

Metaphor and Metonymy—A Tentative Research into Modern Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract—Metonymy, as often treated as a subtype of metaphor by cognitive linguistics, has a different working mechanism; metaphor is based on perceived similarity between things while metonymy on the relationship within things themselves. Cognition and the use of language involve the access and manipulation of mental spaces, which are constructed from human perceptual experience and are extended through imaginative processes, within which metaphor and metonymy are the most significant ones. From the perspectives of construction, poetic and cognitive function and working mechanism, this paper makes a comprehensive analysis of metaphor and metonymy through comparing and contrasting these two important language phenomena, exploring their similarities and contiguities.

Index Terms—construction, poetic function, cognitive function, similarity, contiguity

I. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor and metonymy are treated as two different figures of speech in traditional rhetoric. The famous linguist Jakobson mentioned them in his works in 1960s as two important principles for language. Cognitive linguistics focuses on the ubiquity of metaphor and metonymy in language but in modern theories of metaphor, metonymy is often regarded as a subtype of metaphor and gets a bare mention. Based on the illuminating framework offered by *Cognitive Exploration of language and Linguistics*, this paper attempts to analyze these two language phenomena in terms of their constructions, functions and working mechanisms in the light of semiotics, pointing out that both of them are special signs with the features of multi-hierarchy, ambiguity and openness and its construction relies on similarity and association.

Instead of recognizing their similarities in certain respects, my thesis suggests that they are two fundamentally different cognitive devices, with metaphor involving things from two different categories and metonymy involving properties of something and its relations with other things. Cognitively speaking, metaphor is more useful since people often use metaphors to explain something in a less well-known domain in terms of things from relatively better-known domains. Human interaction generally proves to be much more significant as the foundation for the decoding of the signified. However, metonymy basically involves using a special property of something or its special relationship with some other thing to refer to it, therefore its major function is to help the hearer to locate or recognize the referent and its special characteristics. In Chinese rhetoric, it also includes synecdoche. As for their working mechanisms, metaphor is based on perceived similarity between things while metonymy on the relationship within things themselves.

II. CONSTRUCTIONS OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY

A. Construction of Metaphor

As we know, “metaphor” is a type of figurative language in which one thing is described in terms of some other thing. The word “metaphor” comes from Greek “*metapherein*” which means “carry over”. Another translation is “transference”, a term more familiar to us from psychoanalytic theory. “In a metaphor, one of the basic senses of a form, the source domain, is used to grasp or explain a sense in a different domain, called target domain.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.12) The idea that we take attitudes from one area of experience and use them to approach and understand another is fundamental to human interactions with the world.

Concerned with its Construction, metaphor consists of three parts: tenor (also called “topic”本体), vehicle (喻体) and ground(喻底). For example,

1. *Hang Zhou is Shanghai's backyard.*
2. *She is forever pure and innocent like spring and butterfly.*

In the first sentence, “Hang Zhou” is the tenor, “backyard” is the vehicle but there is no ground. In the second sentence, “she” is the tenor; “spring and butterfly” is the vehicle; “pure and innocent” is the ground.

In Chinese, as speaking on the level of discourse, many idioms and proverbs such as “守株待兔”, “亡羊补牢”, “狐狸吃不到葡萄说葡萄酸”, etc are also metaphorical. Besides, fable is exactly a kind of “extended metaphor” from which engendered many idioms and proverbs. Certainly not all the idioms and proverbs are constituted in the form of metaphor. Only those “understand one thing through another” (Shu, 2000, p.36) can be recognized as metaphors.

Traditionally, metaphor was seen as concerning “live” or “novel” descriptions, the kind of metaphor that is found in poetry and rhetoric. Idiomatic expressions were dismissed as “dead” metaphors; ones that had once been bright and new, but had become worn and dull with overuse.

