

Metaphors of English Learning

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Metaphor research in the contemporary world has its foot mainly in two disciplines: cognitive science and linguistic science. In the field of cognitive psychology alone, there are a number of theoretical frameworks, among which are salience imbalance theory (Ortony, 1979), domains-interaction theory (Tourangeau & Sternberg, 1981), structure-mapping theory (Gentner, 1989), and conceptual metaphor theory (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In linguistic science, the theories that attempt to provide explanations on metaphor include speech act theory (Searle, 1979) and relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1985/1986).

This essay focuses on conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The paper elaborates the theoretical framework before it applies the theory to the metaphor underlying the accounts of English learning experience told by teachers and trainees in China's commercial English learning organizations.

The analysis aims to reveal a) the primary metaphor underlying the accounts, b) its systematic structure and the various subordinated metaphors that it entails and c) the motivations behind the use of the metaphors.

Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, metaphor is viewed as a superficial rhetorical device that dresses up our speech. Recent history, however, has seen that the definition of metaphor has broadened from a rhetorical device in literary works to a common phenomenon of language in use. Nowadays among key scholars in the field (Black, 1979; Burke, 1945; Gibbs, 1994; Kittay, 1987; Lakoff, 1980) there has been a consensus on the definition of metaphor, that metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else (Burke, 1945, p. 503). As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5) says, that "The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another." For example, we often perceive argument as a war in our daily linguistic practices; and accordingly, there exists the underlying metaphor *Argument is war*.

Argument is War

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He attacked every *weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4)

It can be seen from the above examples, that metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon in the sense that it is reflected in linguistic practices. Agents described arguments with the vocabulary dealing with war. In addition, metaphor is more a cognitive concept than a linguistic practice. According to Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory, "metaphors are fundamentally conceptual in nature; metaphorical language is secondary" (Lakoff &

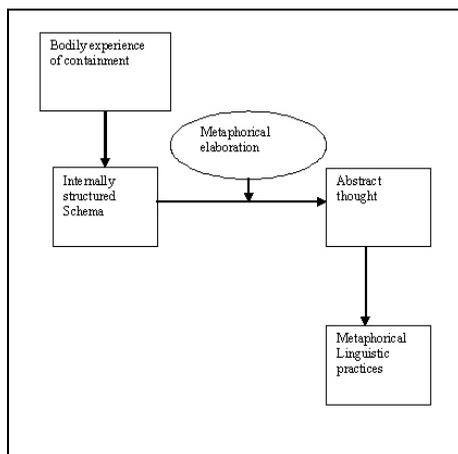


Figure 1.

Johnson, 1980, p. 272). It claims that metaphors are a deep, cognitively-realized agency that organizes our thoughts, shapes our judgments, and structures our language. Based on Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory (1980), metaphor is interpreted as a cross-domain conceptual mapping - a mapping relation from a source domain (vehicle) to a target domain (tenor), which facilitates thought by providing an experiential framework (source domain) in which newly acquired, abstract concepts (target domain) may be accommodated. Following this statement, we humans largely understand abstract concepts in terms of our spatial-physical experience with the help of the underlying network of metaphors so that abstract ideas are "in most cases 'metaphorical'" and are "grounded in [agents'] every day experience" and his or her relation to the external world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 272). Accordingly, there is a metaphorical link between abstract concepts and embodied experience; body and mind cannot be separated and that abstract thought derives from our embodied experience via metaphor.

If there is an underlying network of metaphors in our mind that connects abstract concepts to the external world, we might ask how the cognitive system works. According to Lakoff (1987) and Gibbs (2001, p. 44), as people manipulate objects, orient themselves spatially and temporally, and direct their perceptual focus for various purposes, the totality of the embodied experience gives rise to the development for an experiential gestalt called image schema. The schema has internal structures that can be metaphorically elaborated to provide for our understanding of more abstract domains. For example, the embodied experience of *Containment* is central to people's understanding of the conceptual metaphor, *Anger is heated fluid in a container*. People have various, recurring experiences of bodily containment. In their daily lives, they repeatedly encounter containers such as houses and rooms. They also experience their own bodies as containers which substances enter and exit. In their bodies run liquids such as blood and stomach fluids. When they experience the feeling of anger, they experience the feeling of their bodily fluids becoming heated. The experience shapes image schema in mind and is metaphorically elaborated to provide for our understanding of the feeling anger which in turn is externalized as linguistic practices. Figure

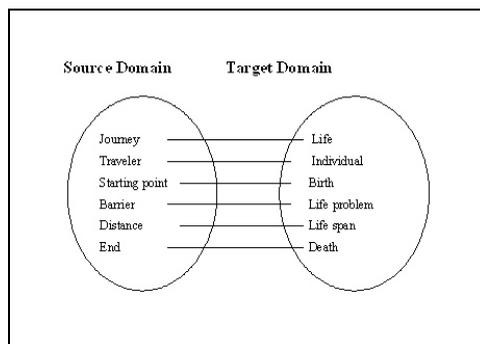


Figure 2. Metaphor: *Life is a Journey*

1 is drawn above to provide an illustration of the working process.

