A Universal Approach to Metaphors

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Metaphors have been studied for a long time from different perspectives. Philosophers tend to consider language as literal, thinking metaphor as aberrant only to be used by poets. Cognitive linguists view metaphor as important and not marginal at all, emphasizing the construal of meanings and our embodied understanding of the situation. By using examples from English, Polish, Chinese, and other languages, this paper attempts to analyze metaphor from the universal perspective, arguing that metaphors in different cultures reflect a similar thinking pattern, thus indicating metaphors are universal because human nature is the same.

The nature of metaphor has been studied for quite a long time from different perspectives. Traditionally, metaphor is treated as part of figurative language such as simile. It is viewed as a characteristic of language alone. Philosophers like language to be literal. Some scholars have thought that metaphor is simply a matter of bringing out similarities between things and states of affairs. Is that so? We don't have a definite answer. Since the publication of *Metaphors We Live By* written by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), scholars both at home and abroad are thrilled by the idea of considering the phenomena of metaphor as a conceptual system of human beings (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Kovecses, 2002; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996; 赵艳芬, 2001). The crucial point about meaning study is its abstraction. That's why people are focusing their attention on the cognitive side of the story. The rise and fall of Generative Semantics also indicates scholars' endeavor to seek a universal process for interpreting meaning. People with different languages might perceive reality in different ways. However, they have much more in common in the due process. Chomsky's linguistic views are actually considered as part of the cognitive school of psychology (Brown, 1994). However, the idea of the present-day cognitive linguistics runs counter to Chomsky's ideology (Croft & Cruse, 2004). On further analysis, the two schools have the same amount of similarities as their differences. This paper will review the development of metaphor study from different perspectives and argue that a universal approach to metaphor is of paramount importance since human beings are the same.

Traditional Views of Metaphors

Traditionally, metaphor is considered as part of figures of speech, being used mainly in poetry. It is saying one thing in terms of something else. Robert Frost has said, "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Words do have their literal meaning, but they can also be used so that something other than the literal meaning is implied. For example:

1. The girl is a rose.

Literally, this sentence is nonsense because she is not a plant at all. But the suggestions of "rose" include "beauty," "soft," "pure," and thus the word "rose" can be meaningfully applied figuratively rather than literally to "the girl." This young lady is fragrant; her skin is perhaps like a rose in texture and color. We can see that people who write about poetry have found it convenient to assert the identity by using metaphor.

Two Early Articles about Metaphors

In the early years of last century, two articles about metaphors were published which were representative in interpreting metaphors. One article was entitled "Figurative Language" (Beardsley, 1966) in which the author considered figurative language as the most important and fascinating aspect of language. Beardsley criticized those who simply regarded metaphor as a kind of poetic decoration that was really not necessary in our daily life. He pointed out that metaphors not only appeared in poetry and imaginative works such as novels and short stories, but they also played a prominent role in expository and persuasive works. Being functional, they occurred in our everyday conversation. According to Beardsley (1966), metaphor has both denotation and connotation. For example:

2. The animal in that pen is a pig.

The word "pig" has both a literal meaning and a metaphorical meaning. The literal meaning of a "pig" is just its denotation: that is, the characteristics of having four legs, having a long nose, and so forth. But the very word in the following sentence has more than a literal sense:

3. That man over there is a pig.

It is clear that the above sentence cannot be literally true. Therefore, it is not the denotation but only the connotation that is conveyed about the man. That is to say, the word "pig" is used metaphorically. The metaphorical statement contains a couple of meanings: he is greedy, he is dirty, he is lazy, and he is fat.

Compared with Beardsley's article, Richards's interpretation of metaphor provides far more profound and penetrating analysis of metaphor. Richards's article (1967) was entitled "The Command of Metaphor" in which he stated that a metaphor involves comparison between at least two objects. He was the first one to discuss the complex interrelationships that might exist between tenor and vehicle while talking about metaphors. A metaphor, according to Richards (1967), sometimes "vehicle," sometimes means "vehicle and tenor together." The boundary between literal and metaphorical meanings is not fixed or constant. Let's have a look at the following sentence:

4. The man has a wooden leg.

Can we be sure of what kind of leg it is? In another word, is it a metaphoric or a literal leg? The answer is that it could be both. It is literal in one set of respects, metaphoric in another. A word may be simultaneously both literal and metaphoric.

