

## *Original Paper*

# The Application of Conceptual Metaphor in English Vocabulary Teaching

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### **Abstract**

*As the basic unit of expression, vocabulary is the foundation of English and is closely related to students' overall language ability. However, many teachers tend to teach English vocabulary in traditional way, simply listing words with little attention to context in daily instruction. As a result, students mechanically memorize words without understanding the connotation and extension of words, which frequently leads to misunderstandings in vocabulary comprehension and inflexible vocabulary application. To solve this problem, this study considers cognitive linguistics as the guide to exploring vocabulary teaching based on conceptual metaphor. Following the definition, mechanism, and classification of conceptual metaphor, it makes an overview of both the international and Chinese studies concerning the application of conceptual metaphor in English vocabulary teaching, and finds that the lack of empirical research, the small sample size, the short time of experiment, the uncomprehensive research results and students' different ability to accept this teaching method remain to be further solved. This contributes to the existing problems in vocabulary teaching and cultivating students' competence in cognitive acquisition.*

### **Keywords**

*Cognitive linguistics, Conceptual metaphor theory, English vocabulary teaching, English vocabulary learning*

### **1. Introduction**

Language is an essential tool for human communication, and word is the base construction material of language as well as the smallest language unit that can be used independently. Wilkins (1972) wrote that "without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed", which shows the importance of vocabulary in communication (p. 111).

Although many English teachers have joined the ranks of vocabulary teaching research, it remains a difficult task because teachers often follow the traditional teaching methods, causing students to learn mechanically and thereby influencing the effectiveness of vocabulary learning. To tackle it, it is necessary to find some new ways to enhance vocabulary teaching and learning.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) holds that metaphor is everywhere in life and language, which enlightens linguists that metaphor, a tool and way of thinking to promote the development and change of meaning, points out a new direction for L2 acquisition. Metaphor helps to map individuals' understanding of abstract things and forms the diversity and flexibility of language, and metaphorical consciousness exists in people's way of thinking. Through association, students can understand and remember words more quickly and effectively, and this consciousness can also deepen students' understanding of the meaning of words through metaphorical thinking, thereby promoting their vocabulary learning.

Therefore, this paper chooses the application of conceptual metaphor in English vocabulary teaching as the research topic and presents an overview of foreign and domestic studies on it.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor

### 2.1 Definition of Conceptual Metaphor

The concept of metaphor was originally developed from the Greek language, in which “meta” means “over”, and “phor” means “carry”, thus, their combined meaning is “to carry over”. It is in line with Shu (2000), who stated that the original meaning of metaphors is to express a kind of “from this to that” movement that exists in a dynamic process.

Traditionally, metaphor is known as a rhetorical device in language. Richard (1936) argued in *Philosophy of Rhetoric* that metaphor is not only a rhetorical device but also a mechanism for humans to think and behave. It is not until the publication of the book *The Metaphors We Live By* that metaphor get its accurate definition. In the book, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) proposed that metaphor is not just a rhetorical device, but also a cognitive phenomenon in which something is understood or experienced through the usage of other things.

### 2.2 Mechanism of Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson believe that metaphor is a way of human beings' cognitive recognition. They use “domain” to represent two subjects, one is the source domain and the other is the target domain. Through metaphorical mapping, some features in the source domain can be transferred to the target domain so that we can understand the abstract or complex parts in the target domain (Chen, 2014). Besides, experiences in the source domain tend to be concrete or involve familiar information, while the target domain is inclined to be abstract. People systematically think from one conceptual domain to another. Through these cross-domain system correspondences, metaphorical mapping helps people better understand unfamiliar concepts or experiences. Noting that different languages use the same metaphor, Johnson proposes the hypothesis: the mapping from the target domain to the source domain is equivalent to neural mapping in the brain. Additionally, Lakoff believes that metaphor is a cognitive

mechanism that can help people organize their thoughts and form judgments to structuralize language and generate language expressions (Hu, 2004).

Similarity is the key to understanding the metaphorical meaning, and the foundation of the connection between the basic meaning and extended meanings of words. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) insisted that a variety of people's daily experiences and activities are metaphorical, and their conceptual systems are constructed by metaphor. People view similarity through the categories of conceptual system and various natural experiences, and many perceived similarities result from some common metaphors in our conceptual system.

Take the conceptual metaphor "love is a journey" as an example. Journey is a familiar concept, including the traveler, starting point and destination, beauty along the road, frustration on the way, different routes, distance already traveled, interruption of a journey, and so on. These are the experiences or concepts that people are familiar with, so the journey is the source domain. A love relationship is abstract, in which there are the lovers, the beginning and end of the relationship, the sweetness and conflict, different choices, the duration of the relationship, and the interruption of the relationship when something goes wrong between the two lovers.

We can have a more specific understanding of love after associating the love relationship with a journey. Of course, the two domains do not totally correspond one by one. In the metaphorical mapping process, some aspects might get highlighted while others do not, but the metaphor still remain coherent.

