

Applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory in English Vocabulary Teaching from a Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract: This study explores the use of metaphor in teaching English vocabulary under the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Traditional rote memorization methods in vocabulary learning often fail to account for the cognitive connections among lexical items. The study explores conceptual metaphors in three areas in which polysemy, idioms, and cultural connotations are studied using qualitative analysis and representative examples that show how vocabulary is learned through conceptual metaphors. Results show that lexical meanings are not arbitrarily arrived at by arbitrary definitions but instead, guided systematically by underlying metaphorical mappings. Learners can improve their knowledge of semantic relationships, better retention and use the language more flexibly by determining source domains and building semantic networks. The research explains that incorporating Conceptual Metaphor Theory in teaching English vocabulary makes the process of learning to be more cognitively based and pedagogically significant.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor theory; English vocabulary teaching; Vocabulary acquisition

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1. Introduction

For a long time, metaphor has been regarded as a rhetorical means that only exists in literary language. However, with the development of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is now understood as the basic mechanism of human cognition, which shapes the way people conceptualize the world, organize experience and learn language.

Lakoff and Johnson point out that metaphors are prevalent in everyday language and reflect systematic mappings between conceptual domains^[1]. This reconceptualization has a profound impact on second language acquisition (SLA) and English teaching. If learners can be guided to understand the conceptual motivation behind linguistic expressions, rather than memorizing isolated forms through rote memorization, language learning may become more meaningful and efficient.

In China, English learners often struggle with vocabulary polysemy, idiomatic expressions, and abstract grammatical concepts. Traditional teaching and learning methods often grossly emphasize rote learning. This, in the long run, is not only misleading, but also more or less leads the students to abstract, rather than to contextual answers. Against this background, applying conceptual metaphor theory to English teaching provides a valuable perspective for addressing these learning difficulties. Therefore, this thesis discusses the application of metaphor in English vocabulary teaching, focusing on how metaphor-based instruction can promote learners' understanding and acquisition of English.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conceptual metaphor theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was first systematically proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in the book *Metaphors We Live By*, and has become one of the core theories in cognitive linguistics. The theory believes that metaphor is not only a rhetorical means at the language level, but also a basic component of the human cognitive system and a conceptual mechanism that individuals generally rely on in thinking and action^[1]. Due to the limitations of human cognitive ability and expression resources, people tend to understand the world by mapping familiar and specific empirical domains (source domains) to more abstract or complex domains (target domains). This mapping process forms the basis of metaphorical existentialism.

Lakoff and Johnson divide conceptual metaphors into three categories: structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors use one concept to understand another through systematic correspondence. For example, the expression TIME IS MONEY is a typical embodiment. Ontological metaphors conceptualize abstract thoughts and psychological processes into concrete entities, among which the container metaphor is the most representative, deriving from the embodied experience of human beings who regard their bodies as containers. Orientational metaphors, also known as spatial metaphors, are based on the spatial concept of the body and are often used to construct abstract concepts such as emotion and time. Among them, UP is usually associated with positive meanings, while DOWN corresponds to negative ones^[1].

Kövecses introduces many aspects of contemporary metaphor theory and provides readers with rich language examples from different languages. Its content covers the topics of metaphor at the levels of language, cognition, psychology and culture. For beginners, he describes the picture of metaphorical research and the research direction that has yet to be explored^[2]. Thibodeau & Boroditsky show based on five experiments that even a minimalist metaphorical framework can significantly affect people's reasoning and decision-making process on social issues^[3]. In a more recent study, Gibbs points out several challenges faced by metaphorical research, including metaphorical identification, metaphorical meaning in discourse, real-time processing process and the nature of the source domain^[4].

China has a long history of research on metaphors, and is also deeply influenced by Western metaphor theory. In the late 20th century, Western metaphor theory was introduced to China by scholars.

