

Cognitive View on Metaphor and Polysemy Learning

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Language is a product of human cognition. It is of great importance and necessity to study the role of metaphor in foreign language learning and teaching. The paper is intended as a trial to develop a metaphorical cognitive approach to aid the learner of English as a foreign language, especially in polysemy learning since it has been a big problem in foreign language learning area. Metaphor plays a positive role and produces better results than the traditional approach in vocabulary learning. The metaphor approach is a powerful strategy in vocabulary comprehension, retention, and production. Teachers and researchers must shoulder the responsibility to carry out close examinations of linguistic metaphors instantiating the underlying conceptual metaphors by analyzing and establishing corpora to better established metaphor systems.

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The Nature of Metaphor

The cognitive approach was largely initiated by Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 book *Metaphors We Live by*, which claims that metaphor is far more than a rhetorical or poetic device. Rather, it is pervasive throughout everyday language. Moreover, this ubiquity of metaphor is held to serve as evidence of its role in structuring not only how we talk, but also how we think and act. Thus, the assumption that metaphor is essentially in contrast with literal language is seen as false. Rather, the essence of metaphor is seen as how one mental domain is conceptualized in terms of another (Lakoff, 1993, p. 203). Here, primacy is thus given to metaphor as a way of thinking about one idea in terms of another. According to Lakoff, an enormous mental system has been discovered structuring our everyday conceptual system and pervading our everyday language. We frequently use the language from one semantic area to think and talk about another. People map a structure of concrete source domains onto abstract domains of experience. Abstract reasoning is largely governed by these metaphorical mappings that are said to be not arbitrary, and in large measure constrained by the so-called "image schemas". The experience "logic" of the image schema experience (its inference patterns) is generally preserved in the metaphorical mapping.

The word metaphor itself derives from the Greek "meta" expressing change, and "pherein" meaning "to carry". As we have seen, metaphor involves the interaction of two domains. Richards was the first person that posed the interaction theory that has strong explanatory power, and many scholars' theories belong to it. Because the traditional theory only notices the existence of transference between two objects, it never concerns how transference happens. Black argues that a metaphor has two distinct subjects, to be identified as the "primary "subject" (topic) and the "secondary" one (vehicle). The topic and the vehicle have systems of "associated

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implications”, including commonplace cultural beliefs, personal attitudes, and common knowledge. In a metaphor “A is B”, the “systems of associated implications” attaching to A interact with that which attaches to B. The method works by “projecting upon” the topic a set of “associated implications” comprised in the vehicle. The presence of the topic incites the hearer to select some of the vehicle properties, and to construct a parallel “implication complex” that can fit the topic and reciprocally induces the parallel changes in the vehicle.

The Centrality of Metaphor

We all have known that metaphor is to think about one domain in terms of another. Metaphor can be found in non-linguistic areas, such as paintings films, religion, and architecture, etc. In this sense, metaphor is a cognitive tool for human to understand, perceptualize, and conceptualize the world. The function of it can be found in scientific, affective, and linguistic aspects. The author is going to focus on the function of the metaphor in linguistic field. And since the author shows more concern with the role of metaphor in language learning.

Saussure holds that there’s an essential arbitrary component in the association of words with what they mean. For example, in “I see the tree”, it is arbitrary fact that the sequence of sounds which we spell see is used in English to refer to vision. But, given this arbitrary fact, it is by no means arbitrary that “see” can also mean “know” or “understand”, as in “I see what you’re getting at”. It has something to do with cognition and conceptual system. It can be metaphorically understood: “Vision is knowledge”. It has been argued that a great deal of polysemy is due to metaphorical usage, and that in fact not only language, but our cognition and hence our language, operate metaphorically. Therefore, cognitive linguistics believes that natural language is a product of the human mind based on the same organizing principles that operate in other cognitive domains. As one domain of human cognitions, language is intimately linked with other cognitive domains and as such mirrors the interplay of psychological cultural, social, ecological, and other factors. In other words, language is not just a system of consisting of arbitrary signs, and it is motivated by human conceptual knowledge and bodily experiences, etc.

Polysemy (semantic extension) and semantic change are closely related. No semantic change of meaning can take place without an intervening stage of polysemy. If a word which once meant A now means B, we can be sure that speakers did not just wake up and switch meanings someday. Rather, there was a stage when the word meant both A and B and the earlier meaning of A eventually was lost. Next, the author turns to learning of polysemy.

Learning Policy by Means of Metaphor

A lot about nature of metaphor, as a cognitive way and its important role in linguistic field, has been discussed. Since a great deal of language is motivated by metaphor, then examination or study of vocabulary learning from the point view of metaphor might also offer valuable insights into a large area of vocabulary learning as foreign language, so it should be not ignored and should be given more attention to.

