



Conceptual Metaphor, Language, Literature and Pedagogy

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Abstract

Conceptual metaphor as a means of understanding and explaining language use is by now well established. However it has made little impact in language pedagogy, nor does it figure prominently in standard approaches to literary appreciation. This paper will provide an overview of the theory of conceptual metaphor and advocate its usefulness in language teaching and the study of literary texts. It will argue the importance of "metaphoric competence" (Low, 1988) as an indispensable element of awareness and knowledge in language use. It will consider the status of conceptual metaphor in current practice in English Language Teaching (ELT) and make the case for explicit inclusion of metaphor in language teaching programmes aimed at increasing proficiency in L2. Finally it will relate the relevance of a conceptual understanding of language to the growing fields of intercultural studies and communication.

1. Metaphor in Language and Thought

Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work on conceptual metaphor, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), there has been a rapid increase of interest in metaphor studies, principally in the fields of psychology and cognitive science. Lakoff and Johnson revealed, through theoretical argument supported by empirical investigation, the centrality of metaphor to thought exemplified in the ubiquity of metaphorical forms in everyday, conventional language. Accordingly, we talk about things the way we conceive of them, and this is fashioned through and grounded in experience and culture: our basic conceptual system "is fundamentally metaphoric in nature". In practical terms, this theory of cognition and language provides for two levels of metaphor: conceptual metaphor and linguistic metaphor. The former are super-ordinate, epistemic and semantic mappings that take the form of TARGET DOMAIN IS/AS SOURCE DOMAIN. Linguistic metaphors are motivated by conceptual metaphors and are the realisations that appear in everyday written and spoken forms. For example, the conceptual metaphor LIFE (target) IS A JOURNEY (source) motivates common linguistic metaphors such as *we're on the right (wrong) track (path)*, *we've come too far down this road to turn back now*, *he's looking for a change of direction*, and a great many more typical everyday expressions as well as more elaborate extensions that occur in poetic language. It is from these linguistic instances that we are able to hypothesise the existence of a wide range of conceptual forms. All the above expressions use different words and if metaphor were no more than a linguistic device it would not be possible to talk about them as essentially the same metaphor; by locating metaphor at the conceptual level we can identify it as a conceptual structure.

For Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is in essence "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 5); it is a matter of thought rather than language.

Traditionally, figurative language, especially in literary contexts, is regarded as something used for effect or for ornament and contrasts with "literal" language; cognitive metaphor challenges the very basis of that notion. We are aware that in traditional rhetoric there are subtle differences between figures of speech - between metaphor and metonymy, for instance. Cognitive linguistics recognises this difference. Whereas metaphor treats one thing, in culturally determined and cognitively recognisable ways, as another for the purpose of understanding, a metonymic utterance takes one entity to stand for another. If in the pub I request "a Guinness, please", I use a typical, everyday metonymic form by substituting the name of the producer for the product. But more is implied: it is also a reference to my attitude to the product, its status among alcoholic beverages and my preferences as a beer drinker. Like metaphors, metonymic concepts structure and reflect more than just our use of language. In this paper, as I subscribe to the conceptual nature of so much language use, metaphor will be used a generic term to cover all aspects of figurative language.

Firstly, some aspects of theory of conceptual metaphor are considered and their usefulness in terms of language understanding and pedagogy.

2. The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor

Lakoff's 1993 paper "The contemporary theory of metaphor" sets out more concisely how the theory of conceptual metaphor works. He distinguishes between two types of basic conventional, conceptual metaphors: generic-level metaphors and specific-level metaphors. The former are those which have become a routine and unconscious part of our everyday conceptualisation - for example, MORE IS UP/LESS IS DOWN. These metaphors are likely to occur across cultures and be the most intuitively recognisable to L2 learners with cross-linguistic correspondences which can be elicited and discussed in the learning context. Specific-level metaphors are also fully established but less pervasive and likely to be more culturally specific - the LOVE/JOURNEY mappings referred to earlier are examples. The "invariance principle" holds that the image-schema structure of the source domain must be consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain. This represents a constraint on possible mappings and ensures consistency; invariably, the target domain takes precedence and limits the forms of linguistic expression which the metaphor may motivate. In the conceptual metaphor ACTIONS ARE TRANSFERS, actions are conceptualised as objects transferred from agent to agent. If I say *I will give Lakoff a kick*, the source domain allows us to think that as the recipient of the kick the receiver may then possess it. But the target domain overrides this because we know that actions do not continue to exist after they occur; hence, the common, everyday metaphor of giving somebody or something a physical action but without the corollary of them keeping it.