At the philosophical level, the conceptual theory is based on Experiential Realism. It does not agree with the assumption of western traditional philosophies that we can arrive at the truth through senses (in empiricists tradition) or through reason (in rationalists' tradition). Instead, experiential realism and the conceptual theory believe that metaphor is "essential to human understanding and as a mechanism for creating new meaning and news realities in our live"; and as metaphor is grounded in physical and cultural experience, truth is therefore relative. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 196)

Based on the previous discussion that centers around the definition of metaphor and its cognitive mechanism, we are ready to see that metaphor is systematic and ubiquitous.¹

First, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 52) say "concepts are metaphorically structured in a systematic way." To put it another way, the concepts in a source domain are systematically mapped out onto concepts in a target domain so that target concepts become easier to understand. For example, *Life is a journey*. With this metaphor, we are likely to use words (walk, road) from the source domain (*Journey*) to express corresponding concepts in the metaphorically defined domain (*Life*). Figure 2 shows how the concepts are metaphorically structured.

However, not all the concepts of a source domain are used to express the corresponding concepts of a target domain. As Lakoff (1980, p. 52) says "The metaphorical structuring of concepts is necessarily partial." In the above example, the parts of the concept *Journey* that are used to structure the concept *Life* are traveler, road, barrier in the conventional metaphor. There are also unused parts of the concept *Journey* that have no corresponding parts of the target domain *Life* in the conventional metaphor, e.g. ticket, entrance. Admittedly, we are very much likely to see the linguistic expressions that reflect the "unused" part of a metaphor such as *Life is a Journey* in daily language, which Lakoff call "figurative or imaginative language" (1980, p. 52).

It also should be noted that Lakoff used to classify the conventional metaphors into three categories: structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor. Recently, Lakoff (2003) corrected his mistake in the second version of *Metaphors We Live By*, in which

¹ In addition to the two features, there are others such as inconsistency. For the purpose of the study, my discussion is confined only to the two features

he admitted the previous division is artificial and all metaphors are structural (in that they map structures to structures).

Out of one primary metaphor arises a series of subordinated metaphors and the relationship between these metaphors is systematic and coherent. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 9) points out that a coherent system of metaphorical concepts is characterized by metaphorical entailments. For example *Time is Money*, *Time is a Resource*, and *Time is a Valuable Commodity* are all the metaphorical concepts. Between them are the entailment relationships. *Time is Money* entails that *Time is a Limited Resource*, which entails that *Time is a Valuable Commodity*.

Metaphor is also ubiquitous. Many scholars now recognize that metaphor is essential and “indeed necessary [for our daily communication] and not just nice and ornamental” (Ortony, 1975, cited in Gibbs, 2001). The iniquitousness of metaphor is emphasized by Lakoff (1980, p. 1) who says it is “pervasive in every day life.” From daily conversation to literary works, we are very much ready to see that metaphor underlies our linguistic practices. For instance, the previous metaphors *Life is a Journey* and *Argument is War* and the linguistic expressions reflecting them are all from daily linguistic practices. In addition, metaphors are also pervasive in legal, political discourses and novels. It is the ubiquitousness that provides a wide range of data for metaphor research. Recent applications of the theory in the fields are made in the fields from literary theory to political studies. Lakoff and Turner, in *More Than Cool Reason* (1989) demonstrated that metaphors in the poetry are based on the conventional conceptual metaphor used in everyday linguistic practices. Steven Winter, in *A Clearing in the Forest* (2001), explored the central role of metaphor in legal reasoning. Lakoff, in his article “Metaphor and War” (1991), analyzed how metaphor system is used to justify the war in the Gulf. Lakoff and Johnson, in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) analyzed the metaphorical structure of the rational actor model used widely in economics and politics. Cortazzi and Jin, in their article *Bridges to learning- Metaphor of teaching, learning and language* (2001) studied metaphors used in English teaching and learning contexts. This article, enlightened by Cortazzi and Jin, is another attempt to analyze the metaphors about English learning underlying the accounts given by those English language trainers and trainees in China’s commercial English-learning organizations.

