STRUCTURAL, ORIENTATIONAL, ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Language expressions in most languages are largely shaped by conceptual metaphors. However, the underlying metaphor that can help language learners better understand language expressions is often taken for granted. This article discusses how structural, orientational, ontological conceptual metaphors work in forming new language expressions or idioms. From this insight, several suggestions for EFL classes are made.

Keywords: *Conceptual metaphor theory, EFL classes, ontological metaphor, orientational metaphor, structural metaphor.*

1. Introduction

Until recently, metaphor has been seen as a rhetorical device and has only been studied in the field of stylistics or rhetorics. Metaphor used to be defined by the formula "A is B" in such classics as "Achilles is a lion". In this sense, the metaphor formed based on implicit comparison. This is the key difference that helps distinguish metaphor from simile. In simile, the compared object is expressed directly as "Achilles is brave as a lion". Unlike traditional point of views which considered metaphor as a matter of pure literary language, cognitive linguists like Lakoff, Johnson (1980) and Wray (2002) believed that metaphor is a regular activity of thinking and metaphors appear a lot in our everyday language. As metaphor is so common in everyday language, it should be taken more seriously in language teaching. This article discusses three common types of conceptual metaphors and how explicit explanation about them can help language learners.

2. Structural Conceptual Metaphor

Structural conceptual metaphors are considered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as the group with the highest number. In this kind of conceptual metaphor, complicated and abstract experiences are conceptualized based on the experience of simple and specific experiences. An example often used to illustrate this type is the conceptual metaphor "ARGUMENT IS WAR" which is expressed through a series of the following expressions in English:

- Your claims are indefensible.
- He attacked every weak point in my argument.
- His criticisms were right on the target.
- I demolished his argument.
- I've never won an argument with him.
- You disagree? OK, shoot!
- If you use that strategy, he'll wipe you out.
- He shot down all of my arguments. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:4)

The above examples show that many

actions that we perform when debating are structured from the concept of war. We can win or lose in a debate. During the debate, we consider the one we argue with as the opponent. Therefore, we "attack" the opponent's point of view and "protect" our opinion. We can win or lose and also use tactics to win. When we see the adverse situation making it difficult to protect our views, we often "retreat" and "open the new attack route". In this case, even without a fight causing casualties, obviously we have a war of words through the words of war that we use.

Through these examples, Lakoff and Johnson explained that an abstract conceptual domain "debate" is understood through a specific conceptual domain of "war". Therefore, the concepts used in the sample expressions above come conceptual domain of "war". This is the basic characteristics of the structural conceptual metaphor. Besides, in this group of conceptual metaphor, the phenomenon of highlighting and hiding in the conceptual domain is an important characteristic. For example in a fierce war of words, where people only seek to put the views of their opponents down and defend their opinion, they cannot see the aspect of "cooperation" in the war of words. When someone argues, he or she spends time with us and tries to find out what we think and why we have such views to understand each other better. However, while focusing on the debate, we often forget this aspect of cooperation. In other words, the aspect of debate is highlighting and aspect of cooperation is hiding.

3. Orientational Conceptual Metaphor

In orientational conceptual metaphor, a system of ideas is organized in the relation and interaction in space like up-down, inside-out, front-behind, shallow-deep, center-periphery etc. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) called this group the orientational metaphor because they are related to the orientation in space. The origin of this metaphor group is explained as follows by researcher Tran Van Co (2007):

"We are the physical entity limited in a certain space and separated from the rest of the world by our skin; we perceive the rest of the world as the world outside us. Each of us is contained in limited space by the surface of the body, which is potentially orientational type of "inside-out". This orientation makes us imagine other physical objects also limited by the surface. At the same time we also see them as containers with inner space and separated from the world outside."

An example often cited to illustrate the orientational conceptual metaphor group is "HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) illustrated in these examples:

- I'm <u>feeling up</u>.
- That <u>boosted my spirits</u>.
- My spirits <u>rose.</u>
- You're <u>in high spirits</u>.
- Thinking about her always <u>gives me a lift</u>.
- I'm <u>feeling down</u>.
- He's really <u>low</u> these days.
- My spirits <u>sank</u>.

Conceptual metaphor "HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN" is derived from the human body posture while they are happy or sad. Normally, when people are depressed or sad they often bow down and when they are happy they raise up their head and straight up their back. Thus we see that the orientational conceptual metaphors are not arbitrary but based on culture and experiences. Also according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the conceptual domain "up-down", "inside-outside" are the spatial domain concepts in the material world but the metaphors based on these conceptual domains may vary in different cultures. For example, in some cultures, the future is seen as the front but other cultures see the future lying in the back.

Another orientational conceptual metaphor with sharp cultural origin is "RATIONAL IS UP; EMOTIONAL IS DOWN" (Lakoff 2004):

- The discussion fell to the emotional level, but I raised it back up to the rational plane.
- We put our feelings aside and had a high-level intellectual discussion of the matter.
- He couldn't rise above his emotions.

In many cultures, people themselves see as owners who have control over animals, plants and the surrounding environment. Indeed, the ability to think and reason have placed human above all else and entitle human the ability to control the world. In this case the conceptual metaphor "Control is up" is the foundation for conceptual metaphor "Human is up" and from which we have conceptual metaphor "Reasonal is up; emotional is down". This conceptual metaphor may have different justifications. In human body, wisdom lies in the brain and the brain locates in the head. Emotions of human are often thought in various cultures to be arising from the abdomen or chest. Obviously, heads are above the belly or the chest, so "Reasonal is up; emotional is down".