Another important feature of the contemporary theory is that there is an inherited hierarchical structure among metaphors. Among the most common forms in everyday thought, reasoning and speech are event-structure metaphors: aspects of events such as states, changes, processes, actions, causes and purposes are understood in terms of space, motion and force. A state, for example, is a bounded region we may be 'in' or 'out of', 'entering' or 'leaving' (*in a hurry*, *out of patience*, etc) in accordance with the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE LOCATIONS. In English, spatial prepositions are used in a wide variety of metaphorical senses. There are numerous cross-linguistic correspondences but this conceptual basis for language is almost entirely unavailable to L2 learners in many course-book and reference materials. The "inheritance hierarchy" maintains that basic event-structure metaphors pass on their structures to specific-level metaphors further down the hierarchy - for example, LONG-TERM PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITIES ARE JOURNEYS (generic level - event structure), A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY (specific level), LOVE IS A JOURNEY/A CAREER IS A JOURNEY (specific level).

The contemporary theory challenges the views of traditional linguistics, which is the basis of formal semantics. The traditional view maintains a distinction between literal and figurative language. It sees the workings and interpretation of metaphor to be in the field of pragmatics where metaphorical meaning is derived algorithmically from 'literal' language according to the application of cumbersome principles and the influence of context. Cognitive linguistics rejects the notion that metaphor is separate and understood differently from literal or conventional language.

3. Poetic Metaphor

In the preface to *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (1989), Lakoff and Turner state:

Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought - all kinds of thought ... It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason. Great poets can speak to us because they use the modes of thought we all possess.

What the authors go on to say in this important work is that literary, poetic language is not something special or exclusive to poets and accomplished writers. Students of English literature are accustomed to high levels of figurative language in what they read. Traditionally, these are classified according to 'figures of speech' and studied in terms of effect or evocation or other features associated with language with no particular reference to or awareness of underlying coherence. As Eaglestone (2000: 94) mentions, metaphors make us think by "defamiliarising" language. A good metaphor stands out and can be contrasted with one that is so commonplace in language that we barely notice it or simply take it for granted (sometimes referred to as 'dead metaphor'). The theory of conceptual metaphor adds more insight. Novel, creative metaphorical expressions in a language can be traced back to a limited number of underlying conceptual metaphors formed by experience and culture; the instantiations are novel but the mappings are pre-existent and reside in the conceptual system. But this does not mean that metaphors are immutable or that we cannot challenge them. One of the interesting things about seeing metaphor in terms of conceptual structures is that we can analyse them and consider alternatives. Eaglestone makes the point that part of "doing English" is to use metaphor not only to defamiliarise language for rhetorical effect but to make choices and changes in order to offer new ways of conceptualising the world (Ibid.: 97).

Lakoff and Turner divide novel metaphors - those found in poetry, literature and new expressions - into two: extensions of conventional metaphors and image metaphors. The latter occur frequently in poetic language and are often highly abstract. An image metaphor maps one mental image from one source of knowledge onto mental images from a different source. They are different to mappings in the conventional system, which map many concepts in the source onto corresponding concepts in the target domain. Lakoff and Turner use the term "one-shot metaphors" (Lakoff & Turner, 1989: 91) to describe image metaphors as they are not ordinarily part of the way we conceptualise our experience. They take as an example a highly abstract and surrealist poem by Andre Breton about his wife entitled "Free Union":

My wife whose hair is brush fire
Whose thoughts are summer lightening
Whose waist is an hourglass.

The details of the mappings are missing in the examples and the reader can fill this in. What aspects of a *brush fire* can we map onto the *hair*: colour, controllability, volatility? Why does it seem so natural to characterise thoughts in terms of *lightening*? The last line presents us with the mental image of an hourglass and of a woman. We map the middle of the *hourglass* onto to the *waist* of the woman because we are aware of the common shape. But this is not spelt out in the words themselves; the metaphors emanate from our conceptual system and are not a matter of language.

In their investigation into conceptual metaphor in poetry and literature, Lakoff and Turner hypothesised the existence of a number of generic-level metaphors to explain a range of literary devices. Personification is found in abundance in poetry and literary prose. To take an example, death is frequently personified in terms of an action by some agent. This allows us to hypothesise a general metaphor - EVENTS ARE ACTIONS - and combine it with specific-level metaphors such as DEATH IS DEPARTURE and PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, and so explain the persistence of images of drivers, or coachmen, or reapers in the popular personification of death. Here the hierarchical principle described earlier is at work. Invariance is also present; the event - departure or reaping - is conceived in terms of an overall causal schema involving the action of an agent. To understand an

event in terms of actions, there must be certain correspondences: "the general shape of the action must conform to the general shape of the event" (Ibid.: 77), thereby imposing a constraint on acceptable forms. Turner's (1987) example of CAUSATION IS PROGENERATION demonstrates the principle: one can talk of Kirkegaard as the father of Existentialism, or New Orleans as giving birth to jazz, but not of Alan Shearer as the father of his many goals, or of a recent hat-trick as giving birth to United's last home victory.

