



The Cognitive Nature of Metonymy and Its Implications for English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract

Metonymy is an important means for people to know the world and enrich the language; and it is a way of thinking used widely in people's daily life. This paper illustrates firstly the cognitive nature of metonymy in terms of its definition, classification and contiguity notion. Based on this, the author then studies the meaning extension and lexical conversion of vocabulary from the perspective of metonymy, and concludes that understanding the cognitive nature of metonymy can greatly promote the efficiency of vocabulary teaching and help to expand students' vocabulary amount.

Keywords: Metonymy, Cognitive nature, English vocabulary teaching

1. Introduction

The research of metonymy has a history of more than two thousand years, and its study develops from traditional rhetorical research to modern cognitive research. Rhetoricians and linguists have taken it for granted for a long time that metonymy is a figurative language. It is claimed that metonymy operates on names of things; it involves the substitution of name of one thing for that of another and the two things are somehow associated. The cognitive view of metonymy makes different assumptions from the traditional opinions. Metonymy is believed to be a conceptual phenomenon; it is an important means for people to know the world and enrich the language; and it is a way of thinking used widely in people's daily life. The study of metonymy from the cognitive view is a great help for people to understand the cognitive and conceptual nature of metonymy, and it will shed new light on the English vocabulary teaching.

2. The cognitive nature of metonymy

2.1 The cognitive definition of metonymy

The traditional definitions of metonymy are carried out under the assumption that metonymy is a figurative device to provide some charm and grandeur to the style, and, the researches are all defined to the lexical level yet without treating it as a phenomenon in everyday language and normal modes of thinking. It is believed that most of the basic insights into the tropes of metonymy started from Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, who subsumed metonymy and synecdoche under metaphor (Panther and Radden, 1999, p.1). For him, metonymy is one of the four categories of metaphor (the second category, though he never used the word metonymy explicitly). Since then his study of metonymy has been confined within the study of metaphor for centuries.

The study of metonymy in cognitive linguistics starts with the publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980, p.37), in which it is claimed that metonymy, like metaphor, is not only a linguistic form but also a powerful cognitive tool for people's conceptualization of the world: "Metonymy allows us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else; metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions; Metonymic concepts (like THE PART FOR THE WHOLE) are part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as talk."

Langacker explains metonymy as "a process consists in mentally accessing one conceptual entity via another entity" (1993, p.30). This definition points out the cognitive nature of metonymy.

Blank's definition seems clearer, which considers metonymy as "a linguistic device based on salient conceptual relations within a frame network" (1999, p.174). In this definition, Blank points out that "salient" is an important notion in the view of metonymy.

Later on, Radden and Kovecses define metonymy from a cognitive perspective as: "metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same

idealized cognitive model”(1999, p.21).

All in all, despite the different viewpoints they adopt, most cognitive linguists agree on the fact that, metonymic process consists in mentally accessing one conceptual entity via another entity; metonymy is not merely a figure of speech, but is part of people’s everyday way of thinking; and, the function of metonymy is not just to achieve some artistic or aesthetic purpose but rather to better understand concepts. It is an effective cognitive tool for people to conceptualize the world.

2.2 *The cognitive classification of metonymy*

Classification of metonymy is one of the crucial concerns of research in both traditional rhetoric and cognitive linguistics, as it contributes to understanding the exact nature of metonymy.

Traditional approach to classifying metonymy is to give more or less complex lists of its types, such as PART FOR WHOLE (e.g. Many *hands* make light work.), WHOLE FOR PART (e.g. *Australia* beat *Canada* at cricket.), PLACE FOR INSTITUTION (e.g. The *White House* isn’t saying anything.), PRODUCER FOR PRODUCTS (e.g. I like *Shakespeare* most.).

It seems there are no systematic criteria for the classification and it lacks generality, so it is hard for people to understand the real nature of metonymy.

Cognitive linguists take a different view at the classification. One particular appealing proposal is offered by Panther and Thornburg (1999, pp.334-336), who have classified metonymies pragmatically into three groups: referential metonymies, predicational metonymies and illocutionary metonymies (or speech act metonymies).

The first one is the often-heard claim that metonymies are typically used for indirect referring, example like PLACE FOR INSTITUTION helps to identify the intended referent of the organization.

In predicational metonymies, a statement is used to refer to a different statement.

(1) a. She was able to finish her dissertation.

b. She finished her dissertation.

