain semantic meaning, and we cannot simply attempt to restore a metaphor by paraphrasing. Specifically, we should create metaphors with the help of language, mind, behavior, communication and other factors. We should rely on embodied experiences to create metaphors through the interactions of our bodies with the outside world, and we also rely on the "intimacy", which is presupposed and increases through communication to create metaphors.

Philosophy is rational; it aims to present the origin of things in the most basic of words. But what are the most basic words? We can always find a trace of metaphor in philosophers' views. We always want to escape from the bondage of metaphor and seek the truth. However, no language can be "translated" in the face of truth, precisely because what language presents is itself. Therefore, using cognition or experience to explore the unknown world is a necessary way to accept and generate intimacy in communication between people.

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