Take the conceptual metaphor "love is a journey" as an illustration, we have different ways to express love relationship because of the various forms of journey, such as the following expressions about love:

- (1) Looking back, we have **experienced a lot**. 回望过去, 我们经历了很多。
- (2) We are **at a crossroad**. 我们现在处于十字路口。
- (3) This relationship is **a dead end**. 这段感情是条死胡同。
- (4) Our marriage **hit the rocks**. 我们的婚姻触礁了。
- (5) We are **off the track**. 我们偏离了轨道。
- (6) This relationship is going to **break down and sink**. 这段感情将破裂沉没。

As the above expressions indicate, although we use various vocabulary to describe love, the most fundamental metaphor is still the journey. There are many ways to travel, such as walking, car and sailing. During the journey, crossroads, vehicles on roads, derailed trains, ships that hit rocks and sink may exist. All the above examples show that metaphor has coherence.

### 2.3 Classification of Conceptual Metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphor can be divided into three types: ontological metaphor, structural metaphor, and orientational metaphor. Meanwhile, other scholars have also given different classifications. For example, Black (1979) divided metaphor into extinct metaphor, dormant metaphor and active metaphor. Shu and Tang (2002) distinguished noun metaphors and predicative metaphors based on their syntactic characteristics. Grady (1997) classified metaphors into basic metaphors, synthetic metaphors, and complex metaphors based on their way of generation. This

paper primarily focuses on the classification method put forward by Lakoff and Johnson.

Ontological metaphor is a figure that provides “ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, and so on as entities and substances” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25). Moreover, they pointed out that ontological metaphors “are so natural and pervasive in our thought that usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena” (p. 28), and they can be subdivided into entity metaphor, container metaphor and personification. The paper provides the following examples to elaborate them:

- (1) **Inflation** is lowering our standard of living.
- (2) Buying land is the best way to deal with **inflation**.
- (3) They must have been **out** of trouble.
- (4) He fell **in** love with the girl.
- (5) Life has **cheated** me.
- (6) Cancer finally **caught up** with him.

The experience of rising prices can be metaphorically viewed as an entity via the noun “inflation” in sentences (1) and (2), in which viewing inflation as an entity enables us to make such abstract concept concrete. As for container metaphor, prepositions like “out” and “in” are often used. For example, in sentences (3) and (4), abstract concepts are seen as a container with a boundary. As a result, people connect “in” and “out” with the abstract concepts like trouble and love. Sentences (5) and (6) are examples of personification, in which life and cancer are inanimate, but they are endowed with the qualities of human beings, like cheating and catching up.

### 2.3.2 Structural Metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 61), “Structural metaphors allow us to do much more than just orient concepts, refer to them, quantify them, and so on as we do with simple orientational and ontological metaphors; they allow us, in addition, to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another”. For example, “argument is war” in metaphorical expressions can be reflected as the follows:

- (1) The president was accused of defending the **indefensible**.
- (2) This statement was the opening **shot** in the debate.
- (3) The criticism right on **target** was made by the minister.
- (4) Jack attacked **every weak** point in his opponent’s argument.

Generally speaking, at the lexical level, the meaning of a concept can be expressed and understood through metaphor or other related words. Obviously, the above expressions are often used to talk about war and argument, but we often do not realize that we are using metaphors in our daily lives. Thus, it can be seen that metaphor is not something we create but something embedded in our mind and increases with the richness of our experiences.

### 2.3.3 Orientational Metaphor

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson noted that “one does not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (p. 14). These concepts are

so-called orientational metaphors, also known as spatial metaphors, enabling speakers to make a set of target concepts coherent through some basic human orientations, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, center-periphery and the like. They are closely related to the structure of human bodies, natural surroundings and how people behave. Abstract terms like emotions can be understood by the simple concepts connected with space. Here are some examples:

- (1) Nobody can cheer her **up**.
- (2) She's feeling really **low**.
- (3) If he sees his test results, he will feel **down**.

Such language expressions are not arbitrary but based on the orientational metaphor of the concept "happy is up; sad is down". People will be in high spirits when they are happy and cheerful, while in low spirits when they feel sad or lost. Hence, the use of "up" and "down" is often taken to describe human beings' moods. Additionally, prepositions in English are often used for abstract concepts, such as "get into trouble" "find a way out" and "come out of difficulty". Moreover, many directional verbs can also present metaphorical meanings, such as rise, fall, come, go, stretch, and spread.

### **3. Research on Conceptual Metaphors in English Vocabulary Teaching**

#### *3.1 International Research*

In recent years, metaphor has become one of the heated topics in linguistics, and plenty of studies have been conducted. Traditionally, metaphor is a figure of speech widely used in literary or poetic language. However, things changed in 1980 when Lakoff and Johnson explained the concept of conceptual metaphor in the book they coauthored and gave detailed illustrations. Since then, conceptual metaphor has officially become an independent branch of theory. Later, they introduced the categories of metaphor theory, which is obviously different from the traditional metaphor concept, and they also incorporated it into cognitive linguistics, marking a new development of metaphors.

As cognitive linguistics develops, an increasing number of linguists have realized that we can not only apply conceptual metaphor to the study of relevant studies but also the actual language teaching. So far, many linguists have suggested applying conceptual theory to language learning, and some foreign scholars have focused on the logical connection between conceptual metaphor and vocabulary teaching.

