Figurative Language

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Figurative and literal language

Figurative language is traditionally taken as having ornamental functions, decorating a text or a speech with its special aesthetic value. As such, what is figurative is novel and creative, in contrast with literal usages that are conventional and usual. In cognitive linguistics (CL), which has been a main force in figurative language studies in the past few decades, "figurative" means that a usage is extended from a literal usage, whereas "literal" means that a meaning is not dependent on a figurative extension from another meaning. So defined, figurative structures such as metaphor and metonymy are pervasive in language and thought, and figurative meaning is part of the basic fabric of linguistic structure (Dansygier and Sweetser 2014). The contrast between literal and figurative in the sense of CL is illustrated in (1) and (2).

1. a. He's in the kitchen.
    b. He's *in* trouble.
2. a. I see a house on my left side.
    b. I *see* what you mean.

Here, (1b) is figurative because the meaning of the preposition *in* is extended from its literal spatial sense in (1a). In (2b), the verb *see*, which means "know" or "understand," has its figurative meaning extended from its literal vision sense in (2a). As can be seen, both (1b) and (2b) are as conventional and usual in everyday usage as (1a) and (2a), but the relevant words in the former are considered figurative while the latter are believed to be literal, in the sense of CL.

Conceptual and linguistic metaphor

CL studies language as a window to the mind, and is interested in the relationship between language, culture, and cognition. When studying figurative language, CL is concerned specially with the cognitive mechanisms behind linguistic usages, and treats linguistic forms as manifesting deeper conceptual structures. Thus, CL concerns itself with such figurative structures as conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and conceptual blending. Roughly speaking, metaphor involves a mapping between two domains, metonymy represents a mapping between two elements within a single domain, whereas blending refers to a multidomain mapping compressed into a new, emergent blend. In the area of figurative language, however, CL is best known for

its metaphor studies within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), represented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson ([1980] 2002, 1999).

According to CMT, the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, and metaphor is defined as a unidirectional mapping between two conceptual domains, a source and a target domain. Metaphor, therefore, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but refers to the pattern of conceptual association underlying linguistic expressions. While CMT is concerned with the mappings of inference patterns from source to target, conceptual metaphors are conventional conceptual patterns and structures resulting from those mappings. Metaphorical expressions in language systematically manifest underlying conceptual metaphors. For example, the linguistic metaphors in (3) instantiate the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY in one way or another.

3.   LIFE IS A JOURNEY
   a.   He got *a head start* in life.
   b.   He's *without direction* in life.
   c.   I'm *where I want to be* in life.
   d.   I'm *at a crossroads* in my life.
   e.   He'll *go places* in life.
   f.   He's never let anyone *get in his way*.
   g.   He's *gone through* a lot in life.

Thus, the general metaphorical mapping between LIFE as the target and JOURNEY as the source results in some correspondences between closely related concepts in the two domains. For instance, the people leading life are the travelers, their original states of life are the starting locations, their life goals are the destinations, and their life experiences are the journey routes. Furthermore, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor would also map the inference patterns of the source onto the target domain. For example, as much as travelers have to choose among different routes to a destination, people in life also have to determine which life path to take in order to reach a particular life goal. It is expected that people in life would come across various difficulties while trying to achieve their life goals as much as travelers could experience a tough journey along the way. Systematic studies of the linguistic expressions that instantiate particular conceptual metaphors can help delineate the conceptual structures and patterns in the conceptual system. It is worth noting that the evidence for conceptual metaphors is not limited to linguistic metaphors, but from multimodal metaphors as well, namely metaphorical expressions found in visual artifacts, co-speech gestures, and sign language, for instance.

Primary and complex metaphor

A later version of CMT distinguishes between two kinds of conceptual metaphors: primary and complex metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Primary metaphors, with their simple mapping schemes, are metaphoric representations at a highly schematic level. They are motivated by conceptual domains closely related in experience, or experiential correlations which pair subjective experience and judgment (target) with sensorimotor experience (source). Complex metaphors, on the other hand, are

composed of primary metaphors and other literal knowledge such as cultural frames, beliefs, and assumptions. For instance, the examples in (1b) and (2b) above are both motivated by primary metaphors: states are locations in (1b), and knowing is seeing or knowledge is vision in (2b). In contrast, a purposeful life is a journey, which is a more specific subcase of life is a journey in (3), is a complex metaphor. As such, it consists of two cultural beliefs, people should have purposes in life and people should act so as to achieve their purposes, and two primary metaphors, purposes are destinations and actions are motions (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

Other examples of primary metaphors include affection is warmth (They greeted me *warmly*), importance is size (Tomorrow is a *big* day), happy is up (I'm feeling *up* today), intimacy is closeness (We've been *close* for years, but we're beginning to *drift apart*) (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Because primary metaphors are derived directly from common bodily experience, it is hypothesized that they are more likely to be widespread than complex metaphors. In contrast, complex metaphors are less likely to be widespread because they can be composed of primary metaphors in combination with culturally based knowledge, which will give rise to different metaphor systems. The neural version of CMT has discovered evidence that experiential correlations grounding primary metaphors are realized in the brain as the co-activation of distinct neural areas, and that concepts paired by primary metaphors are connected as neural circuits linking representations of source and target in different regions of the brain (Lakoff 2008). This theory has provided a neural account of the nature and properties of primary metaphors.