Research Question and Methodology

Cortazzi and Jin (2001) examined metaphors about “learning” from experienced UK primary teachers. Based on the data collected, it lists dominant metaphors about learning which include *Learning is a Quick, Light Movement* (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001, p. 159). The article also analyses the change in public attitudes toward teachers since 1949 when the New China was founded and how the change in attitudes has been reflected in metaphors about teachers. It points out that with the development of market economy, many teachers, particularly English teachers, have gone in for evening work to earn extra money. Accordingly, English learning environments in China have been commercialized, where teachers are service providers, students are customers, and courses are sold. This essay, enlightened by Cortazzi and Jin’s works, is in an attempt to find out one of the prevailing metaphors *English Learning is Practicing Martial Art* underlying English-learning experience accounts given by the teachers and students. It aims to reveal its systematic and coherent structure and the

subordinated ones that the metaphor generates. It is also in attempt to provide explanation on the cultural motivation behind the use of the metaphor *English Learning is Practicing Martial Art*. We ask where the metaphor comes from and why the metaphor is deeply rooted in the accounts.

The collected data comes from the website of New Oriental School, an elite commercial English learning institution. Its website has a section titled “elite teachers” in which there are numerous student memoirs and diaries about their English learning experience in that school.

Results

A brief reading of the accounts instantly reveals that they are full of linguistic expressions that come from Chinese tales of roving knight. Behind the linguistic expressions are the metaphors about teachers, books, students, the language of English itself, language skills, and the tips for English learning in the English-learning environment.

A Good Teacher is Elite Kongfu Boxer

The data collected shows that a good teacher is like an elite boxer in Kongfu circle. According to the data, a good teacher is called “Big Shrimp,” which refers to elite knight-errant (in Chinese “shrimp” is homophonic with “knight errant”). Other nicknames given to a good teacher include master-hand and hierarch. Accordingly, a teacher’s teaching performance is metaphorically thought as Kongfu. In the sentence written by a student, “the teacher leapt it over briskly to deal with the opening paragraph, ending...,” “leap over briskly” means that teacher omitted part of teaching content. To describe the teachers’ good mastery of English, quite a number of adjectives are used which originally derived from the domain of Kongfu.

For example, “...早已经将他的阅读能力打造的炉火纯青” (The teacher’s reading skill has long been proficient as pure blue flames). The phrase “pure blue flames” comes from Qigong. It is said that Qikong practitioners use flames to make pills for immortality; and flames become pure blue when impurities of the pills disappear. Therefore, pure blue flames metaphorically mean the final stage or the highest degree of proficiency. In addition, a good teacher’s wisdom is the absolute truth.

我就完完全全融入到他所创造出来的场当中去了，唯一感觉就是醍醐灌顶。(I was completely involved in the Qi environment he created and what I was feeling only was that his nirvana wisdom was pouring over my head.)

When a good teacher is not able to do something, he or she is zhao jia bu zhu (ward off attack) and ask for mian zhan (truce)

这个本来就忙得一塌糊涂的人终于招架不住，挂起了免战牌。(The person who is busy to death finally was unable to ward off attack and began to hang truce flag.)

English Book is Kongfu Guide

English books or lectures notes are Kongfu Guide. A book by a good teacher or his lecture notes are Hong Bao Shu (red treasure book), Shou chao ben (handwriting book) or kui hua bao dian (sunflower treasure volume), etc. All these words associate English learning

with Kongfu as they come from Chinese Kungfu novels and movies of the same subject. For example:

The tips offered by these books are jue zhao (fatal blows), tao lu (a series of tricks). A good book can help you obtain real Kongfu.

戴尔英语红宝书 练就口语真功夫 (Dell's red treasure book, Perfect your oral English as real Kongku)

Classroom is a Place to Practice Kongfu

The classroom in which a good English teacher is teaching is a place full of Qi and Cha (Qi and Cha are terms from Chinese Qigong, a type of Kongfu. They are the forces that only Qigong master can produce.) Course-mates are sibling-like apprentices.

English is a Monster

English is a monstrous enemy. Those as English teachers or lecturers whose English language skills are proficient in English are metaphorically seen as the ones who defeat the enemy. Those who are not are metaphorically under constant threat and attack from the monster. A student who finds it hard to memorize academic English vocabulary describes these words as ugly looking.

