

When Metaphors Cross Cultures

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Abstract—The focus in this paper is on the kind of metaphors that is pervasive in everyday life and more specifically in everyday literal language; the kind of metaphor that is referred to as “conceptual automatic”. In this paper, I explain reasons for having different and similar metaphors across languages by taking the comparison between the Arabic spoken in the western area of the Arabian (WS Arabic) and English as an example. This paper concludes that metaphor similarities or differences between languages could be a result of differences in one or more of the metaphor shaping factors which are: extent of different cultures, geographic environments, speaker’s values and personality, thinking modes, mental concepts, views of the world, feelings, and human relationships. In this paper, I emphasize that to arrive at more accurate conclusions when finding out conceptual metaphor similarities and differences, we should not neglect the indirect effect of mainstream languages on nonmainstream ones.

Index Terms—conceptual metaphor, automatic metaphor, cognitive metaphor, figurative language, WS Arabic, across cultures

I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS?

The first time automatic metaphors were pointed out to me and I was exposed to the idea of the automaticity of metaphor, I was surprised. I had not thought about such expressions as metaphorical before. Such expressions are heard more often than imagined without even bothering thinking about them. A probable reason for not noticing such expressions is that we experience instances of them so frequently that they have got deeply entrenched in our perception and they become automatically retrieved after going through a gradual process of conventionalization. These metaphors are represented in our minds more as literal pieces of language other than figurative, Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Once a metaphor stops from being figuratively noticeable, it becomes opaque or “dead”, Lakoff (1987), though they can be revitalized, Pawelec (2006). When thinking about a metaphor we can make most sense of it by conceptualizing it having two domains; a source domain mapped to a target domain. For instance, from the metaphorical expression¹ “The future is ahead of you” the word “future”, which is literally supposed to be abstract, is conceptualized as a concrete entity that is in front of us and toward which we are going. The source domain which is implied in this example is ‘concrete entity’ and the target domain is “future”. In other words, the target domain “future” is conceptually embodied in a source domain as a “concrete entity”. In such metaphors, target domains are used to help in the conceptual defining process in our minds for the purpose of easier understanding of respective source domains through conceptualizing how these two domains are related; in addition to having two mental spaces connected which is also helpful in at least triggering the process of conventionalization of the target domain. An interesting thing about automatic metaphors is that they go through this whole process without us noticing them as metaphors, when hearing them, and without deliberately retrieving them as metaphors, when we produce them. Steen (1994), however, argues that the communicative function of metaphors which we use deliberately is to shift audience attention to another domain by the establishment of a cross-conceptual domain, but when they are not used deliberately as figurative language they lose their communicative function as metaphors, and when that happens, only one domain is used and no need for cross-conceptual domain mapping²; hence, and according to Romero and Soria (1998), no need for metaphorical interpretation in such a case. Sweetser (1990) introduces another interesting idea that words which we use in everyday language are originally metaphorical, which can be figured out when tracing their etymological data.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), consider metaphors as pervasive in everyday life, in thought, language and action. They introduce the example of ARGUMENT IS WAR which involves winning or losing, attacking, and using strategies for example. Then they introduce an imagined culture where ‘argument is a dance’, in which participants are performers whose goal is to move in a nice aesthetic way. In such culture, we would not view such participants as arguing but as doing something else. This imagined culture probably does never exist, since it does not make sense for the general human view of ARGUMENT, except probably in our minds. This example can be taken as a support for the idea that humans can perceive conceptual metaphors similarly; hence human cultures could share similar metaphorical concepts. This probably can be taken as a support for the idea that human cognition perceives a number of conceptual metaphors similarly across cultures with slight modifications that are driven by external factors from surrounding environments of

¹ A metaphorical expression is one of the related expressions that are categorizable within one metaphorical concept. In addition, the most schematic metaphor is a conceptual metaphor and the most specific metaphor is a metaphorical expression.

² This is the case when using language, but for our purpose we will assume that there are two conceptual domains as a technique for analyzing metaphors of different languages.

different types; such modifications could produce different or similar metaphorical expressions that are entailed within same conceptual metaphors.

