

# An Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Economic Discourse

ZHU Tian-yi

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

As a cognitive tool, conceptual metaphor permeates in economic discourse. It plays an important role in interpreting economic activities, as well as keeping abreast with economic trends. Through summarization and observation, this paper analyzes the conceptual metaphor in economic discourse, and draws the conclusion that the utilization of conceptual metaphor in economic discourse not only has theoretical functions at a discourse level, but also the practical significance in enlightening economic activities.

*Keywords:* conceptual metaphor, economic discourse, cognition

## Introduction

Metaphor has long been perceived as one of rhetorical devices, which can be traced back to Aristotle's study of metaphor more than 2000 years ago. As Aristotle said, "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor". He then assumed that metaphor is a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. In the 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson put forward the conceptual metaphor theory from the perspective of cognition: metaphor is not only a kind of linguistic phenomenon, but also an important means of human thinking. Since then, more and more scholars at home and abroad have been carrying out research on metaphor.

With the rapid growth of economy, especially the economic globalization, business activities have exerted great influence on people's daily life. People are exposed to a great amount of news from television, newspapers and the Internet. However, many technical terms in economic reports are too obscure for ordinary readers. Therefore, it is necessary to employ conceptual metaphor in economic news.

Since the conceptual metaphor theory has been highly influential both within cognitive linguistics and in social and natural science, which has made substantial achievements, numerous scholars have also conducted extensive research on metaphorical representations in economic discourse. Based on the classification and function of metaphor, this paper intends to analyze the characteristics of metaphor in economic discourse, and present its cognitive structure in the economy. There are about 113 references during the past twenty years on this topic. The thesis reviews the key literature concerned with the conceptual metaphor in economic discourse in recent ten years, mainly from 2010 to 2021, and few of them are more than ten years ago.

## **Research Background**

Metaphor has always been a hot spot in linguistic research. The traditional view held that metaphor is a rhetorical device deviating from the conventional use of language. It mainly plays the role of language decoration. With the advent of conceptual metaphor theory, many linguists have studied metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. It is not merely a matter of language, but an effective cognitive tool for human beings to conceptualize abstract concepts in terms of concrete ones. Since then, the study of cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor has developed into a new height.

With the rapid development of globalization, the English economic reports have sprung up greatly. The reading of these news has become one of the most available ways of holding the latest international economic dynamic. Especially as scholars mentioned in the latest literature, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has led to a severe blow to the world economy. News concerned with business and finance has become an important access for people to comprehending and constructing the world economy. Since the economic activities like international finance and foreign trade are at an extreme level of complexity and specialty, the reporters usually use an army of metaphors in order to help readers to grasp the meaning of the news conveniently. So far, many studies have shown the common existence of metaphors in business discourses.

In modern theories of metaphor, metaphor is pervasive in daily life. It is reflected in language and is affecting people's thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Thanks to the cognitive ability of conceptual metaphor, it can diminish the rigidity and obscurity in economic discourse.

## **Research Method**

Most research has been carried out by means of natural observation. It starts from a linguistic phenomenon—the common existence of conceptual metaphors in economic discourse. The examples then will be analyzed and interpreted according to the specific context. Therefore, some scholars assume that this kind of research paradigm is exploratory-interpretive. On the other hand, others investigate by classifying the conceptual metaphors from different perspectives. Above all, observation is the basic approach researchers adopt.

## **Results Discussion**

### **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) held that metaphor is a systematic process of mapping from a source to a target domain. The target domain is an abstract concept, while the source domain is a relatively specific and familiar concept. The internal similarity between the source and target is the cognitive basis of metaphorical thinking. Conceptual metaphors are divided into three types, namely, structural metaphors, orientational metaphors and ontological metaphors. In fact, these three types of metaphors are found to be widely existed in economic news discourse.

Research during the past ten years focused on the features of conceptual metaphor and its major patterns in economic discourse. However, in the recent five years, studies are turning to the cognitive model of the conceptualizing process. In this way, researchers utilize the conceptual metaphor patterns to enlighten economic interactions and Business English teaching.