The Problems in Learning Polysemy

Polysemy is one of the headaches of vocabulary learning for English learners; it cannot be treated effectively through translation or explanation. Translation attempts to provide a language one equivalent but falls short in addressing a word’s manifold meanings, collocations, and usages. There is not a simple one-to-one relationship between two languages in reality. Explanation or translation can be clumsy failing to make meaning explicit and

understandable.

In last section, we have known that a great deal of polysemy is motivated by metaphor. Traditionally, teachers always list a number of different meanings of each word in the dictionary one by one on the blackboard. It is impossible for learners to remember so many meanings of a word. They can just remember some first language translation of a word and even they remember all of them for the time being; they feel helpless and puzzled when the word appears in new contexts, lexical set phrases or sentences. It is all known that a new meaning of a word is largely determined by the context. That is to say, the new meaning of a word occurs only if it is used together with other words. Moreover, the teacher cannot list all the meanings of a word because the context it occurs is countless. Thus, it would be crucial to develop learners' inferring ability of understanding polysemy in creative and new contexts. The traditional method can only add to learners' task of memorizing a vocabulary. It will be more effective if teachers can make learners aware of a metaphorical link after they learn prototype meaning of a word, and then, they can infer the other corresponding meanings in different contexts (different lexical sets, phrases, or sentences).

Metaphorization in Semantic Extension

Metaphorical link can make learners have deeper perceptualization of polysemy (e.g., go about/over, talk about/over, and think about/over), thus a longer retention of it.

Word meanings can be expanded by means of linguistic metaphorization rooted in the transference from one conceptual domain to another. The transference of different conceptual domains creates different contexts in which the phenomena of polysemy happens. For example, "up" originally in orientation domain means "to a higher position" such as in the contexts of "jump up" and "lift the head up". But when it is transferred to emotional domain, "up" appears in the new context, "I'm feeling up" and "cheer up". Here, "up" has another meaning "happy". But why? When learners consider it carefully by making use of their conventional knowledge, they will find that drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression, while erect posture with a positive emotional state. Now, the transference of two conceptual domains or the process of metaphorization underlies the existing conceptual metaphor. Happy is up. This process of metaphorization involves the psychological similarity (perceived similarity) between the physical concept "up" and abstract concept "happy". As Shu Dingfang said similarity provides the ground for the working of metaphor by means of which word meaning expands. And Bolinger (1980, p. 141) claimed that the ability to see resemblances is the basis of metaphors.

Then, where does the similarity between the concrete concept (such as "up") and the abstract concept (such as "happy") come from? Why can two seemingly unrelated things be placed on a par? Of course, the visual sense may discover the physical features in a sense (including perception). Therefore, the psychologists have proved that the cooperation of the objective and subjective can make people make out both the physical features and the psychological properties for them to make full understand of the world. So, the author classifies the similarities as physical similarity and psychological similarity. Physical similarity means those in shape, appearances, or functions, etc. Psychological similarity means subjectively perceived similarity.

Let's return to conventional knowledge by which the author means the shared information that people in a given culture have. Understanding of similarities between different things is closely related to conventional knowledge. What learners possess about the conventional knowledge of a concept exerts great influence in their identifying and understanding similarities. In turn, better understanding of similarity helps to enforce the accumulation of conventional knowledge of the concept. Therefore, the author holds that both similarity and

conventional knowledge are important and relevant mechanism to operate metaphor in the phenomena of polysemy.

For example, there are many words for the emotions which are very frequently derived from words referring to physical actions or sensations accompanying the relevant emotions. For instance, psychological tests have shown that physical colors (e.g., of the walls of a room) do affect people's emotional state; it would seem that bright colors do indeed help to promote bright to come to mean cheerful while dull means the reverse. Likewise, emotional tension or feeling down can be linked to physical muscular states or limpness which accompany the relevant mental states. But uses such as bitter anger and sweet personality seem relatively distinct from any direct physical taste-response of sweetness or bitterness. But metaphorically, the anger is unpleasant to our emotions in a way similar to that in which a bitter taste displeases our taste buds.