In this paper, I am analyzing some previously done studies that deal with metaphors of emotions to see to what extent it is possible that we have similar or different metaphors across different languages. Then I will try to figure out why we would have similarities or differences in metaphorical representations between languages. I will also include some conceptual metaphors that are used in Arabic and some entailed metaphorical expression within these conceptual metaphors to add more examples to investigate the issue at hand. In the following section, I will refer to some studies that tackle some metaphors in two or more languages to build basis for my analysis of automatic metaphors in this study. Then I will discuss how the topic of metaphor similarities and differences are dealt with in these studies. I will then include some metaphors from Arabic and English and try to find equivalent for each of them in the other language to see how speakers in two cultures where Arabic and English are used use metaphors and how metaphors are transferable from one of these cultures to the other.

II. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON METAPHORS ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES

Several articles have tackled the topic of intercultural similarities and differences in metaphorical expressions and conceptual metaphors in the past decade. One of these studies is the one by Xiuzhi Li (2010) which identifies similarities in the conceptual metaphor of happiness between English and Chinese. Of these similarities is the orientational metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP which entails expressions such as “We had to cheer him up.”, and “He’s been in high spirits all day.” Another metaphor that is similar in English and Chinese is HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (BRIGHTNESS) which entails expressions such as “She was radiant with joy.”, and “His face is glowing.” A third metaphor that English and Chinese share is the container metaphor HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER which entails the expressions “We were full of joy.”, and “His heart is overflowing with joy.” for example. On the other hand, the author presents conceptual metaphors that are mapped to different targets such as the metaphor BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND which entails expressions such as “They were riding high.”, and “I feel on top of the world.”. In addition, the metaphor “Happiness is the flower in one’s heart.” is used in Chinese and not in English. The author argues that different thinking modes and cultures are reasons for different metaphors in English and Chinese (Xiuzhi Li, 2010).

Another study is done by Chen (2010), in this study, the authors introduces some similarities and differences in the anger metaphor. He started by arguing that languages of the world share root metaphors as a result of shared human experience. He argues that when new metaphorical expressions are introduced in a language, it indicates that human beings are getting to know new things by means of those root metaphors which are universal conceptually not linguistically.

In this study, the author identifies three conceptual metaphors of anger that are similar in English and Chinese, ANGER IS HEAT, ANGER IS PSYCHOLOGY REACTION, and ANGER IS THUNDER. ANGER IS HEAT entails metaphorical idioms such as “add fuel to the fire”, and “to blaze up”. An example for ANGER IS PSYCHOLOGY REACTION is the idiom to lose one’s hair. While ANGER IS THUNDER entails the metaphorical idioms “black as thunder” and “as powerful as thunderbolt” for instance. The author also identifies three differences in anger metaphor between English and Chinese, ANGER IS SOMETHING HOT IN A CONTAINER, ANGER IS HUMAN BODY PARTS, and ANGER IS AGGRESSIVE ANIMAL BEHAVIOR. By looking at the analysis of the conceptual metaphor BLOOD IS SOMETHING HOT IN A CONTAINER we see that it entails a metaphoric idiom boiling blood which is construed in English as anger while in Chinese BOILING BLOOD IS ENTHUSIASM. The author attributes such difference to how the two culture view the world, in English cultures water is regarded as the source of the universe while air is the source of universe in Chinese. That is why anger is compared to fluid in a container in some English speaking cultures while in some mainstream Chinese speaking cultures they consider illnesses as resulting from malfunction of air. The author argues that different metaphors are due to geographic environment, personalities, values, concepts, thinking modes, and views of the world, (Chen, 2010).