So far a good many linguists have been attempting to elucidate the ways in which language reflects the manner in which human beings perceive, categorize and conceptualize the world. The result is like this: the more accurate, objective and literal the description is, the more elusive it may be. According to the linguist George Lakoff (1980), “we use our basic bodily understanding of places, movements, forces, paths, objects and containers as sources of information about life, love, mathematics and all other abstract concepts.”(p.38)

Cognitive linguists suggest that we use metaphor intuitively and unconsciously to understand the mind, emotions and all other abstract concepts. Such metaphors enable us, as embodied beings, to make sense of a concept such as “mind” which we cannot see with our eyes or grasp with our hands. It allows us to “take a view” on the debate and to “get to grips” with the subject. Cognitive linguists suggest that, without such conventional metaphors, there would be no abstract thought. It also suggests that metaphors may “privilege” some understandings exclude others. Through field research, Lakoff has collected large numbers of metaphorical expressions. It is believed that these are derived from a smaller number of conceptual metaphors. Both creative, novel metaphors and “dead”, conventional metaphors are derived from conceptual metaphors. For Lakoff, the locus of metaphor is not in language at all but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. For example,

3. *Love is a journey. (We are not getting anywhere. This marriage is in a rut.)*

The idiomatic expressions above, exemplifying two conceptual metaphors, are commonplace, unpoetic and do not, perhaps, strike us as particularly metaphorical. We can say “this marriage is in a rut” and this statement is taken at literal value. If someone were to say, “Even a Massey Ferguson wouldn’t have salvaged my marriage”, we hear the statement as something new. Metaphorically, an impediment to the continuation of a marriage is an impediment to a journey continuing, such as a rut. On a real journey, we might ask the local farmer to haul our car out of a rut with a tractor. To create a novel metaphor, essential for poetry and humor, the speaker has taken an aspect of the source of the conceptual metaphor that is not usually associated with the target. In doing so, the speaker has made the metaphor explicit and brought it back to life.

Basically speaking, metaphor is describing one thing in terms of some other. Its tenor and vehicle have similarities as well as difference. The most significant difference is that the two belong to different domains: tenor belongs to the source domain while vehicle belongs to the target domain.

4. *The encyclopedia is a Gold mine.*

Here “the encyclopedia” and “Gold mine” are totally different but they have similarity in a certain aspect. To say the encyclopedia is a gold mine is because both of them deserve hard digging thus forming a metaphor. Such kind of similarity should be limited to certain aspects otherwise it cannot form a metaphor, e.g.

5. *The encyclopedia is a dictionary.*

In this sentence, “the encyclopedia” and dictionary belong to the same category. Actually the former is a subcategory of dictionary; therefore it is not a metaphor. Theoretically speaking, the possibility of forming a metaphor depends on the difference between the two things. The more different they are, the more possible a metaphor they can be form. However, the extent of difference should also be restricted by its similarity. The more different they are, the more difficult it will be for people to understand the metaphor. Because of this, a “ground” is needed to offer necessary explanations. Generally speaking, vehicles’ characteristics are more specific and familiar to people. Take this sentence for example.

6. *Architecture is solid music.*

As we know, music cannot be seen or touched but people still can understand it. By employing an abstract and invisible thing to define a concrete and specific object, this sentence gives the readers a sense of distance as well as a poetic conception.

B. Construction of Metonymy

Cognitive linguists have paid less attention to metonymy, yet it is also a rampant phenomenon in linguistics. Metonymy is a type of figurative language in which the name of one thing is replaced with another commonly associated with it. The word originally comes from Greek, constituted by two affixes “meta” and “onoma” which mean “change” and “name” respectively. It is present whenever a part of something stands in for the whole item, or when something closely associated with an item stands in for the item itself. In other words, a partial or associative reference maps to the referent itself.

A metonymy can also be seen as consisted of three parts—tenor, vehicle and ground. What makes it different is that the “tenor” never appears in a metonymy and the “vehicle” serves as the “ground” at the same time. The “tenor” and the “vehicle” function implicitly, one substituting for the other. This is because the “vehicle” represents some characteristics of the “tenor” but the two components in the same metonymy don’t share any similarities at all. For instance,

7. *“He is mad, absolutely mad!” The greybeard said abruptly.*

Here “graybeard” is a metonymy, taking place of the person who was wearing grey beard. “Grey beard” is a significant feature of the “tenor” thus it functions as the “ground” does in this sentence. Because of this substitutive relationship existing between the “tenor” and “vehicle”, in traditional Chinese rhetoric, metonymy is also called

“substitute (借代)”

In English, there is another figure of speech called synecdoche that is quite similar to metonymy. Actually It is very difficult to distinguish one from the other since both of them make use of the relationship between things. In a synecdoche, part of a word's basic meaning can be used for the whole, referring to specific objects, e.g.