Sentence *a* and *b* are not semantically synonymous, and sometimes it is possible to assert *a* and to deny *b* without contradiction. Yet on many occasions, speakers can use *a* to pragmatically convey the same propositional content as that expressed in *b*. In this sense, the statement *a* can be used to stand for the statement *b*, the only difference being that in the first case the speaker predicts the ability to finish the dissertation of the subject *she*, whereas in the second case the speaker predicts the actuality of finishing it. In pragmatic terms, *b* is a generalized conversational implicature induced by *a*. This predicational metonymy exemplifies the POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY metonymy, which is very common in English language: A potential event (e.g. the ability, possibility, permission, obligation to undertake an action) is metonymically linked to its actual occurrence.

Panther and Thornburg also put forward the concept of illocutionary metonymies wherein one illocutionary act stands for another illocutionary act.

(2) a. I don’t know where the bath soap is.

b. Where is the bath soap?

In this case, sentence *a* has the direct illocutionary force of an assertion about what the speaker does not know, but in many contexts it is used with the indirect illocutionary force of a question, that is, *a* may metonymically stand for the question or inquiry *b*.

The significance of Panther and Thornburg’s classification lies in the fact that for them metonymy is not restricted to its referring function but is much more pervasive in ordinary language use.

2.3 *The contiguity notion of metonymy*

The notion of “contiguity” (i.e. nearness or neighborhood) is the key term in the understanding of the definition of metonymy, to which both traditional rhetorician and cognitive linguists agree. However, traditional approaches locate contiguity relationship in the world of reality, whereas cognitive approaches locate them at the conceptual level. Lakoff (1987) accounts for metonymic contiguity within the framework of idealized cognitive models (ICMs); Croft (1993) deals with contiguity relations in terms of encyclopedic knowledge representation within a domain or domain matrix; Blank (1999) and Panther and Thornburg (1999) describe the network of conceptual contiguity by using the notion of frame and scenario respectively.

While all of these are comparable with respect to claiming a cognitive basis, we will adopt Lakoff’s (1987) framework of idealized cognitive models (ICMs) as the cognitive mechanism of metonymy as it very well captures the metonymic processes.

The ICMs are the static or dynamic mental representations of typical situations in life and their typical elements. Concepts within ICMs are related by “conceptual contiguity”. “An ICM concept is meant to include not only people’s encyclopedic knowledge of a particular domain but also the cultural model they are part of” (Radden & Kovecses, 1999, p.20). The content of an ICM depends on people’s everyday experience, their world knowledge: beings, things, processes, and actions that generally or ideally occur together are represented in the mind as ICMs. For example, people have *Possession ICM*, *Production ICM*, *Control ICM*, etc. ICMs and the network of conceptual relationships give rise to associations, which may be used in metonymic transfer. When a specific ICM is opened or accessed, all concepts that by convention belong to this ICM are simultaneously activated. For example,

(3) A: How did you get to the railway station?

B: I waved down a taxi.

Speaker *B* means to inform listener *A* that “I got to the railway station by hailing a taxi, having it stop and getting into it, and then the driver drove me to the railway station and parked there, then I got out and arrived at the railway station”. Obviously, the whole process is so complex that it is hard for the speaker to express it in just a few words. Actually speaker *B* does not provide all these details of the event. It is understandable to say that traveling from one place to another can be regarded as a whole event or more accurately, a *Travel ICM*. This *Travel ICM* contains a series of actions where people find some vehicle to take them to the desired location, get into the vehicle, ride in it to the destination, arrive and get out. And ICM of this series of event includes the following:

Precondition: You have (or have access to) the vehicle.

Embarkation: You get into the vehicle and start it up.

Center: You drive (row, fly, etc.) to your destination.

Finish: You park and get out.

End point: You are at your destination. (Lakoff, 1987, p.78)

In everyday life, it is conventional for people to speak only one part of this ICM, like the Precondition, Embarkation or Center, to evoke the entire series of events that make up the *Travel ICM*. Thus, this metonymic way of thinking and speaking can, to a great extent, quicken the process of pragmatic reasoning in information exchange and therefore promote its efficiency.

From above we can see that ICM serves as a background for understanding of metonymy and, it plays an important role in the human communication with the world.

3. Metonymy and lexical meaning

Metonymy is one of the basic ways of cognition. It is extremely common for people to take one well-understood or easily-perceived aspect of something or some event and use it to stand either for the thing or the event as a whole or for some aspect or part of it. That is, a word referring to one aspect of something may have a relatively extended meaning or may change its lexical class to stand for the whole event, thus metonymy causes meaning extension and lexical conversion.

3.1 Means of meaning extension

Metonymy plays an important role in meaning extension. Take the body parts as the example. Body parts are familiar to people themselves; they are usually used to refer to the actions, functions that are related to the body parts or the whole person. Some references become conventionalized and the body parts change their meaning from bodily organs to the actions or functions. The underlying cognitive principle is CONCRETE OVER ABSTRACT. The basic human experience relates to concrete physical objects, which have more salience than abstract object. Body parts make particular concrete objects, and people routinely access various abstract human domains by reference to their body. For example,

(4) Her lovely voice caught my *ear*.