The two authors' articles had shed light on the study of metaphors and made a vital contribution to our understanding of the nature of metaphor. Searle (1979) thought that Richards' comparison theories about metaphor were wrong, arguing that similarity between objects need not be the case and a metaphorical expression actually gets the true conditions of the metaphor not from the literal meaning. In the following sentence, the true conditions do not require there to be a dragon:

5. Sally is a dragon.

Searle (1979) insisted that Sally and dragons could not be similar since dragons do not exist. However, it is Searle who is incorrect for criticizing Richards because the reader assumes there are similar characteristics between Sally and a dragon. It is the reader's perception that counts. It does not matter whether a dragon is an imaginative animal or not.

Kovecses (2002) summarized the traditional features of metaphor. First, metaphor is a characteristic of words; it is a linguistic phenomena. Second, metaphor is used for some artistic and rhetorical purpose. Third, metaphor is based on a resemblance between the two entities that are compared and identified. Fourth, metaphor is a conscious and deliberate use of words. Fifth, metaphor is a figure of speech that is not indispensable.

Philosophers' Views about Metaphors

Philosophers are the ones who first showed interest in studying metaphors. They are inclined to think that literal speech is the vital part of language and metaphorical utterances are occasional aberrations. But there is someone who thinks differently. William G. Lycan (2000), a leading philosopher of language and mind, thinks that almost every sentence produced by any human being has metaphorical elements and non-literal usage in language is the rule, not the exception. But most of the philosophers think otherwise.

Davidson's Theory

According to Donald Davidson (1975), we will have a better theory of meaning if we focus on the sentence's truth condition. Davidson offers to account for our understanding of meaning in terms of compositional feature. He argues that to know a sentence's meaning is to know the conditions under which that sentence would be true. Hence, Davidson (1978, p. 30) rejects metaphorical meaning and denies linguistic mechanisms by which metaphorical significance is expressed. "Metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more." In Shakespeare's drama when Romeo said:

6. Juliet is the sun.

For sentence 6, Davidson thinks that Romeo was just saying that Juliet was, literally, the sun. We know that this is not the case at all. Davidson's article is largely devoted to his negative case against metaphorical meaning. Obviously, Davidson cannot allow for metaphorical truth. The fact is few human utterances are entirely free of metaphorical elements. Further, if

metaphorical utterances have only literal meaning, then utterances themselves will not be true.

The Naive Simile Theory

Davidson argues that metaphor's comparison is really causal, not linguistic. The Naive Simile Theory, on the contrary, holds to the effect that metaphors simply abbreviate literal comparisons. A striking similarity has been noticed ever since Aristotle's time. It seems that both similes and metaphors express comparisons in one way or another (Lycan, 2000). According to the Naive Simile Theory, a metaphor derives from a corresponding simile by ellipsis. The following two sentences will illustrate the point:

7. George is a rock.
8. George is like a rock.

Therefore, sentence 7 is simply an abbreviation of sentence 8. This simile view explains the metaphor's intelligibility. Such intelligibility is very obvious, since statements of likeness or resemblance are quite intelligible. Plausible as it is, the Naive Simile Theory also meets some objections.

Beardsley (1967) argues that the simile explanation is unreliable. If a metaphor is only short for the corresponding simile, then it is simply synonymous with the simile and will not be heard as anomalous. Davidson (1978) and Searle (1979) argue that the metaphor does have the anomalous meaning. Searle (1979, p. 106) even complains that a simile taken by itself is almost totally uninformative. "Similarity is a vacuous predicate: any two things are similar in some respect or other."

Searle's Pragmatic Theory

Searle (1979) proposes an account of metaphor rejecting linguistic ambiguity view and thinking that metaphorical utterance is really linguistic communication. He sees metaphor as simply a species of indirect communication. According to Searle (1975, pp. 92-93):

> The problem of explaining how metaphors work is a special case of the general problem of explaining how speaker meaning and sentence or word meaning come apart…Our task in constructing a theory of metaphor is to try to state the principles which relate literal sentence meaning to metaphorical [speaker's] utterance meaning.