Metaphor from body and culture

According to CMT, metaphorical mappings are not arbitrary, but constrained by our embodied nature as human beings functioning in the physical world. Embodiment is an idea central to the theoretical position of CL. It emphasizes the role of the human body in grounding and framing human cognition. In contrast with the Cartesian mind–body dualism, the embodiment hypothesis claims that the body shapes the mind. The mind is embodied in that it is crucially shaped by the particular nature of the body, including our perceptual and motor systems and our interactions with the physical and cultural world. That is, metaphor is motivated by and grounded in our bodily and cultural experiences. Cross-linguistic studies of metaphors in a systematic fashion can help reveal universal and culture-specific patterns characterizing various cultural cognitions in particular and human cognition in general.

For example, Yu (1998) studied anger metaphors in Chinese in comparison with those in English. According to Lakoff and Kövecses (1987), the central metaphor for anger in English is anger is heat, which has two subversions: anger is fire (e.g., *He was breathing fire*; *Those are inflammatory remarks*; *Boy, am I burned up!*) and anger is hot fluid in a container (e.g., *She was seething with rage*; *She got all steamed up*; *Billy's just blowing off steam.*). Yu (1998) found that anger is heat and its first subcase anger is fire are applicable in Chinese, but its second subcase is anger is hot gas in a container. Yu (1998) accounted for the selection of the gas metaphor over the fluid

metaphor in Chinese with the *yin–yang* theory of ancient Chinese philosophy and traditional Chinese medicine, which shapes the way Chinese culture categorizes and conceptualizes the world and constitutes Chinese cultural models as shared understandings.

Yu and Jia (2016) also showed how cultural models are responsible for different metaphors in different languages. Both English and Chinese share the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW, where SHOW stands for performing arts at the superordinate level. At a more specific, subordinate level, however, the subcase is LIFE IS A PLAY in English (Lakoff and Turner 1989), but it is LIFE IS CHINESE/BEIJING OPERA in Chinese. This difference in metaphoric subcases can be accounted for by the contrast in major types of performing arts in different cultural traditions: the Shakespearean play in English culture vs. Chinese or Beijing opera in Chinese culture.

Another example of cultural differences is presented in Yu (2009), a study of the Chinese cultural conceptualization of the HEART. The study exemplifies a fundamental difference in the shaping of the body by cultural models between Western and Chinese cultures in the conceptualization of PERSON. This difference can be expressed by two formulas: (i) Western PERSON = BODY + MIND; (ii) Chinese PERSON = BODY + HEART. That is, the Western conceptualization of PERSON is dualistic in that a person is "split" into two distinct and separate parts: the body and the mind. This mind–body dichotomy defines Cartesian dualism, which has been the dominant philosophical view in the West for hundreds of years. In contrast to the Western dualistic view, Chinese takes on a more holistic view that sees the heart, an internal organ inside the body, as the center of both emotions and thought. In the traditional Chinese conceptualization, therefore, although a person also consists of two parts – the body and the heart, these two are not separate, the latter being an integral and central part of the former as its "Ruler/Emperor." According to this cultural conceptualization, the heart is regarded as the central faculty of cognition. For this reason, the Chinese concept of HEART is lexicalized in a great number of compounds and idioms related to all cognitive and affective aspects of a human person, such as mental, intellectual, rational, moral, emotional, dispositional, and so on. The contrast outlined characterizes two cultural traditions that have developed different conceptualizations of person, self, and agent of cognition.

The implication of these studies is that, while our mind is embodied, it is not shaped universally because the body itself may take different "shapes" in different cultural models. Cultures may construe the body and bodily experiences differently, attributing different values and significances to various body parts and organs and their functions. Various cultural conceptualizations of the body and bodily experiences may motivate culture-specific metaphors, which give rise to varied perspectives in the understanding of the world. This view is what cognitive linguists call "socioculturally situated embodiment" as they seek a better understanding and articulation of the relationship between body, culture, and cognition.

SEE ALSO: Body, Embodiment; Cognition and Cognitive Science; Cognitive Linguistics; Culture; Language and Mind

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