In a third study comparing conceptual metaphors in English and Chinese is done by Liu and Zhao and published in 2013. In this study, the authors compare emotion metaphors between English and Chinese and introduce some similarities such as the orientational metaphor HAPPY IS UP and HAPPINESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER. They, on the other hand, identify differences in that English has the metaphor HAPPINESS IS BEING OF THE GROUND while Chinese has the metaphor HAPPINESS IS FLOWERS IN THE HEART which is consistent with what the study by Li (2010), which we talked about above, identifies. Other examples of metaphors that are used by either English or Chinese cultures are the metaphor SAD IS BLUE and SADNESS IS PAIN IN THE HEART that are used by English and Chinese respectively. The authors conclude their study by saying ‘Culture is the total pattern of beliefs, customs, institutions, objects and techniques that characterize the life of a human community.’ And that these metaphor differences are due to “cultural influences” in which language plays a role as a part of culture, (Liu and Zhao in, 2013).

In a comparative study of basic emotion metaphors, anger, happiness, sadness, fear, and love, between English and Persian. Mashak, Pazhakh, & Hayati (2012) argue that the English and Persian share most of the metaphors of these basic emotions. He argues that this means that the metaphorical expressions of these emotions can be literally transferred

from one of the two languages to the other and still convey the same meaning and function. Of the examples they mentioned is the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP, which entails the English metaphorical expression “She was in seven heaven” and the Persian metaphorical expression that is literally translated as “walking on the clouds“. Another conceptual metaphor they include in here analysis is the English metaphor HAPPINESS/JOY IS a FLUID IN a CONTAINER which entails the metaphorical expression “full of joy” which exist in English and in Persian as an equivalent translation of it. However, they say that there are very few metaphor differences between English and Persian such as the conceptual metaphor EYE/HEART ARE NESTS FOR SADNESS and DRINKING HEART BLOOD STANDS FOR SADNESS which entail equivalent translations for such expressions as “sadness nest in his eyes” and “drinking hear blood” respectively in Persian which are not used in English. (Mashak et al., 2012)

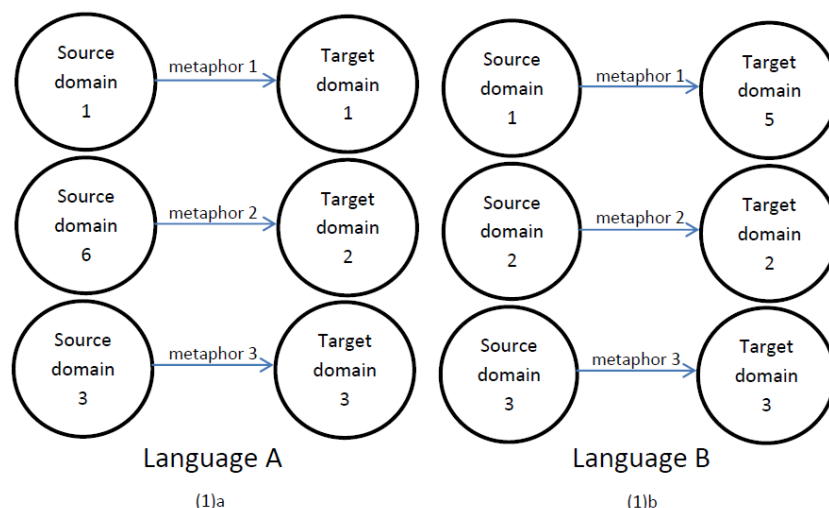
Berendt & Tanita (2011), compare three languages, English, Japanese and Thai, to figure out similarities and differences in using metaphor of HEART between these three languages. Heart in Thai is used in metaphors such as HEART AS ENTITY, HEART AS PERSON more specifically, HEART AS LOCUS OF THINKING, and, HEART AS A LOCUS OF EMOTION. These metaphors are used in Japanese as well but with replacing the word HEART for HARA which literally means ‘abdomen’ which covers a wider range of functions than the English equivalent does. However, in English not all these three examples of conceptual metaphors are used. The HEART AS LOCUS OF THINKING metaphor is not used. The authors argue that this third metaphor that is excluded from English actually had been used in English before. They say that Japanese and Thai use a monistic view of communication and that English uses a dualistic one. The monistic view means that there is a merger of different ways of understanding, while the dualistic view means that there is a dichotomy of the way to refer to rational and emotive modes by using the expression mind and heart respectively for example.