4. Ontological Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believed that the conceptualization of our experience under the conceptual domain of material or tangible things helps us extract abstract experiences and ideas out and see it as objects or concrete substances. According to Tran Van Co (2007), the semanticization of experience by terms allow us to extract a part of experience and interpret them. Once we can conceptualize the experience into a specific object or material, we can classify, group, quantify, etc… As a result of this we can reason about the experience. Even if the boundary of things in the objective world is not clear, we still classify them as: range of mountains, corners of street, the row of trees etc... Setting such boundaries is so as to serve the purpose of communication of human like defining a geographical area or a location for appointment. According to Lakoff and Johnson, experience in an interactive process with the specific object or substance is the foundation for a wide variety of conceptual metaphors in which events, activities, feelings, ideas etc...are considered as the essence. For example, in English, human thinking is seen as a particular object, can be a machine or a fragile character shown by the following examples:

THE MIND IS A MACHINE

- We're still trying to grind out the solution to this question.
- My mind just isn't operating today.
- Boy, the wheels are turning now!
- I'm a little rusty today.
- We've been working on this problem all day and now we're running out of steam.

THE MIND IS A BRITTLE OBJECT

- Her ego is very fragile.
- You have to handle him with care since his wife's death.
- He broke under cross-examination.
- She is easily crushed.
- The experience shattered him.
- I'm going to pieces.

The above ontological conceptual metaphors allow us to focus attention on different aspects of thinking. Conceptual metaphor "thinking is a machine" tells us that thinking can be seen as a machine operating under on-off mechanism. The machine can work with high or low performance, can damage or rust and can use the fuel. Conceptual metaphor "thinking is a fragile thing" also allow us to discuss the tolerance of the pressure of human psychology. The ontological conceptual metaphor like this frequently occurs in human thinking. According to Lakoff and Johnson, this kind of

conceptual metaphors appears frequently and is used so commonly that people take them for granted.

5. Implications for language teaching

As stated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphors are not just literary devices. They are prevalent in everyday language. Since a large part of idioms and expressions in English are motivated by conceptual metaphors, language teachers can make those idioms and expressions easier by raising students' awareness of how conceptual metaphors work in the meaning making.

5.1. Current issues in teaching English idioms and expressions

Many learners of English develop the habit of learning by heart the equivalents of idioms in their mother tongue and then use those in communication. Teachers also tend to avoid teaching English idioms although these expressions are important for developing language capability in learners. Some teachers believe that idioms are too difficult for learners. Evidence for this can be found in many language teaching textbooks which only show a list of idioms grouped by themes or key words and then come gap-filling exercises for learners. That way of task designing only encourages students to learn by heart idioms' meaning from the context in which they occur. Students will not be able to understand how those idioms were formed or use them in real contexts when the contexts are different from what they have in the textbook. Sometimes, textbook also tries to provide learners with synonyms but they are not quite equal and can be confusing.

5.2. Dealing with English idioms and expressions

The three types of conceptual metaphors discussed show that mental images grounded deeply in idioms can be activated by making learners understand the underlying conceptual metaphor and trace back to idioms' origin. Vu (2006) showed that the meaning of many idioms, especially those of body part idioms are motivated rather than abstract. Consequently, in order to teach idioms effectively, teachers should not only ask students to learn by heart. Instead, they should encourage students to predict the origins of idioms and then help them to find out the illiterate meaning based on that finding.

Besides, explicit explanation of conceptual metaphors can also help students infer idioms' meaning to a great extent. In a research on idioms containing 'ears' (Vu, 2008), it was found out that it was very hard for students to automatically identify the proper conceptual metaphor for decoding idioms' meaning. In order to help students do that, teachers need to give students direct instruction on underlying conceptual metaphors or metonymies that motivate those idioms.

5.3. Technique for teaching phrasal verbs

In advanced language tests like IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge CAE or CPE, phrasal verbs appear with high frequency. Currently available grammar books and other textbooks do no more than encouraging learners to memorize. Streamline English Directions is a good example of mechanical drilling and practice. Almost all units in the textbook come with a list of phrasal verbs and gap-filling exercises for learners to work on. These phrasal verbs are grouped in terms of verbs (take, give, look etc.) or in terms of particles (up, down, on etc.). The aim of these practice exercises is to drill and help learners memorize the idioms. This makes the learning task tedious and does not really help students to retain the meaning of phrasal verb in the long term. For example, orientational metaphor can help when teachers need to explain the meaning of the following phrasal verbs:

- What lies ahead?
- Let's think ahead to next season.
- I'm looking forward to seeing them again.

- I've put my watch forward one hour.
- The house dates back to the 16th century.
- Never look back, never have regrets.
- She was trying to leave behind a difficult adolescence.

Temporal conceptual metaphor starts from our conventional conception of time as a straight line running from the past to the future with the past in the back and the future in the front. As a result, phrasal verbs with "ahead" and "forward" are used to talk about future while those with "back" and "behind" are used to refer to the past. With such understanding of conceptual metaphor "FUTURE IS AHEAD – PAST IS BEHIND", students can better learn the meaning of the above phrasal verbs.

6. Summary

A large part of our everyday language expressions are motivated by conceptual metaphors that we take for granted. Structural, orientational and ontological metaphors all start from our bodily experience interacting with the outside world and shape the meaning of many idioms and language expressions. From the examples given, it is shown that explicit teaching of underlying conceptual metaphors that motivate idioms' meaning not only leads to better learning but also makes learning idioms and other language expressions more interesting. This new approach towards teaching vocabulary, language expressions and idioms should be encouraged in modern EFL classes.

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