4. Metaphoric Competence: a Rationale for Teaching Conceptual Metaphor

The notion of a metaphoric competence is discussed by Low (1988) in his paper "On teaching metaphor". The focus is on alerting learners (L2) to the presence and effects of conventional metaphor and pedagogical approaches to achieving this in ELT contexts. Therefore, the emphasis is on the "discoursal and pragmatic aspects of metaphor rather than literary uses" (Ibid.). He identifies a number of functions of metaphor in language use and includes "how things in life are related in systematic ways we can at least partially comprehend through the complex structure of conceptual metaphor" (Ibid.). Although the term "competence" is used, Low writes in terms of skill or strategy as this carries within it the notion of "behaviour which is variable between individuals and which appears to be alterable under appropriate instruction" (Ibid.) - skills which native speakers are expected to be proficient at and which learners need to master if they are to be competent language users. It is possible that Low uses the term in a way which is analogous with "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972). Intrinsic to the notion of competence in this sense is the notion of skill, a variable of an incremental nature that can be influenced through instruction and practice. To be a skilled language user implies both receptive and productive skills in the language. However, in addition to linguistic knowledge, learners need socio-linguistic skill and knowledge to be 'proficient', or to have attained a level of proficiency that is 'native-like'. As Cameron and Low (1999) point out, the universality and systematicity of grounded, generic-level metaphors are more transparent and more easily understood by most L2 learners but problems occur in linguistic choices with attempts at linguistic metaphor and the pragmatic context. Low (1988) enumerates a number of areas that could be addressed by language teachers, and course and materials designers through explicit instruction in the conceptual basis of language. These are listed below. I have included in parenthesis two things: the aspect of metaphorical knowledge mainly concerned and a functional designation which I think appropriate to each area.

- * Developing an understanding of the metaphorical nature of language and the normal metaphors "we live by" (generic-level and specific-level metaphors) (metaphoric competence)
- * Arriving at plausible meanings for utterances that contain semantic anomalies and contradictions (instantiations of specific-level metaphors and how metaphors are hierarchically structured) (metaphoric competence)
- * Knowing the boundaries of conventional metaphor; understanding what is heard in terms of conventional metaphor but also knowing what is not said. What are acceptable extensions of conventional metaphor? When can speakers acceptably innovate? When can metaphors be acceptably mixed? (This can be addressed by reference to the systematicity, complex coherence as well as constraints of metaphorical use described in the contemporary theory) (metaphoric competence/metaphoric extension and innovation)
- * Areas where word-class differences and cross-linguistic preferences can lead to unconscious innovation or simply error in the L2. In many cases where metaphors are analysed cross-linguistically, understanding can be achieved but there are problems in the linguistic choices L2 learners make (inter-cultural communication/cross-linguistic correspondences)
- * Typical hedging devices which are metaphorical in nature but part of native-speaker usage (for example, the use of "literary" in an utterance when the opposite in reality pertains) (metaphoric competence/pragmatic awareness/inter-cultural pragmatics)
- * Awareness of metaphorical layering; many utterances and expressions can be interpreted on a number of levels easily perceivable in the L1 but require

more explanation in L2 (metaphorical understanding)

- * Sensitivity in the use of metaphor in terms of social and political correctness. This is important when learners come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (inter-cultural pragmatics and sensitivity)
- * Developing an interactive awareness of metaphor - why do speakers use metaphor? What are the positive and negative purposes of using metaphoric language in everyday use, in literature and in different walks of life? What do metaphors highlight and hide? (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) (metaphorical and inter-cultural understanding)