Metaphorical Method in Learning Polysemy

According to the statistics, 70% of the lexical meanings originate from metaphor in language. The most basic experience of human beings lies in themselves and then extends to the outside world. Human body is a three-dimensional container and forces the special relationships with the outside world such as up-down, front-back, on-off, and central peripheral. In order to understand different "ups" in different contexts, we will turn to the two important mechanisms we have discussed about conventional knowledge that equals learners' conventional experience in this case and psychological similarities. In the context of "wake up", it is a linguistic metaphorical realization of the conceptual metaphor "Conscious is up" because of the conventional experience that human and most mammals sleep lying down and stand up when they awaken. The learners can also infer the meaning of "up" in other contexts, for instance, "stay up", "sit up late", or "get up", etc. In the number of books printed each year keeps going up, it is transference from the source domain (orientation domain) to the target domain (amount domain). Here, the conventional experience is that if we add more of a substance or of objects to a container or pile, the level goes up. So, "up" here means "more". According to it, learners can also infer its meaning in "speak up", "turn up", "lay up", and "run up", etc. In "What's coming up", the conventional knowledge is that normally our eyes look in the direction in which we typically move. As an object approaches a person or the person approaches object, the object appears larger. Since the ground is perceived as being fixed, the top of the project appears to be moving upward in the person's field of vision. So, "Foreseeable future events are up". Learners can catch the meaning of "What's up", "There's something up" in a walk. In "come up in the world", "on your way up", "up the ladder", the conventional knowledge is that status, control is correlated with power and usually the victor in the fight is typically on top. In "Things are looking up", "pick up", etc., the conventional knowledge is that the things that principally characterize what is good for a person are all "up" such as happiness, health, and life status. In "bring up", "crop up", "pop up", and "That's up in the air", up means unknown. The experience is very much like "Understanding is grasping" as in "I couldn't grasp his words". With physical objects, if you can grasp something and hold it in your hands, you can look it over carefully and get a reasonably good understanding of it. It's easier to grasp something and look at it carefully, if it's on the ground in the fixed location than if it's floating through the air like a leaf or a piece of paper.

Sometimes, metaphorical meanings of a word should be understood in a larger context. For instance, he is on his way up if learners do not know what is the topic in the sentence. It may mean "He's on the uphill road", "He is recuperating", or "He's on a higher position in his career". So, it is important to give different contexts lexical set faces sentences or even larger context backgrounds when learning polysemy. There is another point

we should note that the word “up” is just one of the linguistic extensions of the conceptual domain “up” which also includes words like rise, high top over, etc. For instance, “Up is having status”. “High” is also one instance of the concept “up”; others similar mappings with those in up also happen to the word high, besides the mappings from “up” to “status” (e.g., high society high-class high position in the company). In accordance with the conceptual metaphor, “More is up”. High lends itself naturally to denoting position on a numerical scale. Examples include high number, high price, high temperature, high speed, and high blood pressure, etc. “Good is up” is the basis for a large number of expressions in which high carries positive evaluation, high standards, high-quality, high opinion, high moral values, etc.; in other expressions, high denotes a positive evaluation of emotional states, as in high hopes and high expectations. Some metaphorical uses of high, e.g., high technology, appear to fuse the two conceptual metaphors of quantity and evaluation. High technology is not only high on the scale of sophistication; it is also positively valued over low technology. In other words, “more” is often also “better”. A fusing of the two metaphors may be felt in other expressions, e.g., higher mathematics, higher education, higher forms of life. Learners can also understand the polysemous meanings of other words (e.g., over, top, etc.) in a similar way. Since much has been discussed about “up”, it will be easy to understand and remember the meanings of “down” which are the counterpart of “up”. That is in “Sad is down”, “Unconscious is down”, “Bad is down”, “Sickness is down”, and “Less is down”. The metaphorical approach can also be applied to the words of other areas.

The teacher should help students become aware of the fact that the meanings of a word are often related and there’s almost always a combing with all the other meanings coming from it by means of metaphor; the teacher helps learners use the conventional knowledge associated with the core and the context and discern the physical similarities or the underlying similarities to make out the internal metaphorical link between the core and the extended. Learners can also be instructed to or independently work out diagrams in fulfilling such exercises. Learners are forced to think in a metaphorical way for themselves activating their imagination facilitating their memorization of polysemy.

Conclusion

It has become increasingly clear that metaphor is playing more and more important role. In traditional view, metaphors are constructed in contrast with “literal language”, and used chiefly for poetic stylistic or rhetorical device. In modern view, metaphor has become a very important cognitive approach, that is, a way of thinking about one mental domain in terms of another. According to the developing rule of human society and cognitive ability, people understand those well-delineated and physical concepts first, and then identify and think about those less delineated, abstract ones in the light of the former ones. This cognitive ability occurs at higher stage of cognition development. Then the language follows suit to describe the latter in terms of the linguistic expressions of the former, relating different kinds of concepts. That is to say, the nature of metaphorical thinking creates metaphorical language expressions. Some writers argue that 70% of the lexical meanings is motivated by metaphor. As such, it is also a topic of considerable relevance to foreign language learning. The author attempts to develop a metaphorical cognitive approach to aid the learner of English as a foreign language, especially in vocabulary learning since it has been a big problem in foreign language learning area. The author believes that the new approach she presents can be applied to other language as well. Teachers and researchers must shoulder the responsibility to carry out close examinations of linguistic metaphors instantiating the underlying conceptual metaphors by comparing and analyzing metaphor system in English corpora and in Chinese corpora , and

establishing corpora to better established metaphor system and to discover new metaphor system, and they ought to help learners look at the world in the same way that native speakers do and develop their metaphorical competence which can make learners learn how to make associations and to use their imaginations in the process of learning vocabulary, especially in comprehending polysemy in the contexts

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