Searle breaks down the interpretive process into three steps. First, the hearer must determine whether to look for a non-literal interpretation. Second, if the hearer has decided to seek metaphorical interpretation, he or she must use some principles or strategies to work out the possible speaker meanings. Third, the hearer must also use more principles or strategies to identify the exact meanings in the situation. According to Searle, the hearer first uses Gricean reasoning to determine that the speaker is trying to express something other than the literal meaning, then the hearer uses speech-act theory to work out the intended meaning of the utterance.

Here, Seale seems to be saying that the speaker meaning is more or less the metaphorical meaning. However, Cooper (1986) and Moran (1997) quickly point out that if metaphorical meaning is simply speaker-meaning, then it will be determined by and confined to the speaker's intensions. For fresh metaphors, as Cooper says, "even a quite definite speaker-intention does not finally determine the meaning of a metaphor" (p. 73). Moran further says that "the interpretation of the light [the metaphor] sheds on its subject may outrun anything the speaker is thought explicitly to have had in mind" (p. 264). Obviously, Searle's Pragmatic Theory does not hold water either.

The Cognitive Interpretation of Metaphor

By publishing the book entitled *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have staged a revolution in the area of cognitive linguistics. Since then, many researchers have been following their footsteps by researching in the same direction, believing that metaphor is fundamentally a way of thinking. In the book mentioned above, Lakoff and Johnson clearly state their position about metaphor:

> Metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (p. 3)

Lakoff and Johnson observe that people often talk about abstract ideas by employing the words for more concrete concepts. People use words of concrete source field to talk about an abstract target field. It is quite normal for native English speakers to consider life as a journey. In Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*, Frost describes life as a kind of journey. We Chinese even think that after death people still have a long way to go. We often hear people tell those who have just passed away to "have a good journey!" In English, phrases such as *to get a good start, to have no good end, a long way to go, a long life span* and so on are often used. For example, English speakers often use the following phrases to indicate that life is a journey:

> He's *without direction* in life.
> I'm *where I want to be* in life.
> I'm *at a crossroads* in life.
> She'll go *places* in life.
> He's never *let* anyone *get in his way*.
> She's *gone through* a lot in life. (Kovecses, 2002)

So, life is a journey; time is money; theories are buildings. These observations led to the theory of conceptual metaphor. Such ideas turned metaphor from language into our conceptual domain. According to cognitive view of metaphor, people understand one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. In other words, we are trying to

understand the abstract concept through the use of the concrete one. The two domains of conceptual metaphor are source domain and target domain. We call the former domain the source domain from which we draw metaphorical meaning to comprehend the other one. The latter domain is that which we understand in this way. Thus, the target domain is the domain that we try to understand by using the source domain. For example, *Argument is War* is a conceptual metaphor:

> Your claims are *indefensible*.
> He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
> His criticisms were *right on the target*. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

Lakoff and Johnson once put metaphors into three categories: orientational, ontological, and structural. In the 2003 edition of the book *Metaphors We Live By*, the authors made some corrections in the *Afterword*, stating that such classification was artificial since all metaphors are structural. It is obvious that cognitive interpretation of metaphor is not the final solution to understanding metaphor. In fact, the cognitive theory of metaphor has been challenged by some scholars for various reasons (Dahl, 1989; Indurkhya, 1994; Jackendoff & Aaron 1991; Murphy, 1996). Murphy (1996) argued the "strong view of metaphoric representation" is not practicable psychologically, thinking that it could be a chaos situation if the concept of *love* were structured through our comprehension of *journeys*. In that case, we can draw many incorrect inferences.

The Understanding of Metaphor

Above, we have discussed metaphors from different perspectives. Even though the cognitive approach to metaphor is the most popular one nowadays, this view is not without problems. This paper tries to argue that the metaphorical phenomena are universal. In other words, metaphors are generative because the structure of human brain is the same.