Linguists represented by Shu, Lin, Hu, and Zhao pioneer the study of conceptual metaphors in China and make unremitting efforts for academic research^[5-8]. Among them, Shu systematically discusses the origin, mechanism, nature, and function of metaphor^[5]. Lin summarizes the main topics of contemporary metaphor research, including its application in language teaching^[6]. Hu offers a cognitive interpretation and classification of metaphors^[7]. Zhao introduces conceptual metaphor theory based on the book *Metaphors We Live By*^[8]. In general, these studies are mainly theoretical discussions, which lay the foundation for subsequent research.

2.2. The application of metaphor in English vocabulary teaching

Based on the continuous development of conceptual metaphor theory, scholars have begun to apply it to the field of education. Recent research shows that metaphor-based teaching can help learners establish semantic networks, reduce mechanical memory, and improve long-term retention.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory has attracted considerable attention from scholars and experts for its significance in English vocabulary instruction. Leech proposes that metaphor serves as an important mechanism for semantic extension^[9]. Following this, Lazar argues that metaphor can facilitate learners' comprehension and application of vocabulary^[10]. Boers demonstrates experimentally that idiom learning based on conceptual metaphor categorization yields better outcomes^[11].

In recent years, domestic scholars have also paid increasing attention to the teaching of English vocabulary based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and have achieved remarkable results, especially in the teaching of English polysemous words. Liang emphasizes the close relationship between semantic motivation and polysemy and believes that analyzing

the underlying semantic structure is an effective way to understand polysemous words ^[12]. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Gu proposes a series of teaching strategies to explain how the cognitive framework can help students understand and master the various meanings of vocabulary ^[13]. To further develop this research direction, Li introduces a metaphor-based learning method, which proves that conceptual metaphors have a significant facilitating effect on the acquisition of idioms and proverbs ^[14]. Shi also theoretically examines the cognitive relationship between metaphor, metonymy, and polysemous words and emphasizes their guiding role in the teaching of polysemous words ^[15]. Together, these studies provide a solid theoretical foundation for the teaching of English polysemous words and offer an important reference for educators applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory in classroom practice.

In a word, the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in English vocabulary teaching gradually forms a mature and fruitful research direction. Studies at home and abroad consistently show that metaphor-based teaching provides a cognitively rational method for vocabulary learning by revealing the semantic connections among word meanings and organizing vocabulary knowledge into meaningful networks. This method not only reduces learners' dependence on mechanical memory but also improves comprehension, retention, and the flexible use of vocabulary. Therefore, integrating conceptual metaphors into classroom practice provides valuable theoretical support and practical guidance for improving the effectiveness and depth of English vocabulary teaching, especially in the teaching of polysemous words.

3. The application of conceptual metaphor theory in English vocabulary teaching

Traditional vocabulary teaching usually regards vocabulary as an isolated unit or a set of definitions, thus ignoring the cognitive connection between word meanings. Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a systematic framework to analyze this connection. Through analyzing the mapping relationship between the source domain and the target domain, teachers can help students understand the internal logic of vocabulary.

3.1. Application in polysemy teaching

Polysemy is a phenomenon in which one word can have multiple but related meanings. This has been one of the major challenges in learning English words for many years for many Chinese learners. The meanings of a polysemous word are usually taught separately in traditional vocabulary teaching, without being related to each other, in a glossary or a dictionary. A list of these meanings is then given to students for memorization. But typically, this results in confusion and partial understanding. Many learners also forget the meanings after a short period of time. More important, this teaching method tends to neglect the cognitive foundation for word meaning extension and development.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the multiple meanings of polysemous words are not randomly generated, but have a systematic correlation. Most semantic extensions start with a given prototype sense and then are metaphorically expanded from the source domain to various abstract target domains via metaphor, or metaphorical mapping. Thus, polysemy is a process of conceptual expansion, rather than a random accumulation of unrelated meanings.

The initial step that teachers can undertake in class is to assist students in finding out the prototype or literal meaning of words and use it as the source domain. The other abstract or extended senses can then be construed as metaphorical mappings and further target domains may be added. Instead of providing students with a huge number of isolated definitions, it is better to make them develop a semantic web. By so doing, the students will be able to learn more about how the meaning of words evolves over time and in a systematic manner.