### **Features of Conceptual Metaphor in Economic Discourse**

In terms of its characteristics, first of all, previous research has established that metaphor is pervasive in daily life, even in economic discourse. Apart from the complexity and specialty of economic discourse, Wu (2007, p. 224) claimed that it is the similarity of human economic activities and behaviors that makes this metaphorical thinking mode in the economic field universal. Secondly, conceptual metaphor is systematic, which is based on its definition, "Metaphor is a systematic mapping across conceptual domains." A few scholars interpreted this systematic nature as both internal and external. Anna and Ocarina (2021, p. 40) declared that there are two types of strategies to investigate the role of conceptual metaphors. For one thing, the metaphoric transfer strategy operates based on the experience of source; for another, the alternate source strategy performs externally where the activation of metaphor will influence the conceptualizing process. Personally speaking, on the one hand, the way one concept constructs another is systematic in the condition of the same conceptual metaphor. On the other hand, the mapping across conceptual domains is the one between two systems. Thirdly, Evans and Green (2006, p. 296) committed that conceptual metaphor is unidirectional, which means that the mapping process of metaphor is from a source domain to a target domain, and the conceptualizing process varies with the directionality. They illustrated that the unidirectionality still works even when two different metaphors share the same domains. For instance, "People is machine" and "Machine is people." Finally, as Lakoff and Johnson mentioned, conceptual metaphor is based on culture and experience. Broadly speaking, metaphors in different cultures are not exactly the same. Wu (2007, p. 224) gain insights into the nationality of conceptual metaphors that, although many economic phenomena and behaviors are consistent in essence, economies of different nationalities vary in features due to different natural and cultural environments. But in a narrow sense, conceptual metaphor system, as part of culture, is in line with the basic values of the nation.

### **Representation of Conceptual Metaphor in Economic Discourse**

Much of the current literature pays attention to the representation of the conceptual metaphor in economic discourse. Based on the diachronic study, a large body of literature on the representation further divides those conceptual metaphors in economic discourse on the basis of the three types made by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Most of current studies discussed the four common metaphors, namely, journey metaphors, machine metaphors and competition metaphors in economic courses. Besides, Wu (2007, p. 224) mentioned container metaphors which, in their opinions, are one of the most typical ontological metaphors, such as "package investment". Reporters achieve a quantitative process by means of container metaphors, which decreases the level of abstraction and profession of economic conception. In terms of the economic crisis, Ying (2015, p. 202) conceptualized it through an army of disaster metaphors. Researches have listed metaphors of human beings, war, movement, health and nature, which he claimed accounts for 90% of the total in economic discourse. The substitution for health metaphors reveals an upward trend in economy. Furthermore, researchers dissect the law of economic operation through constructing human and nature metaphors instead of machine ones to indicate the sustainable development of economy. From the transformation of these conceptual metaphors, the economic operation is perceived to be a more dynamic, active and positive process.

Some probe into the specific representation from a linguistic approach—the conceptual metaphor at a lexical level. Zhou (2016, p. 117) paid much attention to water metaphors in English economic discourse at the lexical level. “Water” is often used to conceptualize “capital”. “What they have in common is that they may rise, fall and float due to internal and external factors” (Zhou, 2016). In contrast with Zhou, Kong (2002, p. 16) explored the conceptual metaphor of temperature in economic discourse from a cognitive approach. Cold and heat are the direct experience of human sensory organs to temperature. He expounded its image schema, and concluded that such metaphors regarding temperature are often used to express people’s emotional changes, as well as states in economy. For instance, “热销” in Chinese means selling good, and equivalently there are “hot sale” in English (Kong, 2002, p. 16). Both of the two parallel texts are constructed by means of the sensory metaphor in the same cognitive mechanism.

Different from the approaches above, few decisively started from three conceptual metaphor formulas—“Economy is war”, “Economy is human beings” and “Economy is entertainment”, and dwelled on their mapping structures through examples in economic news. It is at some extent the conceptual metaphor at the lexical level.

In addition, a few scholars have adopted a synchronic study the comparative analysis between two languages. Some narrowed down into the lexical level of conceptual metaphor in economic discourse, from a specific word to common patterns. In a broader sense, these differences reflect the cultural diversity and nationality of conceptual metaphor.

In a word, only a minority of scholars conduct research in accordance with the pure classification of conceptual metaphors made by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Most of them carry out the categorization and exemplification in a specific context.

### **Functions of Conceptual Metaphors in Economic Discourse**

In terms of the functions conceptual metaphor bearing in economic discourse, it can be conducted from a theoretical and practical aspect. Much of the current research revolves around its academic functions. Only few scholars attach importance to the practical availability.

