

A Metaphorical Study of L2 Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract: L2 Vocabulary Learning has been an important aspect in second language acquisition study. Taking a cognitive view, this paper discusses L2 vocabulary learning from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Conceptual Theory of Metaphor offers a new way of enriching the traditional L2 vocabulary learning and teaching. Through conceptual metaphors, L2 learners might be better able to understand the lexical meaning of words and form lexical network to match the words and concepts they are expressing. A metaphoric approach is expected to increase the effect and efficiency of L2 vocabulary learning.

1 Introduction

Under the great influence of the traditional Grammar-Translation Method, scholars in China have long been focusing on the acquisition of grammatical rules in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researches, but little attention has been given to the study of the L2 Vocabulary Learning (in this paper, I do not make a distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning', hence they will be used interchangeably in this paper). There is no denying that vocabulary learning constitutes one of the most important and indispensable part of language learning. Without grammar, we express little; but without vocabulary, we express nothing. It is obvious that insufficient vocabulary will pose huge trouble for language learners in their learning because it just prevents learners from making any progress in such basic language skills as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. As a result it will undermine the foundation of language building.

It was up till the 1970s that L2 Vocabulary Learning gradually drew the focus of the scholars both at home and abroad. It was then did linguists realize the importance of L2 Vocabulary Learning. L2 Vocabulary Learning is considered to be a life-long cognition since up to date no one is known to have acquired all the vocabularies of a language. Therefore L2 Vocabulary Learning has become a new challenging task for both language learners and researchers. At present, L2 Vocabulary Learning study has taken on some shape both in theoretical exploration and empirical studies. On the one hand, linguists keep on introducing the latest language acquisition theories from abroad; on the other hand, they try to explore the L2 vocabulary acquisition of the Chinese students. They try to combine the profound linguistic theories from abroad with the real learning situation of the L2 learners in China in the hope of finding the mystery of the process of the L2 Vocabulary Learning.

In recent years, the L2 Vocabulary Learning study mainly involves the following aspects: 1) the incidental lexical acquisition; 2) the learning strategies of L2 learners; 3) the breadth and depth of the target language vocabulary; 4) The L1 transfer in the L2 acquisition process; 5) the contrastive analysis of the native language learners and L2 learners' vocabulary acquisition on the basis of corpus analysis.

Rising up in America and Europe in the 1980s, Cognitive Linguistics is actually an inter-disciplinary scientific field of cognitive psychology and linguistics. It rejects Chomsky's nativist's linguistic theory, but it tries to explain language acquisition from the perspective of human cognition. In other words, it regards language learning as human cognition instead of any inherent gift. Fighting against the prevalent Transformational-Generative Grammar, Cognitive Linguistics holds that like any other learning processes, language learning is a cognitive process. With the prosperous development of cognitive science, L2 Vocabulary Learning study has also taken on a

new atmosphere. Taking a cognitive view, this paper discusses L2 Vocabulary Learning from the perspective of conceptual metaphor.

2 Conceptual Theory of Metaphor

2.1 *Metaphors as a cognitive instrument*

In cognitive science, metaphors are not just a way of expressing ideas by means of language, but a way of thinking. They act as ‘cognitive instruments’. They challenged the deeply entrenched view of metaphor by claiming that:

- (1) metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words;
- (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts, and not just for some artistic or esthetic purpose;
- (3) metaphor is often not based on similarity;
- (4) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, not just by special talented people; and
- (5) metaphor, far from being a superfluous though pleasing linguistic ornament, is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning.

One of the most influential books, *Metaphor We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) [1], cited evidence from everyday conventional linguistic expressions to infer the existence of metaphorical relations or mappings between conceptual domains. Lakoff and Johnson used a formula TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE to describe the metaphorical link between the source domain and target domain. Source domain is the domain supporting the literal meaning of the expression and the target domain is the one that the expression is actually about. A metaphor is therefore a conceptual mapping between two domains. The mapping is asymmetrical, however, the metaphorical expression profiles a conceptual structure in the target domain, not the source domain.

The mapping between source and target domains involves two sorts of correspondences, epistemic and ontological. Epistemic correspondences are correspondences between relations holding between elements in one domain and relations between elements in the other domain (including encyclopedic knowledge about the domain); ontological correspondences hold between elements of one domain and elements of the other domain.