The Biological Foundation of Metaphor

Chomskyan camp has been criticized for neglecting the study of meaning (Jackendoff, 2002). However, it is Noam Chomsky who claims that natural language is internal to the speaker. Therefore, the author of this paper argues, that the study of metaphor should be a study of human brain. People might think that human beings have the largest brain of any living creature in the world. It is not the case at all. It is the blue whale that has the largest brain, with an average brain mass of 9000 grams compared with 1375 grams of a human brain. We, as human beings, have the most favorable ratio of brain mass to the body mass of any living creature (O'Grady & Dobrovolsky, 1987, p. 271). The human brain has an average of ten billion neurons. These nerve cells form many electrical microcircuits that make possible thought, cognition, communication, and other types of mental process. That is the reason why we need to study metaphor from the biological perspective.

In 1994, Steven Pinker, a professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, published a book entitled *The Language Instinct* in which he claims that "language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal

government works, instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brain" (p. 4). He followed Darwin and Chomsky, criticizing Chomsky a bit, trying to find DNA evidence in the brain building, and believing that human language is a part of human biology. In 2004, V. S. Ramachandran, director of the Center for Brain and Cognition and professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of California, San Diego, also published a book entitled *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness*. In this book, he asks if there are such things as artistic universals. Ramachandran believes that even though there are different artistic styles across the globe, such as Tibetan art, Greek art and so on, such universals do exist and cultural boundaries can be transcended. Ramachandran's interpretation is so enlightened that we can know more about metaphors similarly.

Evidence from More than One Language

The universal approach to metaphors is buttressed up by evidence from English, Chinese, French and other languages. This fact alone indicates that human thinking pattern is the same regardless of your nationality. In English, we often say:

9. You can *kill two birds with one stone*.

Needless to say, sentence 9 suggests a handling of two things by using only one strategy. In this case, you not only save time but also energy. Chinese people will express similar situation by saying:

10. You can *kill two eagles with one arrow*.

Why do Chinese people and native English speakers express the idea by using similar thinking pattern? The reason is that human beings are universally endowed with the ability to use language metaphorically. In the military circle, the US air force used *Flying Tiger* to refer to their squadron; the South Koreans used *White Tiger Regiment* to refer to their military unit; and we Chinese often use *a tiger general* (yi yuan hu jiang) to describe someone who is tough in fighting a war. So, Americans, Chinese and Koreans are alike, they all use the word *tiger* to denote military heroes. A bee cannot think that way; an ant cannot think that way; and even an elephant cannot think that way. It is only the human beings who can do it because their brain is wired up that way. Kovecses (2002, p. 171-172) finds that English, Hungarian, Japanese, Chinese, Zulu, and Polish produce very similar container metaphors for anger:

Body Heat Stands for Anger
<u>English</u>
Billy's a hothead.
When I found out, I almost burst a blood vessel.
<u>Hungarian</u>
[cerebral-hemorrhage gets] will have a hemorrhage
[up-went the blood-pressure-his] His blood pressure went up.
<u>Japanese</u>
[my head get hot] My head got hot.

[head cool should] You should cool down.
<u>Chinese</u>
My face was pepperily hot with anger.
[lungs all explode] one's lungs explode from too much qi
<u>Zulu</u>
[he.PAST-be.hot-INTENSIFIER] He was really hot.
<u>Polish</u>
[white fever] 'high fever'
[gall itself in sb-LOC boils] sb's blood boils

Kovecses (2002, p. 171) explains that those different people "see themselves as undergoing the same physiological processes when in the state of anger… They all view their bodies and body organs as containers." Here, unfortunately, Kovecses sees things from the physiological perspective and not from the biological perspective. Ray Jackendoff (2002, p. xiv-xv) disagrees with the idea that only syntax is generative. He strongly proposes an "interface" study of language "in which phonology, syntax, and semantics are equally generative."

Conclusion

Metaphors have been studied for a long time from different perspectives. Philosophers tend to consider language as literal, thinking metaphor as aberrant only to be used by poets. Cognitive linguists view metaphor as important and not marginal at all, emphasizing the construal of meanings and our embodied understanding of the situation. The metaphor study is also meaning study, focusing first on the literal and then on the idiomatic meaning, thus forming a gradual process. If most of the languages in the world are metaphorical, then we are in a position to say that the metaphorical essence of language is the refection of human nature. By using examples from English, Polish, Chinese, and other languages, this paper attempts to analyze metaphor from the universal perspective, arguing that metaphors in different cultures reflect a similar thinking pattern, thus indicating metaphors are universal because human nature is the same.

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