8. *They are taking on hands down at the factory.*

9. *Mary Sue lives four doors down the street.*

In sentence 8, “hands” represents “workers” and in sentence 9 “doors” stands for “houses”, both of which confirm to the rules of metonymy, “using part for the whole”.

Furthermore, there're many other ways to constitute a metonymy. “Just as conceptual metaphor restructures a conceptual domain like mountains in terms of another conceptual domain such as the human body, a conceptual metonymy names one aspect or element in a conceptual domain while referring to some other element which is in a contiguity relation with it.” (Jakobson, 1985, p.45) For instance,

a. Person for His Name: *I'm not in the telephone book.*

b. Author For Book: 马列, 鲁迅

c. Inventor For Invention: 杜康

d. Container for Contained: *This is an excellent dish/He drank the whole bottle.*

e. The Name of Some Person for A Kind of People: 西施

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The famous linguist Jakobson has pointed out that the basic difference between metaphor and metonymy is that metaphor is based on similarity while metonymy is on contiguity. This is fairly illuminating to our study of metonymy's characteristics. Since contiguity isn't necessary to be involved in some certain relationship, as long as the two elements share some connection, one can be perceived as the other's metonymy.

The well-known semiotist Eco (1985) noted that contiguity of all kinds of metonymies generally falls into three categories:

1) Contiguity in language coding (the most common one) such as “the crown” for the throne, “white collar” for office staff.

2) Contiguity in context. E.g.

10. *There came several gunshots from the car; that car should be dumb.*

3) Contiguity in the referents, which is considered to be impossible by Eco.

Eco's classification is extremely illuminating. It is quite common to form metonymies by using semiotic contiguity, especially through phonetic contiguity and syntactical functioning. For example, some traditional Chinese two-part common expressions make use of phonetic contiguity to give a sense of humor such as “老太婆喝稀饭 – 无耻(齿)下流”, “孔夫子搬家 – 尽是输(书)”. Many Chinese taboos or auspicious expressions also work on this phonetic contiguity such as “碗(完)”, “送钟(终)”, “瓜(寡)”, “伞(散)”, “梨(离)”, “四(死)”, “八(发)”, “蝙蝠(福)”, “福倒(到)”, etc. What's more, all phenomena of ellipsis, truncation, and phonological reduction/neutralization are linguistic examples of metonymy.

In our daily life, out of some certain consideration, people often express something by describing some other related with it instead of talking about it directly.

11. A: *How did you get to the airport?*

B: *I waved down a taxi.*

Towards A's question, B didn't answer directly–“I got to the airport by taxi”–but only choose one part of the whole process to give an indirect reply. The whole process of this incident is a so-called “ideal cognitive model (ICM)” (Eco, 1985, p.330). As for a westerner, the ICM for the incident of “going to some place” is like this:

Precondition: You 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.

Endpoint: You are at your destination.

People usually use one part of this ICM to call the whole process and the hearer will instantly understand that the speaker is talking about the whole thing through the part being mentioned simply because they share the same ICM. This enables us to infer something we're not being told.

Very common uses of metonymy in the world's languages are the reduction of movement along a path to either a stationary or just the endpoint of a path. English *over* provides examples of both types of reductions. We can invoke movement along a path by saying “Bill Walked *over* the hill”. This can be reduced to a stationary path in “the road goes *over* the hill”. A statement like “Bill lives *over* the hill” access only the endpoint of the path described by *over*. Besides, metonymy has often been used to extend the indirect object to constructions lacking a direct object. There're many verbs such as *pay*, *advise* and *hamper* that denote *the giving of something* that is so predictable from the meaning of the verb itself that there is no need to express the *something* given as an accusative direct object. This metonymy motivates the use of the indirect object, and therefore the dative case, with a host of verbs which otherwise look rather like a

random list.