5. Metaphor and Language Teaching

In recent years, insights into the nature of language in use in vocabulary studies have emerged through corpus analysis. In particular, there is greater evidence of the range in which words occur together: collocation. This has influenced ELT methodology towards a focus on words in "strings" or "phrases" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992) with an emphasis on functionality and pragmatic awareness. This fits within the paradigm of communicative language teaching and can be found in many recently published course books and ELT materials. It is debatable whether this has improved on simple item-by-item rote learning with regard to the teaching of lexis. The emphasis on functionality is limiting as it excludes a closer examination of the cultural aspects of language as well as the elements of systematicity and coherence identified through a conceptual approach. Lindstromberg (1997) reviewed a wide range of published ELT materials, learners' dictionaries and reference books and found no reference to metaphor. In my own more limited review I found the same situation. For example, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* includes one page of explanation on "idioms"; *Oxford Collocations* simply puts in parenthesis the term "figurative" to describe usage; *Oxford Idioms* provides an inventory of similar expressions, so the verb blow has twelve entries and definitions and a short list of substitutable forms such as "blow/sod that for a lark"; the *Collins Cobuild Learner's Dictionary* requires the learner to look up different words to check for different figurative usages. (An exception is the *Collins Cobuild English Guide (7): Metaphor*, which includes more detailed explanation but seems only appropriate for advanced learners). Advanced learners may be more inclined to consult thesauri for more precise information, but as Low (1988) noted the situation is not much improved as the learner is likely to be confronted with (often unordered) inventories of expressions. In none of the above is there any attempt to consider the conceptual basis of language; there is little attempt to show how expressions can be linked or differentiated. The result is, as Low (1988) points out, that learners are not told when the expression may be used, what the possible extensions and constraints are, and what aspects of the target domain are highlighted by the source. In short, there has been and continues to be little concern with metaphor in ELT. In teacher training, the published syllabuses of the Royal Society of Arts Certificate and Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults (Cert/Dip TEFLA) make no mention of metaphor or the teaching of figurative forms; therefore, novice teachers are inducted into ELT unaware of a conceptual basis for language.

There have been some interesting contributions made in the literature of language teaching. Lindstromberg (1991) advocated raising awareness of metaphor in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In subject specific areas such as business, law or medicine students, will encounter (in addition to technical terminology and genre conventions) a wider range of extraneous and unpredictable lexis. In these contexts, specific-level metaphors abound and can be identified and categorised. For example, the competitive nature of the free-market or the volatility of the stock exchange is often conceived in terms of BUSINESS IS WAR. Students can find instantiations of this metaphor and make decisions about them; they could also be asked to reflect on what this metaphor says about the culture and conceptualisation of business, and to examine and comment on aspects of the metaphor in terms of its implications. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons could also be discussed. Lindstromberg makes the point that in learning subject matter, the potential role of explicit metaphor teaching ought to be an area of urgent interest. In ELT, Holme (1991) considers collaborative activities for learners to work on paraphrases of metaphors provided by the teacher from a text. Students are asked to make their own versions and compare these with the originals. A further activity requires students to consider why the writer chose the metaphors in question. One

area which lends itself to a pedagogic approach to conceptual metaphor is basic prepositions and particles in English. Typically, in a learner dictionary the numerous but related senses of basic prepositions are listed as polysemes: the learner is confronted with a variety of meanings and needs to identify the one needed. Lindstromberg (1996) points out that this method overlooks the systematic nature of prepositional semantics and demonstrates this with a look at the preposition *on*. His teaching techniques (1997) are inductive, with the use of iconic and illustrative devices in the classroom, and involve looking at prototypical meanings and focusing on the roots of metaphorical expressions. Boers and Demecheleer (1998) take a similar approach in a treatment of prepositions and adverbs of direction, emphasising how a cognitive semantic analysis of a preposition can be used to anticipate comprehension problems about an area of perennial difficulty for learners and to facilitate greater comprehension of unfamiliar uses. Other examples include classroom activities which use gap-fill and classifying activities and require learners to consider aspects of metaphoric use (Lazar, 1996) and specifically cross-linguistic comparisons (Deignan, et al., 1997). Low (1988) emphasises the role of analytic discussion in developing metaphorical awareness and understanding. This method is more appropriate to the capabilities and needs of more advanced learners. However, as Cameron and Low (1999) comment, while there is some recognition that the linking of meaning through metaphor can contribute to language learning efficiency, this does not seem to have been developed in mainstream ELT.

6. Metaphor, Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Communication

Cultural awareness is at the heart of intercultural communication. A lot of this has to do with language and behaviour; with pragmatics, beliefs and values, for example. But intercultural communication should also highlight the areas of commonality as well as divergence in terms of cultural and linguistic behaviour. All too often culturally stereotypical behaviour is objectified and described with insufficient reference to underlying factors that help explain and elucidate. Traditions, customs, institutions, history and social developments can be discussed and described from different perspectives and contrasted and compared with other cultures. Pragmatics emphasises the influence of context on linguistic behaviour and links this to culturally related factors such as particular expectations, degrees of politeness and formality. A conceptual approach to language can draw into focus areas of divergence and commonality at another level of awareness and provides an extra dimension to the understanding of linguistic and cultural norms. More specifically, advanced learners in particular need to develop a "metaphoric competence" if they are to attain a level of proficiency in English that will equip them for professional lives that require a high level of language awareness, knowledge, understanding and resourcefulness. For these students attaining a grasp of the conceptual nature of language is likely to be a revealing and enriching challenge.