By looking at these studies that compare metaphors across languages, we can conclude that schematic metaphors are used more universally than more specific metaphors. And that the more specific a metaphor the more cultural specific it is; however usually conceptual metaphors are more interculturally shared than culturally specific. According to Li (2010), different metaphors result from different thinking modes and different cultures. Lie reached this conclusion after comparing English and Chinese cultures by analyzing and comparing examples for anger metaphor from each culture. Chen (2010) argues that geographic environment, personalities of speakers, values, concepts, thinking modes, and views of the world are criteria that decide if conceptual metaphors are similar or different in two languages. He concludes that after he analyzed Anger metaphors form English and Chinese. An additional study that compares metaphors form English and Chinese is the study by Liu and Zhao in 2013. This study is dealing with happiness metaphors and concludes that metaphor differences are due to cultural influences. An additional study that compares metaphors includes English and Persian in the comparison. This study was done by Mashak, Pazhakh, & Hayati (2012). This study concluded that English and Persian speaking cultures are very similar with regard to conceptualizing metaphors of emotions to the extent that most of the metaphors used in either of these languages is transferable to the other while still retain their same meanings and functions. The last study I refer to above is the one by Berendt & Tanita (2011). In this study, metaphor of Heart of three languages, English, Japanese, and Thai is compared. They conclude similarities in basis of metaphorical uses except for one use of the metaphor of heart which they claim to be used but not anymore; this metaphor is HEART IS LOCUS OF THINKING metaphor in English. They imply that this difference is due to different cultural construct in how thinking, feeling, human relationships, and understanding are understood. To sum up the conclusions for differences or similarities in metaphors across cultures according to the studies we refer to in this paper, we can say that extent of different cultures, geographic environments, speaker’s values and personality, thinking modes, mental concepts, views of the world, feelings, and human relationships all of these are factors that play critical roles in shaping conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions in languages³, I will refer to these factors as conceptual metaphor shaping factors throughout this paper. A very detailed and through investigation needs to be done by applying each of these factors, and other factors, in order to arrive at reliable conclusions.

III. METAPHOR SHAPING FACTORS

When we have a conceptual metaphor in one language that does not have a matching conceptual metaphor in another language then we need to bear in mind two different situations in which this mismatch is represented. As we stated above, we need to have two conceptual domains in order to have a metaphor. The two conceptual domains are a source and target domains for every metaphor. A change in one of them renders a change in the metaphor hence results in two different situations where metaphors of a language are not matching metaphors of another. One of these situations where the target domain is matching but the source domain is not, compare metaphor 1 in (1)a and metaphor 1 in (1)b, and the other situation where the source domain is matching but the target is not, compare metaphor 2 in (1)a and metaphor 2 in (1)b.

³ These factors are not inclusive to all factors that shape conceptual metaphors however they are used as basis in this study.



How if we introduce a nonmatching metaphor in a language? Then it will depend on acceptability of speakers according to any of the conceptual metaphor shaping factors summed up above. Metaphors in general map a target domain, which could not be readily fully understood, to a source domain to help in the understanding of it. If a source domain needs to be defined to be understood by the respective speakers of a language, then it is not serving its purpose as a source domain and probably is more confusing when it is mapped to a target domain. Let us take the example HEART IS LOCUS OF THINKING and apply it to English. The example from Berendt & Tanita (2011) “Look in heart then choose.” does not make sense in English; although it makes perfect sense in Thai since heart is locus of thinking in Thai. A speaker who is not familiar with the conceptual metaphor HEART IS LOCUS OF THINKING and is familiar with the conceptual metaphor HAERT IS LOCUS OF EMOTIONS would probably think that the second conceptual metaphor is applied to this metaphorical expression. In this example the target domain does not have a match in English. And even if we introduced such example we would not be successful in having speakers of English use it unless one or more of their conceptual metaphor shaping factors is changed.