In response to the traditional view on metaphor, it has the rhetorical function. Although economic texts are of non-literary features, there is an urgency to upgrade the language in economic texts as a result of the inevitable connection with the development of society. Metaphor has the beautified function so that it gives the economic coverage more accuracy, brevity, and clarity. Aesthetically, it is a matter of appreciation function for evaluating the texts.

As a cognitive tool, linguistic functions are the most basic functions of conceptual metaphor in economic discourse, namely, informative function and interpretation function. These functions are realized under the guidance of modern theories of conceptual metaphor. Therefore, researchers like Shu (2003) also interpreted as cognitive functions. Besides these, coherence function is also one of the linguistic functions based on the discourse analysis. A cohesive device as it is, the conceptual metaphor is the link in the system of economic texts, which controls the development of information in discourse. However, the discourse coherence can be decoded on two levels: the linguistic level and the conceptual one. As a matter of fact, the connectedness of

economic texts has been in both semantics and pragmatics; meanwhile, the cognitive coherence is forging in the mind.

Transforming from theory to practice, domestic scholars have indicated that it is essential for teachers to adopt some effective strategies in business English teaching to improve students' language proficiency. Additionally, much roughly mentions its guidance in realistic economic activities. On the other side, foreign scholars mainly pay attention to resolving real economic problems based on these conceptual metaphors.

### Conclusion

The thesis presents an overview of conceptual metaphor applied in economic discourse. The essence that metaphor using one concept to construct another reflects the basic cognitive mode of human beings, and what's more, it enables the human perception and cognition to become more innovative and economical. Previous research has established both linguistic and cognitive patterns of conceptual metaphors in economic discourse, which can help people interpret economic dynamics. More importantly, it plays a directive role in economic interactions and Business English teaching. In terms of its categorization, Lakoff and Johnson also proposed another approach to classify conceptual metaphor chronologically—dead, latent, active and revived metaphors. It is expected to adopt this research method in analyzing its representation in economic discourse. As for the selection of corpus, most of the existing studies are confined to economics textbooks, rarely engaging in the realistic financial coverage, which is expected to be resolved in further research. In this way, it will shed new light on constructing a socialist economy with Chinese characteristics, as well as involving in intercultural communication.

### References

- Ángel, A. (2021). The use of 'bubble' as an economic metaphor in the news: The case of the 'real estate bubble' in Spain. *Language & Communication*, (78), 100-108.
- Anna, P., & Ocarina, B. (2021). The power of conceptual metaphors in the age of pandemic: The influence of the WAR and SPORT domains on emotions and thoughts. *Language & Communication*, (81), 37-47.
- Evans, V., & Green. (2006). *Cognitive linguistics an introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Michael, B. (2006). Economic metaphors for solving intrafirm allocation problems: What does a market buy us?. *Decision Support Systems*, (42), 1657-1672.
- Rafael, A. (2010). Where does the money go? An analysis of the container metaphor in economics: The market and the economy. *Journal of Pragmatics*, (42), 1137-1150.
- Wang, H., Runtsova, T., & Chen, H. (2013). Economy is an organism—A comparative study of metaphor in English and Russian economic discourse. *Text & Talk*, (33), 259-288.
- 陈振东, 杨会军. (2007). 商务英语中的隐喻及其翻译. *上海翻译*, (1), 37-41.
- 孔德明. (2002). 从认知看经济语篇中的隐喻概念. *外语与外语教学*, (2), 13-16.
- 任朝旺, 曾利沙. (2016). 中英文经济报道中概念隐喻的跨文化性. *广州大学学报 (社会科学版)*, 15(11), 64-69.
- 束定芳. (2003). *隐喻学研究*. 上海外语教育出版社.
- 谭业升, 陈敏. (2010). 汉语经济隐喻的一项历时研究. *语言教学与研究*, (5), 84-90.
- 吴金花. (2007). 西方商务报刊中的经济隐喻. *山西财经大学学报*, 29(z1), 224.
- 应英. (2015). 英汉经济语篇中的隐喻对比分析. *经济研究导刊*, (20), 201-203.
- 周梅. (2016). 从认知角度看英语经济语篇中的词汇隐喻. *齐齐哈尔大学学报 (哲学社会科学版)*, (5), 117-119.