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Addendum 1

The following activity is aimed at getting advanced students to think about typical conventional metaphoric expressions used in describing arguments. It is particularly relevant to the context of EAP: to students who are engaged in academic study and using academic discourse. It focuses on identifying the metaphoric aspects of language and classifying these according to conceptual structures. Students are invited to think of similar examples and possible extensions as well as cross-linguistic correspondences.

Read the following and then work on exercises 1 - 5.

He presented a solid argument
Each one of her points was shot down in flames
There is nothing new in this argument
There appears to be little foundation to your position on this issue
Attack the weak points of their argument
You need to buttress this with some clear examples
Their criticisms were really on target
There are a few contradictions in what you are saying
You need to defend you position vigorously
This argument does not contain the slightest truth
Their argument collapsed under the weight of opposition
You need to go on the offensive if you want people to listen to you
We need a better framework in which to present our case
At the centre of your position there is a weakness
That argument is devoid of credibility

Conceptual metaphors for arguments structure not only the way we talk about them but the way we conceive of them in our culture.

1) Underline the metaphorical element in the above sentences (e.g. *solid* is used to describe the abstract entity *argument* in the first example so underline these two words).

2) Classify the above according to following:

ARGUMENTS ARE CONTAINERS

ARGUMENTS ARE BUILDINGS

ARGUMENTS ARE WAR

3) In groups think of some more ways of talking about arguments and decide if you would include these under the metaphors above.

4) What forms of linguistic metaphor work? Can you say why a particular metaphor works in one category but might not do in another? Can we mix metaphors? What qualities do metaphors need to share to mix effectively?

5) Think about sentences describing arguments in your own language and translate/transliterate these into English. Do they fit into the above categories? Are there any differences?

Addendum 2

The following poem was written by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). She is one of the great women poets of the Victorian era. Mortality was a constant theme among many writers in the 19th century as many suffered from ill-health and diseases which modern medicine has conquered. Religious belief was also an important part of life and artistic expression. Read the poem and complete the exercises.

<p><i>Does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end. Will the day's journey take the whole day long? From morn to night, my friend.</i></p> <p><i>But is there for the night a resting place? A roof for when the slow dark hours begin. May not the darkness hide it from my face? You cannot miss that inn.</i></p> <p><i>Shall I meet other wayfarers at night? Those who have gone before. Then must I knock, or call when just in sight? They will not keep you waiting at that door.</i></p> <p><i>Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak? Of labour you shall find the sum. Will there be beds for me and all who seek? Yea, beds for all who come.</i></p>	<p>Glossary:</p> <p><i>Wind</i> - to go in a very indirect direction <i>Inn</i>- a place of rest for travellers at the end of the day <i>Wayfarers</i> - travellers <i>The sum</i> - the end <i>Seek</i> - look for <i>Yea</i> - yes</p>
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1) In the poem the writer is in conversation with someone else. Who is it? What is the poem about in metaphorical terms?

2) In the poem find instantiations of the following conceptual metaphors:

LIFE IS A JOURNEY
A LIFETIME IS A DAY
DEATH IS SLEEP/DEATH IS NIGHT
DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION/DEATH IS DEPARTURE

3) There are a number of image metaphors or mental mappings. Consider the images of "roof", "inn", "door" and "beds"; these are oblique mental images. What do they make you think about? The image of the "inn" has a particular significance in the poem. Can you explain this in more detail?

4) Look at the conventional expressions below and classify them according to the conceptual metaphors in exercise 2.

It is important for young people to get off to a good start
Here lies Henry Smith; may he rest in peace.
The poor guy's really ill; I think he's on the way out
In their twilight years people often look back over their lives
This is a place of rest and should be respected
I've got my life on track now and want to keep it that way
Granddad left us last year but he lived to a good age
We all need a little help along the way
"Long dark night is a comin' on down" (Lyrics by Bob Dylan)
In his last years Henry loved to play golf; now he's playing on that great fairway in the sky

5) How would you express these in your own language? What other conceptual metaphors can you think of for life and death? Are they the same or different to the ones above?