In general, metaphors are not merely linguistic in nature, but are conceptual structures. The correspondences between domains are represented in the conceptual system, and are fully conventionalized among members of a speech community. Through ‘elaboration’, the characteristics of a basic metaphor in the source domain may be carried over to the target domain to indicate finer differences in degrees of all different aspects. For example, the difference in intensity between ‘boil’ and ‘simmer’ in a heated liquid would carry over corresponding differences in degree of anger in ‘*to boil with anger*’ and ‘*to simmer with anger*’. The conceptual nature of metaphor may also cause certain patterns of reasoning to be carried over from the source domain to the target domain. Croft and Cruse (2006) [2] summarized Lakoff’s conceptual theory of metaphor as follows:

- (i) It is a theory of recurrently conventionalized expressions in everyday language in which literal and metaphorical elements are intimately combined grammatically.
- (ii) The conventional metaphorical expressions are not a purely linguistic phenomenon, but the manifestation of a conceptual mapping between two semantic domains; hence the mapping is general and productive (and assumed to be characteristic of the human mind).
- (iii) The metaphorical mapping is asymmetrical: the expression is about a situation in one domain (the target domain) using concepts mapped over from another domain (the source domain).
- (iv) The metaphorical mapping can be used for metaphorical reasoning about concepts in the target domain.

(Croft & Cruse, 2006:198) [2]

2.2 Classifications of metaphors

Metaphors can be classified according from different perspectives.

2.2.1 Classifications on the basis of source domain

Based on the difference in source domains, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [1] classified metaphors as orientational metaphors, ontological metaphors and structural metaphors.

Oriental metaphors usually have something to do with spatial orientations: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral. Oriental metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation, for instance, HAPPY IS UP. That's why in English there is the expression like 'I'm feeling *up* today'. But such metaphors are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. Take the metaphor 'HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN' for example. The dropping posture often goes along with sadness and depression while erect posture with a positive emotional state. Therefore, the metaphors in the sentences below will be easy to understand.

My spirits *rose*.

You're in *high* spirits.

He's really *low* these days.

My spirits *sank*.

Definitely orientational metaphors like up-down, front-back, on-off can provide extraordinarily rich bases for understanding orientational concepts. But surely our earthly world and experience are not confined to orientations only. There are situations where things are not clearly discrete or bounded, still we need to categorize them or perhaps impose artificial boundaries to make them physically discrete. These ways of categorizing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances are known as ontological metaphors. Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, quantify them and even reason about them. Take the experience of rising prices, which can be metaphorically viewed as an entity via the word inflation. This gives us a way of referring to the experience:

INFLATION IS AN ENTITY

Inflation is lowering our standard of living.

Inflation makes me sick.

In the above two sentences, 'inflation' is viewed as an entity which we can refer to or bring about certain effects on our human body. However, ontological metaphors may serve more purposes than referring and quantifying, such as identifying causes, identifying aspects, setting goals and motivating actions, etc.

Still a third kind of metaphor is structural metaphor, in which one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another. Comparatively speaking, structural metaphors are richer in content. For example, in ontological metaphor 'THE MIND IS AN ENTITY', we only ontologize the concept of MIND, but there is nothing more to help understand it. If we could develop the ontological metaphor 'THE MIND IS AN ENTITY' into a structural metaphor 'THE MIND IS A MACHINE', things will be quite different. In the structural metaphor, the source domain MACHINE has clear boundary and structure. Through metaphorical mappings, these characteristics are projected onto the target domain MIND, and the target domain MIND gets clear structure and boundary of its own. Thus 'the MACHINE metaphor gives us a conception of the mind as having an on-off state, a level of efficiency, a productive capacity, an internal mechanism, a source of energy, and an operation condition' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:28) [1].

2.2.2 Classifications on the basis of convention

According to different degrees of conventionality in the language, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [1] classified metaphors as conventional metaphors and novel metaphors. Conventional metaphors are those that have long been well-established and commonly accepted by people in a language. They have become a part of daily talk or even been lexicalized and no one can trace back their origins. In that sense, some linguists tend to regard them as 'dead metaphors'. But Lakoff and

Johnson held that they were not dead, but rather rigorous. Examples of conventional metaphor 'HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN' are as follows:

That boosted my spirits.

He is really low these days.

The Lakoffian make a virtue of concentrating on fully established and conventionalized metaphors. However, if we want to get to the heart of metaphors as an interpretative mechanism, we must look at freshly coined examples. Compared with those conventional metaphors whose original properties have more or less been irrecoverably lost, the novel metaphors are the only ones all of whose properties are currently available for study. Easily comprehended novel metaphors are abundantly available in popular literature, the daily press, on TV and so on.

When a novel metaphor was first coined, the only way to interpret it is to employ one's innate metaphorical interpretive strategy, which is subject to a wide range of contextual and communicative constraints. Once a metaphor takes hold in a speech community and gets repeated sufficiently often, its character changes. First, its meaning becomes circumscribed relative to the newly coined metaphor, becoming more determinate; second, it begins to be laid down as an item in the mental lexicon, so that in time, it can be retrieved in the same way as a literal expression; third, it begins a process of semantic drift, which can weaken or obscure its metaphorical origins. Therefore different from conventional metaphors, novel metaphors are always recognized as the official state of metaphor and language users can easily recreate the metaphorical path of its derivation.