The verb "run" offers a clear example. The literal meaning of the verb was once just the action of moving fast on foot. Because of the metaphor ACTIVITY IS MOVEMENT, the meaning of the term has been over time expanded to more abstract meanings. Such abstract applications are "run a company", "run a program" and "run a machine". In these instances, the term run does not mean to move. The verb here more concerns operation, administration or regulation of something. In such instances when the individual meanings are taught differently and translated differently in the target language, the students can find themselves memorizing the meanings in question without having a clue of what these

meanings entail. But, when the same metaphorical mapping is used, then the students will tend to recognize the shared cognitive basis of the various meanings. The vocabulary in this case is likely to be clustered with its individual meanings and to some degree long term memory and use of the language also will be enhanced.

Another example is the locative word “over”. It is first the spatial position which is above something. Through the repetition of spatial experience of people, this meaning is metaphorically expanded over time to abstract space like area of control, advantage, and completion. To demonstrate, such concepts like control, victory and end can be articulated using expressions that are relevant. MORE OR CONTROL IS UP and COMPLETION Is Across are the two metaphors that are involved. Assuming that the teacher is able to describe the expressions jointly and show the students the way back to the same domain of spatial sources, the students can discover the systematic relationship between various meanings. Then, facing new phrases that include the word over, the students will also have an opportunity to guess the meaning of the words, relying on metaphorical relations, without turning to dictionaries entirely.

Therefore, the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the teaching of polysemy can change vocabulary learning in important ways. Besides memorizing words, students realize the relevance of connections among meanings and the reasons behind the processes of semantic extensions. Thus, learning vocabulary is achieved through independent cognitive and conceptual processes as opposed to memorizing definitions.

3.2. Application in idiom teaching

Idioms occupy a very important position in the English vocabulary system, and have always been regarded as one of the difficulties in second language learning. This difficulty mainly comes from two aspects. On the one hand, the structure of idioms is usually relatively fixed; on the other hand, their true meaning often cannot be deduced directly from the literal. In traditional English classes, most of the idiom teaching is still based on mechanical memory. Teachers usually provide interpretations and supplement them with a small number of example sentences, but rarely further explain the reasons for the formation of idioms. Over time, although students can remember the general meaning of some idioms, it is difficult to truly understand their internal logic, so they are also prone to forgetting or misuse in actual application.

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, most idioms are not irregular language combinations, and their formation process is often deeply influenced by conceptual metaphors. In other words, many idioms are actually the concrete embodiment of a certain concept mapping in language. People use familiar and specific experience areas, that is, source domains, to understand the more abstract target domain. Therefore, to truly grasp the meaning of idioms, it is obviously not enough to stay at the level of literal interpretation. What is more important is to understand the conceptual metaphor and cognitive basis behind it.

A common instance is ANGER IS HEAT. There are numerous English idioms, which follow this conceptual metaphor, e.g., blow the top, hot under the collar, make one’s blood boil, simmer down etc. They have a very close relationship with physical experience of heat. In the actual world, individuals will find themselves saying that as the high temperature and pressure keep on increasing, the vessel could burst at some point. Likewise, as the anger keeps on escalating, individuals are likely to lose control as well. This analogy of the body heat to the intensity of emotions is a significant mental ground to the formation of these idioms. When teachers are able to assist students to comprehend this line of thinking, rather than merely obligating them to memorize, it frequently becomes simpler to have students learn various appropriate expressions simultaneously, as well as enhance their general grasp of the meaning of idioms.

The other typical metaphor is ARGUMENT IS WAR. Most phrases around the word “argument” are derivatives of the original word “war”, including “defend one’s point”, “attack an argument”, “win a debate” and “shoot down an idea”. Students can usually learn these phrases separately, and consider them as fixed collocations, which bear no relation to each other, and it is hard to discover the relation between them. But, when the teachers further emphasize that these expressions are a form of war acts like attack, defense and win, students can eventually come to know that in English thinking, the word argument is often interpreted as a form of war. What is more important, once having mastered this metaphoric structure, learners can also attempt to make speculations based on the available experience when presented with new

relevant constructions, as opposed to having to use the dictionary interpretation as a whole.