The use of gestures is another way of metonymic thinking. And according to Eco, the contextual relationship also serves as a source of metonymy. Actually, some Chinese cultural traditions and local customs also created many special expressions functioning as metonymies such as “汗青(for history)”, “秋波(for misgivings and worries)”, “泰山(for father-in-law)”, “推敲(for thinking and consideration)”, “女儿红(a kind of wine)”, “十里香”, etc. Special experience can bring about special contiguities thus producing special metonymies.

III. A FUNCTIONAL COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY

A. Six Types of Functions

Roughly speaking, both metaphor and metonymy have 6 types of functions, including rhetorical function, linguistic function, poetic function, cognitive function, social function and word-play function. I will give a comprehensive introduce of these functions in the following paragraphs (Shu, 2000, p.112-151).

a. Rhetorical Function

Since metonymy denotes something with its related characteristics, usually a most significant one, it often has strong rhetorical effects. A good many nicknames come in this way, making themselves protruding and humorous by emphasizing some special features of things being mentioned such as “独眼龙”, “跷脚”, “花和尚鲁智深”, “豹子头林冲”, “矮脚虎王英”, “行者武松”, etc.

Puns can be taken as a special usage of metonymy as well. For example, “东边日出西边雨，道是无情却有情 (晴)”. At the level of discourse, using a part of the ICM to send a “discourse connotation” (p.138) can help to achieve special effects.

12. A: *Would you like some coffee?*

B: *Coffee would keep me awake.*

Instead of answering “no”, B simply told the result of “drinking coffee” and A would try to infer B’s real intentions with the help of his common sense.

b. Linguistic Function

The so-called linguistic function mainly refers to the function of filling in lexical gaps. As metaphors use similarities between things to make names, metonymies use things’ features in certain aspects, such as “向日葵”, “映山红”, “竹叶青”, etc.

Cognitive linguists assume that language develops by metaphorical extension. Basic body experiences, such as moving in space, seeing people and handling objects, provide the foundation of language. At the same time, a certain form of language can focus some movement (or path) or the endpoint of some incident (endpoint of the path), just like the following sentences.

13. *We walked in the forest.*

14. *We walked home.*

This proves that the nature of metonymy formation lies in the possibility of establishing some connections among individuals contiguously appearing within the same conceptual Construction. These individuals don’t need to have contiguities in the sense of space. They are not restricted to behaviors, either. From this perspective, metonymy is the most basic form of meaning extension. It is even more important and fundamental than metaphor.

c. Poetic Function

Language is building materials for poetry. Innovation in each layer of language can engender poems. In fact, such kind of innovation is a deviation from the original regulations and rules. Layers of language include phonetics, syntax, lexical, etc. Metonymy is a kind of deviation that doesn’t involve two domains as metaphor does, thus it has weaker effects than metaphor does as well. Theoretically speaking, the more it deviates, the more poetic it could be. However, in practice, it is always limited by rules of language itself and people’s cognitive ability. If the tenor is too distant in meaning from the vehicle, it would be too abstruse to understand, no to mention appreciate.

d. Social Function

As we know, metonymy is an important approach to constitute euphemism, indirect discourse behavior and argot; the former two expressing politeness while the later one with a sense of privacy. All of them function in strengthening social communications.

e. Cognitive Function

Metonymy is an important component of our conceptual system. People can use a familiar and easy recognized characteristic to represent the whole thing. Therefore, by obtruding their characteristics, metonymy make it easy to find out and remember the identity and features of things being discussed.

f. Wordplay Function

This function mainly works in nicknames, puns and two-part common expressions(歇后语) that have been mentioned in former chapters.

B. Symmetry in Functioning

15. *Argument is war.*

16. *The ham sandwich around the corner wants another coffee.*

From the above two sentences, we can conclude like this—in a metaphor, the tenor and the vehicle enjoy equivalent positions. The relation between them is symmetrical. (argument \longleftrightarrow war) Under some circumstance, we can also make sentence like “War is argument”. But the metonymy as presented in sentence 16 is by no means symmetrical. We can only use “ham sandwich” to take place of the customer we can never use it in a reversed way. Customer cannot stand for ham sandwich anyway. (Ham sandwich \xleftarrow{x} the customer)

IV. WORKING MECHANISM

Some linguists regard metonymy as a subtype of metaphor while others think metonymy is contradictory to it as they are based on contradictory principles.