I presume that conceptual metaphor shaping factors are constantly changing. As a support for this claim we can take the metaphorical expression “learn by heart” which is a reminiscence of old metaphorical usage in old English according to Berendt & Tanita (2011) which does not exist anymore except in that example. This example is a strong support for the idea that metaphors die once they are well entrenched in mind of speakers of a culture. This metaphor probably retains its function although it has lost a great deal of its meaning due to deep entrenchment. This means that such entrenchment had been happening before one or more conceptual metaphor shaping factors have changed. In the next section, we will deal with some examples of differences in conceptual metaphor mapping between WS Arabic and English.

IV. COMPARING METAPHORS IN ARABIC AND ENGLISH

The general conceptual metaphor A PERSON IS AN ANIMAL entails more specific conceptual metaphors as A HAPPY PERSON IS AN ANIMAL⁴, A COURAGEOUS PERSON IS AN ANIMAL, AN UNGRATEFUL PERSON IS AN ANIMAL, just to mention a few. A metaphorical expression that entails A HAPPY PERSON IS AN ANIMAL as mentioned by Kovecses (2002) is “He was happy as a pig in slop.” The source domain here is “pig in slop” and the target domain is “very happy person” while in WS Arabic the target domain is “very ungrateful person” in such a metaphorical expression in Arabic that translates as “As ungrateful as a pig”, so the only difference between these expressions are the target domains while the same source domain is used in both of these Arabic and English metaphorical expressions. By only changing the target domain in such examples, the meaning and function of the whole metaphor is changed. This different conceptual mapping is due to the fact that pigs are of the lowest status animals in the culture where WS Arabic is spoken. Another probable reason for not using names of most animals to refer to people is that using Animal names to refer to people is generally a kind of cursing in WS Arabic culture, except for names of some high status animals, according to WS Arabic culture, that refer to courage or strength like falcons, lions, tigers, wolves etc., which are more commonly used as metonyms that stand for persons than metaphors. We can draw a conclusion for having these animals as high status animals that these animals are advantageous to have in the environment where WS Arabic is spoken, like falcons and horses especially in the past, or which are conceptualized as strong opponents, such as wolves which use to attack sheep at night, in areas which WS Arabic is spoken now. Another example is the metaphor LOVE IS A NUTRIENT. This conceptual metaphor entails the metaphorical expression “I am starved for love.” in English and the metaphorical expression that is translated as “I am thirsty for love.” in WS Arabic

⁴ Some of these conceptual metaphors are adopted from Kovecses (2002) or Lakoff & Johnson (1980).

which only changes part of the meaning of the metaphor. The metaphor “starved for love” is not used in WS Arabic which is not as appropriate as “Thirsty for love” in a desert environment in which water is scarce and more precious than food, hence adds more to the value of love. The difference between metaphorical expressions in this comparison is in the source domain as opposed to the situation in the previous comparison. SADNESS IS LACK OF HEAT is another conceptual metaphor in English that does not have an exact match in WS Arabic. Lack of heat in WS Arabic is associated with lack of feelings. The following example for SADNESS IS LACK OF HEAT is from Kovecses (2002: 25), “Losing his father put his fire out; he’s been depressed for two years.”; on the other hand, “LACK OF HEAT” is used in WS Arabic in examples such as “inta matifrah lahom! inta mara barid” literally translated as “You don’t feel happy for them! You’re so cold.” ‘Happiness’ in such example can be replaced by any of the other feelings such as “sadness, love, etc.” and the metaphor would be valid. Lack of heat is viewed negatively in both points of view, since sadness and lack of feelings are negative attributes. In the case of English, lack of heat is mapped to lack of happiness, which is lack of a feeling, which can be noticed from Kovecses’s example above, while in WS Arabic lack of heat is mapped to lack of feelings including lack of happiness. In other words, in English, happiness is heat while in Arabic feelings are heat; a sort of similarity can be noticed when looking at it this way.