Hoffman (1980) pointed out that metaphor plays a vital role in the understanding and cognition of words. Compared with the literal meaning, metaphorical meanings are more abundant. Later, Danesi (1986) proposed that the ability to use the target language metaphorically symbolized the possession of communicative competence. Similarly, Low (1988) highlighted the importance of conceptual metaphor in language and the value of conceptual metaphor in language teaching, especially the teaching of polysemy words. It can be seen that teaching activities carried out in this way can deepen students' understanding of vocabulary.

### 3.2 Chinese Studies

In China, the study of metaphor started relatively later than international studies because Chinese scholars in the field of linguistics believed that metaphor was one of the rhetorical devices for a long time, and this concept lasted until the 1990s. During this period, more and more linguists began to understand the cognitive function of metaphor and introduced the Western conceptual metaphor theory into China. Over the past two decades, the number of Chinese scholars studying conceptual metaphor has been increasing continuously, and many achievements have been obtained. According to the current research results, most scholars have only conducted theoretical studies to discuss the impact of conceptual metaphor in language teaching, while few carried out empirical studies to analyze the mechanism of conceptual metaphor on vocabulary teaching from the micro perspective.

Hu (1998) and Dong et al. (2003) both emphasized the importance of metaphor in vocabulary from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, which is consistent with Liang (2002), who stated that metaphor is essential in cognitive linguistics and further analyzed the impact of metaphor on L2 acquisition, stressing that consciously increasing learners' metaphorical knowledge in L2 has a positive effect on their language learning. Moreover, Liu (2000) noted that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural phenomenon, and he advocated to attach importance to applying conceptual metaphor theory to foreign language teaching, which is also highly recommended in Su and Tang (2002). However, it is not easy to achieve such application in language teaching and learning. Yan (2000) found that metaphorical cognition is what Chinese students lack most in English learning. Although some students have already cultivated the awareness, they cannot connect it well with vocabulary learning.

In terms of the empirical study, Li (2004) published the book *Applied Cognitive Linguistics*, in which he mainly verified the effectiveness of conceptual metaphor theory and image schema in learning metaphorical expressions and idioms in his experiments. Zhou (2011) stated that polysemy words often occur in English learning, which bothers Chinese students' vocabulary learning. However, with the development of cognitive linguistics, metaphor has been tested to help learners understand different meanings of words, and metaphorical thinking is of great help to vocabulary memorization and language learning. Furthermore, Tang and Wang (2014) divided conceptual metaphor into two types of teaching modes: recessive metaphor and dominant metaphor. By comparing the two modes, their study found that explicit teaching is more conducive to students' English vocabulary learning, and they also pointed out that the best way for students to learn vocabulary is to combine the recessive metaphor and the dominant metaphor.

To sum up, Chinese linguists are devoted to exploring the influence of conceptual metaphor on vocabulary learning, which exerts a vital guiding role for teachers to alternate teaching strategies and improve the effect of English vocabulary learning. Although many studies have offered some suggestions on how to apply conceptual metaphor to English vocabulary learning, empirical studies are still needed to better implement conceptual metaphor theory in English vocabulary teaching and

learning.

#### 4. Limitations and Recommendations

Via the introduction of the selected research topic, the study finds some limitations in the current relevant studies. Generally speaking, Chinese researchers are mainly clustered in the theoretical research of conceptual metaphor, and empirical study is still in great need. Besides, in the limited empirical studies, the sample size is usually small, so the results are not comprehensive. Meanwhile, there are still some problems existing in the application of conceptual metaphors in English vocabulary teaching. For example, the conceptual metaphor teaching method has mainly been applied in senior high school students, while less used in junior and college students. In addition, some empirical studies found that such teaching method is not suitable for all, because some students may not fully understand English vocabulary's metaphorical meaning. Instead, they are much more likely to get confused.

To address the above limitations and problems, larger sample size and longitudinal empirical studies should be provided. Meanwhile, teachers should pay more attention to students' command of language knowledge and cognitive ability development. Last but not least, it is suggested that researchers study more concepts and theories related to L2 teaching and learning in cognitive studies, such as image schema theory, mental space theory, categorization and categories to help L2 learners improve their English vocabulary learning, as well as other language skills in English learning.

#### 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is an essential and challenging part of English learning. In the traditional way of vocabulary teaching, words are often taught in an isolated and separated way, which leads to students' mechanical way of vocabulary learning. This phenomenon further causes students' low efficiency in English learning. However, with the development of cognitive linguistics, English vocabulary teaching and learning can apply conceptual metaphors, which is helpful in improving students' vocabulary learning and teachers' vocabulary teaching.

Despite the abundant benefits brought by the application of conceptual metaphor in English vocabulary teaching, there are still some problems to be solved, such as the lack of empirical research, the small sample size, the short time of experiment, the uncomprehensive research results and students' different ability to receive such metaphorical teaching in English vocabulary. Therefore, China's future studies should pay more attention to the above challenges and keep exploring better teaching methods to help students improve their vocabulary learning and other language skills in English learning.

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