Here, “ear” is metonymically used. The ear is an organ of listening. When we use our ear to listen carefully, we become attentive. In this sentence, ear is very salient and is selected to refer to the abstract function of being attentive.

For more examples,

(5) She is a woman who has a *ready/silver tongue*. (people’s way of speaking that charms or persuades people)

(6) There are a lot of *good heads* in the university. (intelligent people)

(7) We need a couple of *strong bodies* for our team. (strong people))

(8) We need some new *blood* in the organization. (people with animating force)

(9) They are taking on new *hands* down at the factory. (people who perform manual labor)

(10) He's got five *mouths* to feed. (people viewed as consumers of food)

(11) He has a good *ear* for music. (people's ability of appreciating music)

In the above examples, different body parts are used to refer to human beings. The speakers tend to guide the hearers to associate one abstract entity with some relevant and concrete characteristics of it. The metonymic linguistic expressions above are not random or arbitrary occurrences, but systematic phenomena. In the case of the metonymy THE PART FOR THE WHOLE, there are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which part the speaker picks out determines which aspect of the whole the speaker is focusing on. The underlying reason why different body parts are picked out is grounded in people's mental and physical experience with the world: different parts function differently.

When the speakers utter the above sentences, they are using *good heads* to stand for "intelligent people", *new hands* for "new labors" and *good ear* for "good hearing" etc. The point is that they are not just using a body part to stand for a whole person, but rather to select a particularly relevant characteristic of the person to stress a specific function, i.e. *the intelligence*, *the laboring ability* and *the hearing ability of a person* respectively.

The above examples account for the reasons and the process for some metonymies involve in meaning extension. As a matter of fact, in our life we have various kinds of metonymy and all of them can lead to semantic shift. Some expressions are so widely used and get conventionalized that people rarely think of their original meanings, or hardly notice their metonymic basis.

3.2 Means of lexical conversion

When metonymy operates at morphological level, it causes lexical conversion. A conversion is a special case of derivational morphology: instead of adding an affix to a stem, the stem takes a zero form, i.e. one that is present, but not perceptible as in a *bank* (noun), which by adding the verb class status to it becomes to *bank*.

In a soccer game, for another example, players handle the ball differently, with foot, head, chest, back and so on. When a player sends the ball into the goal, we can describe the event with any part of the event, for example, the player sees the ball coming, he jumps, he hits the ball with his head, etc. but the exact timing of the ball-to-head contact and the exact force and direction given to the ball by the head are of paramount importance, so the instrument participant "with the head" can stand for the whole event itself, therefore we can describe the event as "The player *headed the ball* into the goal". Here *head* is converted from a noun to a verb to refer to the whole action with the body parts by an INSTRUMENT FOR ACTION metonymy.

In light of cognitive linguistic views, one reasonable explanation for why such verbs are readily made and understood is that each conversion process implies a metonymic extension. Thus, in *to bank* the place where the transaction takes place comes to stand for the whole of the transaction. In an example such as *to nail the carpet* the conversion process picks one essential element in the event and names the whole event of fixing the carpet by highlighting the instruments used for it.

More examples,

(12) The librarian *shelved* the books. (put books on the shelves)

(13) The maid *dusted* the table. (remove the dust)

(14) Semis *roared* past me, taking the curves at fifty. (move with a loud sound)

(15) She *grumbled* all the way up the stairs. (complain in a bad-tempered way)

These metonymies are instances of the ACTION ICM. The particular significance of this is that the ACTION ICM and the metonymic relationships occurred in this ICM can account for literally thousands of noun-to-verb conversions. These metonymies apply well beyond noun-to-verb conversions. Because they are deeply entrenched and pervasive, they provide speakers with natural cognitive links that enable them to move from one entity to another, i.e. from the vehicle to the target, unconsciously and without any effort. They are part of the mutual knowledge that speakers share and rely on in creating and understanding this kind of conversion with ease.

4. Implications for English vocabulary learning

The evolution and change of lexical meaning, to a large extent, is considered as the result of exterior factors like historical and social development, however, as for the interior factors, metaphorical and metonymical cognitive models are its basic sources and inner mechanisms.

In terms of meaning extension and lexical conversion, metonymy is of great value to vocabulary teaching. Teachers can illustrate the cognitive nature of metonymy, and guide students to explore the metonymic motivation of a word. This will help students to make clear the internal relationship among different meanings of one word, make reasonable cognitive reasoning, and gradually grasp the language rules. In this way their learning efficiency will be greatly improved and their vocabulary amount will be expanded a lot.

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