A. Difference and Semantic Conflicts

Metaphor and metonymy share something in common in their constructions and function, but they're quite different in working mechanism. First, though both of them involve substitution, they belong to different categories. Take A for B is a category mistake. Metonymy employs characteristics of things to help them to be recognized. It is never involved in two categories. In metaphor, there is a sense of distance between the tenor and the vehicle while the two elements involved in metonymy always belong to the same category. Most of the time, A is even a part of B. A can be used to represent B is because there is a relationship of evoke and being evoked existing between them. Although semantic differences and conflicts exist both in metaphor and metonymy, they are of different nature.

B. Similarity vs. Contiguity

In metonymy, the semantic link between two or more senses of a word is based on a relationship of contiguity, i.e. between the whole of something and a part of it. As a matter of fact, the expression can metonymically stand for each of its components. More generally speaking, “contiguity is the state of being in some sort of contact such as that between a part and a whole, a container and the contents, a place and its inhabitants, etc.” (Shu, 2003, p.89) And the concept of contiguity does not only apply to real physical or spatial contact, but also to more abstract associations such as time or cause.

However, metaphor is based on “conceived similarity between one thing from the source domain and the other from the target domain” (Chen, 1979, p.79). And this “similarity” is always in the eyes of the beholder—“if he wants to see it, it is there; if he wants not, there is none.” “The link is never objectively given as in the case metonymy, where the relation of contiguity always involves some objective link between the various senses of a word” (Chen, 1979, p.81-83).

C. Reflections vs. References

According to Gibbs, to understand metonymy depends on forming a stratified system to impose restrictions on the common knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer – 1> Identity of the metonymy; 2> Acts of the metonymy; 3> Relevant acts of the metonymy; 4> the type of act referred to. For instance,

17. *While I was taking his picture, he did a Napoleon for the camera.*

Here “Napoleon” refers to the typical posture of Napoleon. Without enough knowledge of the identity, acts and relevant acts of this person, the hearer won't be able to understand the referent and real meaning of this metonymy.

D. Metaphor = or \neq Metonymy

Through an analytic study of metaphor and metonymy present in Homer's epics, Jakobson revealed a special relation between the two figures of speech. He claimed that sometimes, metaphor and metonymy could coexist in the same vehicle as applied in the sentences below.

18. *Not a bright falcon was flying beyond the hills.*

19. *Not a fierce horse was coming at gallop to the court.*

In sentence 18, the metaphor is present when a brave man appeared like “a falcon flying beyond the hills”. In sentence 19, the semantic relationship is a bit ambiguous, however. The horse coming to the court implies that the man is coming, which evoked a contiguous and metonymic image of the horse and the court. Things standing for their owner; outdoors activities stand for what happens in the door. There is no need for the horse to substitute for the man: “A brave fellow was coming at a gallop to the court, // Vasilij was walking to the porch.” The image of “horse” is waving between metaphor and metonymy. Since in poetry, similarity is often cooperating with contiguity, any metaphor is a bit metonymic and any metonymy is a bit metaphorical as well.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper makes a comprehensive analysis of metaphor and metonymy through comparing and contrasting these two important language phenomena from the perspective of structure, function and working mechanism. It takes pains to prove that these two phenomena are different from each other by nature. As their constructions are concerned, metaphor is consisted of three parts--tenor, vehicle and ground while metonymy is only constituted by the substitute and the substituted. Metaphor is to describe one thing in terms of some other thing, the tenor and the vehicle belonging to

two different categories with certain distance between each other; metonymy is to replace the name of one thing with another commonly associated with it, usually a part of it, the substitute and the substituted belonging to the same category. Human interactions generally prove to be much more significant than features that might be available in an “objective” description of a category.

Cognition and the use of language involve the access and manipulation of mental spaces, which are constructed from human perceptual experience and are extended through imaginative processes, within which metaphor and metonymy are the most significant ones. Many linguists including Lakoff, Johnson, Jakobson, Eco, etc. have made magnificent contribution to this field. Their theories provide a bridge between linguistics and our understanding of the body and brain, which has been acknowledged as coherent with other studies in cognitive language. Both metaphor and metonymy merit further research.

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