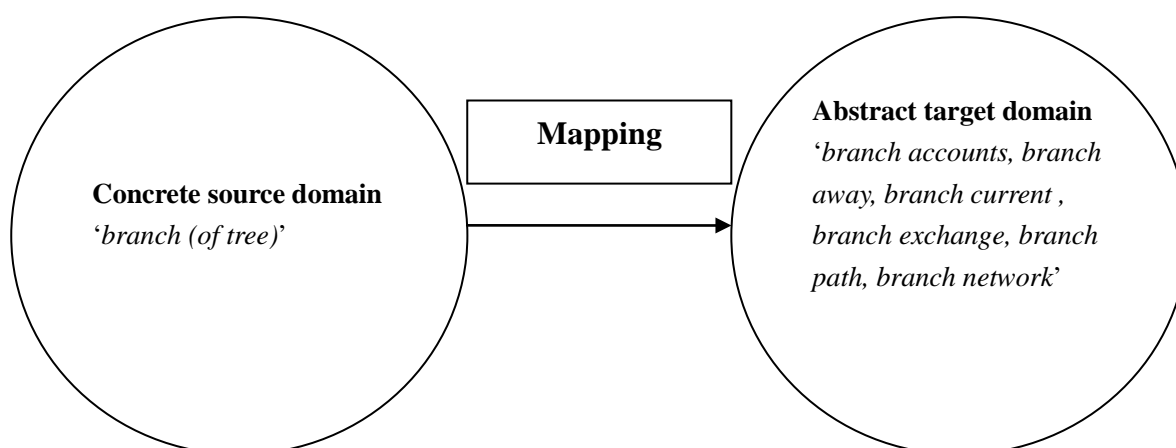
3 Conceptual metaphor and semantic learning of vocabularies

The traditional vocabulary strategies were mostly based on guessing the lexical meaning through contexts or affix clues. However, it could not satisfy the needs of all students. What's more, the mechanical memorizing in the whole process depressed a lot of L2 learners.

Nevertheless, the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor may shed some lights on learning the semantic meanings of vocabularies. Vocabularies have close relationships with the metaphoric thinking in the sense that people use their own experience to process certain concepts so as to build or form new concepts of vocabularies.

3.1 Semantic widening

Understanding the metaphoric meaning is a good way to widen the semantic meaning of words. Take the word 'branch' for example, it originally means the 'arm-like division of a tree', but with the emergence of companies, the word got the meaning 'subdivision of a large organization, local office belonging to a large firm'. Thus the metaphoric meaning of 'branch' is largely expanded because it indicated the vivid association behind two organizations or relationships between two things. And thus gave rise to a host of other phrases: *branch accounts*, *branch away*, *branch current*, *branch exchange*, *branch exchange extension*, *branch statements*, *branch path*, *branch network*, etc. In fact, such a mapping from a concrete and visual perceptual domain to an abstract and virtual domain could be shown as below:



3.2 Lexical network

According to Prototype Theory, in order to understand the earthly world which is full of various kinds of things, we need to classify the world into different types according to their common features. The process of classifying the world in cognitive linguistics is called categorization. Empirical studies on prototypes of such categories as BIRD, FRIUT, VEHICLE and VEGETABLE may provide some evidence for learning those concrete nouns. However, when we speak of such abstract categories as KNOWING or UNDERSTANDING, the Prototype Theory could be of little use. Then we have to turn to their metaphoric links, on the basis of which we build a lexical network to help the Vocabulary Learning in L2.

The difficulty in L2 Vocabulary Learning is that L2 learners can not match the L2 vocabularies and concepts. This is where conceptual metaphor will play an important part. Take the 'UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING' metaphor for example, most learners will think of words like 'know, see or comprehend'. But they will stop there with just a few relative verbs. Through conceptual metaphor, words like 'light, dark or see' will also be activated. Therefore when we understand others, we can say that 'I see what you say'; when we are not informed of something, we say 'I was left in the dark'. With conceptual metaphors, words of different empirical categories are linked as lexical network. This will greatly increase the leaning efficiency in L2 vocabulary learning.

4 Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

Conceptual Theory of Metaphor offers a way of enriching the traditional L2 vocabulary learning and teaching. Through conceptual metaphors, L2 learners might be better able to understand the lexical meaning of words and form lexical network match the words and concepts they are expressing.

Language instructors can try to implant the concept of metaphoric learning of new vocabularies in class, meanwhile they are also expected to design classroom activities to connect the source domain and target domain so as to increase the effect and efficiency L2 vocabulary learning.

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