Teaching idioms through conceptual metaphors generally makes vocabulary acquisition more organized and understandable. Students no longer memorize idioms separately. Instead, they learn how meanings are connected. Therefore, applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory to idiom teaching is not only a change in teaching method, but also a shift from rote memorization to cognitive understanding. Idioms are no longer treated as isolated expressions, but as language forms with internal logic and meaningful connections.

3.3. Application in cultural connotation teaching

Learning vocabulary does not only entail mastering language forms, but also knowing the worth of language and culture. A lot of English words and phrases have strong cultural implications and the meaning of words extends beyond the literal meaning. But, in the conventional vocabulary instruction, the teachers tend to focus more on pronunciation, spelling and dictionary meaning and less on the cultural meaning of the vocabulary, and absence of systematic guidelines. In this way of teaching, learners might not necessarily get the profound cultural meaning of the words they know even though they can comprehend the superficial meaning of the words. Thus, they are likely to misunderstand or misuse in real-life communication.

In terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the language is the way a person perceives the world in his/her own experience that is created by his/her own culture. A conceptual metaphor is a cognitive device which is influenced by the social and cultural context of a specific time. Hence, when analyzing metaphors, the social and cultural aspects of the various societies producing the metaphors cause the various mappings to the same abstract idea. Nevertheless, with the addition of metaphor analysis to vocabulary teaching, students can possibly internalize, both cognitively and intuitively, the logic behind the conceptual language and be able to appreciate the cultural context within which the language is organized, thereby, enhancing their skills to effectively communicate in a cross-cultural setting.

In real class, teachers are able to help students analyze different perspectives of identical objects or experiences through cultural comparison. By following the roots of English phrases and juxtaposing them with relevant visuals in the students' primary language, students will slowly start to see that word meanings are mainly the result of a particular culture and that they are not fully universal or static. With this understanding, students are able to lower the negative impact of their native culture and build a more precise understanding of English phrases.

Animal metaphor is one of the obvious manifestations of cultural differences. In different cultural backgrounds, the same animal is often given different metaphorical meanings. For example, in Chinese culture, "dog" sometimes has negative or even derogatory meanings, which often appears in some negative expressions. In English culture, "dog" is more regarded as a symbol of loyalty, friendship or luck. The phrases like, "lucky dog", "love me, love my dog" among others, all indicate more positive emotional mapping. Teachers can use comparative analysis to get students to identify the various origins of dog metaphors in the two cultures in classroom teaching. This process will also enable learners to learn more about the reason why the same animal will be associated differently in different cultures, and learners can also avoid using the culture of the mother tongue as the only way of learning English expression.

Color metaphor is another example that can clearly illustrate the mapping of cultural conditions. In Chinese culture, red is usually associated with celebration and prosperity. But in English, red often extends to areas such as danger, anger, or financial loss. Business expressions like "in the red" use red ink to represent deficits, while phrases like "seeing red" refer to anger rather than happiness. Teachers can help students to understand the rationale behind red metaphor usages in Western cultures by categorizing red metaphor usages with similar classifications in Chinese culture as positive usages, and thus students would be more able to respond accurately to these phrases and far less likely to incorrectly use these terms.

When metaphor-based cultural interpretation is implemented into vocabulary teaching, the students would have a chance to comprehend the connection of language, cognition and culture better. Learning vocabulary no longer requires rote learning, but is a cultural enlightenment process. By doing so, Conceptual Metaphor Theory will aid learners to

understand that the meaning of words is culturally based and therefore, allow learners to communicate using English better and more appropriately.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the role of metaphor in English vocabulary instruction from the perspectives of polysemy, idioms, and cultural connotation within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Results demonstrate that English vocabulary is not random but is based on logical conceptual and cultural correspondences. Teaching vocabulary using metaphor aids learners to have relational reasoning, an improved understanding of idioms, and minimize cultural conflicts during communication. This proficiency is due to the metaphorical use of language. Thus, instructional use of metaphors is more favorable to the acquisition of vocabulary and the use of the language with flexibility than rote learning. Despite its qualitative nature, this study shows the need to integrate conceptual metaphor in teaching English and how it can improve pedagogical activities in teaching vocabulary.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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