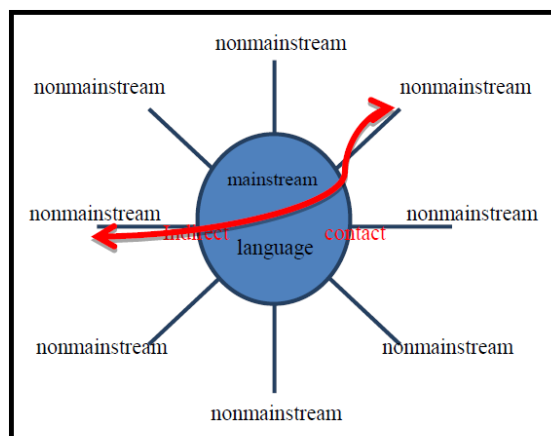
Some metaphor similarities between WS Arabic and English are exemplified in the following table:

TABLE (1)

conceptual metaphor	metaphorical expression	
	in English	in Arabic (followed by lit. translation)
ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER	She is boiling with anger.	xalla dammo jiqli He made his blood boiling.
ANGER IS INSANITY	The man was insane with rage.	elli qultu zannanni What you said made me insane.
THE CAUSE OF ANGER IS TRESPASSING	Here I draw the line.	La trisadda huddudak Do not cross your limits.
FEAR IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER	The sigh filled her with fear.	Alxof sabba almakan Fear filled the place.
HAPPINESS IS BEING OF THE GROUND	I was so happy my feet barely touched the ground.	f'ar min alfarha He flies of joy.
HAPPINESS IS HEALTH	It made me feel great.	atnafat min alfarha I got freshened up of happiness.
HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER	He was overflowing with joy.	Almawlwdah alzadidah sabbat saleihum hajatahom forhah The new born baby has filled their lives with happiness.
SADNESS IS A BURDEN	He staggered under the pain.	jail hamm addunia foq rasoh He is carrying all the burden of the world over his head.
LOVE IS A UNITY OF PARTS	We're as one.	Ana wa inti wahid You and I are one.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: WHY METAPHOR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES?

By looking at metaphors such as the ones in table (1), I notice that there are similarities and some differences in metaphors in WS Arabic and English. I presume that similarities could be due to similarities in human minds, borrowing, or chance, while differences could be due to pragmatic, morphosyntactic, and/or typological differences between WS Arabic and English. Interestingly, I found the process of coming up with similar conceptual metaphors relatively easy; however, when I was coming up with nonmatching conceptual metaphors it was much harder. From this I conclude that there are much more similar conceptual metaphors in WS Arabic and English than metaphors with no match in the other language; hence, similar to what was concluded or explicitly or implicitly in previous studies, the schematic metaphorical systems of WS Arabic and English are very similar, and that differences are based on cultural, environmental, and other factors. Moreover, similarities in metaphorical expressions can be due to borrowing from different languages by speakers of other different languages. Logically, this borrowing, which also needs to be based on factors such as the conceptual metaphor shaping factors, needs speakers of one language to get access to the language from which metaphors are borrowed. Probably that is why most of the metaphorical concepts and some metaphorical expressions in English, to which most speakers around the world have access, are shared with other languages. Therefore, there is a need to look into already done studies and do more studies that compare two languages that are nonmainstream to attempt to figure out if human mind innately comes up with conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions or that partial conversion of metaphorical systems of different languages is due to borrowing and language contact. Even if speakers of two nonmainstream languages are not in contact and do not have access to the other language, there is still the possibility that these languages are indirectly in contact with one another through one or more mainstream languages, and at such situation, metaphor transfer is possible to happen between these two languages once conceptual metaphor shaping factors are similar enough for speakers of these two languages, see diagram (2). A carefully designed study that would exclude all possibilities of contact is needed to arrive at better conclusions.



This paper starts by introducing some ideas about metaphors. Then it refers to some previous studies that deal with metaphors and cultures. After that it discusses some similarities and differences between WS Arabic and English metaphors.

I conclude that metaphor similarities are more likely to be the case than metaphor differences cross-culturally. Decision about such metaphor similarities or differences is driven by looking into some factors such as extent of different cultures, geographic environments, speaker's values and personality, thinking modes, mental concepts, views of the world, feelings, and human relationships. Bearing in mind such factors while doing a cross-cultural study of metaphors, would result in better understanding of reasons for metaphorical systems convergence and divergence of languages at hand.

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