他个子并不高大.... 带着我们闯过相貌崎岖的生物化学物理单词 (He is not tall, and led us to break through those biological, chemical and physical terms with ugly looking).

For the students who find themselves in trouble with English hate the language as abnormal enemy. English is abnormal or a pervert. They are under so much stress from English tests that they perceive their failure in a test as death.

虽然小伙子很帅, 可四六级考试毕竟对我们来讲是“性命悠关”的 (Although the chap [the English teacher] is handsome, Band 4 and Band 6, after all, is crucial to our survival)

Accordingly, the methods to prepare for the English tests are perceived as the methods to attack the enemy. These methods are described as break-through strategies.

Students have some weak points in English learning such as reading skills or listening skills. The skills that they are weak at are perceived as their fatal pressure point or part of their body.

今天教的课程是阅读, 也是本人的死穴 (Toady we have a reading-skill class, which is my weakest point)

中译英才真正是我的软肋, 我从没翻译过一句句子, 更何况是一篇短文 (Chinese-English translation is really my soft rib. I've never translated a single sentence, let alone a passage)

The above analysis shows that the data are dominated by three metaphors which in turn produce numerous subordinated metaphors respectively. Metaphor systems possess a vast generative capacity, inasmuch as they manifest themselves in a variety of guises (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1987) Meanwhile, the three dominant metaphors are entailed by one metaphor *Learning English is Practicing Kongfu*. Therefore, the analysis demonstrates that within one

metaphor and between metaphors there are the systematic and coherent structures which are characterized by entailment relationship.

As mentioned previously, the use of metaphor is closely linked with culture. Different experiences or cultures will produce different understandings toward the external world which will be reflected linguistically via metaphor, and in turn, metaphors help shape our perceptions of the world. Therefore, we might ask what the cultural or embodied motivation behind the metaphors is. In China, there is no denying fact that a large number of students have found themselves frustrated with English-learning. For many, years of English-learning have not seen much progress. Complaints are often made by students about the boredom in the English classes at schools. The dissatisfaction with the English classes within educational curriculum in China can be attributed to the following factors. First, English teachers are not so qualified; secondly, the classes are still teacher-dominated; English teachers, facing the pressure from the written English tests (English test Band 4 and Band 6), explain the grammar as their main task, and do not provide many chances for students to practice. On the whole, English education from primary schools to universities are disappointing and the frustration caused by the failure in English learning produces a negative attitude towards the language which permeates the student population. As a result, a good number of students especially those underachievers, metaphorically think of English as an enemy that poses a threat to their graduation or future career.

On the other hand, students are under a great amount of pressure from English learning in coping with English tests not only as part of requirement of degree but also as an effort in seeking an advantage in prospective job markets. In order to find a more effective way to learn, they enroll in the English courses (generally exam-oriented courses) launched by commercial English learning service providers outside campus. On the side of commercial English schools, to attract more trainees, attempts are made to alter teaching style so that the courses cater for the urgent need to pass the tests and at the same time entertain the customers (the trainees). The style of teaching language used in the courses is the case in point. Teachers do not refer to important words as “key words.” Instead, they are called “Big Shrimp Words” which implies these are key words carefully selected by teachers (Big Shrimp). This renaming strategy is in the attempt to promote teacher, emphasizing the glamour and professional level of the teachers.

Of all these metaphors, *English Learning is Practicing Kongfu* is the primary one. This metaphor generates such subordinated metaphors as *A Good Teacher is an Elite Kongfu Practitioner*. The reason why it prevails also has much to do with the broader cultural context. In china, Knight-errant novels as a literary genre receive tremendous popularity among Chinese, especially among Chinese youth. Given the popularity of the genre, the metaphor *English Learning is Practicing Kongfu* helps to stimulate the trainees’ morale in struggling through the language learning.

Conclusion

The essay analyzes the metaphor *English Learning is Practicing Kongfu* and its subordinated metaphors used in English learning environment in China. The analysis demonstrates the systematic and coherent structure within the metaphors and between the metaphors. It also explores the cultural motivation behind the use of the metaphors and

reveals the close link between culture and metaphors.

The essay has many things to be desired. Short time and space only allow for an analysis on a limited amount of data. There are other metaphors entailed by the metaphor *Learning English is Practicing Kongfu*. Another problem the essay encounters is the difficulty of identifying metaphors and of distinguishing them from metonymy. On the whole, the essay is a starting point and more works remains to be done.

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