

The Difficulties of Students' Understanding on Figurative Language and Feasible Suggestions

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Abstract: Figurative language of creativity is common in our daily life. It is due to the ubiquity of it in written and spoken texts that a second language learner is likely to inevitably encounter all kinds of figurative expressions. Learners of English who come from different cultural background are likely to have great difficulties in understanding figurative language in texts. Based on American former president Trump's speech, this essay identifies the figurative language which could pose difficulties for a learner of English in the text, especially focused on learners from China and explains why learners may experience these difficulties. The essay suggests that using the context, literal meaning and corpus lines may be helpful for learners to aid comprehension and overcome metaphor difficulties.

Keywords: Figurative Language; Learners of English; Metaphor; Metonymy; Trump's Speech.

1. Introduction

It is suggested by Carter [1] that figurative language is one of the most common expressions of creativity in daily life. People will use a variety of figure of speech (i.e. metaphor, metonymy) in everyday life to express their emotions and communicate different experiences. In other words, figurative language almost pervades people's everyday dialogues. It is due to 'ubiquity of metaphor' that makes metaphor a part of applied linguistics. Also, cognitive linguists hold that metaphor is not merely an ornamentation of language, but a process about how human beings think and make sense of the world. Exploring how metaphor operates can be helpful for understanding how people understand this world and communicate with each other. Also, it is due to the frequent usage of figurative language in written and spoken texts that a second language learner is likely to inevitably encounter all kinds of figurative expressions. Learners of English come from different cultural background, which may lead to the discrepancies of figurative language. These discrepancies are likely to pose difficulties for learners of English.

Based on American president Trump's speech, this essay will identify the figurative language which could pose difficulties for a learner of English in the text, especially focused on learners from China. The essay will analyse metonymy and metaphor along with a particular L1 background and explain why learners may experience these difficulties. Then, the suggestions will be given for how to overcome these difficulties in a classroom context.

2. Theoretical Bases

2.1. Metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson [2], metaphor is not merely a type of rhetorical strategy. It is a cognitive tool of human beings about how people think and act. For example, the frequently used conceptual system: ARGUMENT IS WAR. We can find that some expressions 'his claims are indefensible' and 'I demolished his argument' are derived from the conceptual system ARGUMENT IS WAR.

It is suggested that metaphor can make the abstract more

concrete and tangible. In other words, by using metaphor, people can make communication understandable as the abstract and unfamiliar concepts in one domain can be converted into familiar ones in another domain. Built on the views of Kovecses [3], 'conceptual metaphor' is used to differentiate the traditional rhetorical strategy from metaphor in cognitive sense. Conceptual metaphor is defined as 'understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another of conceptual domain'. One frequently used example, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, is as follows.

'LOVE IS A JOURNEY
We are at a crossroads.
We cannot turn back now.
Where are we?'

(Kovecses, 2002:5)

From the example above, it can be seen that the familiar concepts of journey are used to refer to the abstract and intangible concept love. JOURNEY is the target domain from which we can use the metaphorical expressions to understand the conceptual domain LOVE.

In order to understand how the conceptual metaphor works, it is necessary to have a brief look though its working mechanism. In conceptual metaphor, the source domain can be used to strengthen the comprehension of the target domain. This comprehension process can be achieved through the organized mapping which is established between the two domains. In other words, every component in the source domain has the corresponding component of the target domain. For instance, the expression *We are at crossroads* literally refers to the journey, *we* standing for the travelers and *crossroads* indicating the necessity of making a choice. However, if the three components are applied to a context concerning love, it is natural to see *we* as the lovers, consider *crossroads* as the certain stage the lovers are experiencing.

2.2. Metonymy

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metonymy is defined as 'a cognitive process where one conceptual entity

(the vehicle) offers mental access to another conceptual entity (the target), both of which are in the same domain or idealized cognitive model (ICM)'. According to the definition, metonymy is reviewed not only a rhetorical strategy, but also a tool for helping language speakers to understand another concept from one concept. Moreover, both of the two concepts are in the same cognitive domain, which distinguish metonymy from metaphor as metaphor compare one thing to another one, both of which come from two different domains. For example, the sentence *I like Shakespeare* can illustrate how the cognitive mechanism of metonymy works. In this example, *Shakespeare* is the *producer* which stands for the works (*product*) of Shakespeare. In the example above, Shakespeare is considered as vehicle entity, whereas the works of Shakespeare is target entity.

We can focus on specific aspects of what we want to refer to by using metonymy. For instance, in *the part-for-the-whole* relation, metonymy allows us to use the parts to refer to the whole (i.e. count heads). *Head* is a part of one's body, referring to a person.

In this essay, the metonymy and metaphor which is going to be analyzed are conceptual metonymy and conceptual metaphor.

3. Analysis

I shall analyse the metaphor and metonymy occurring in the Trump's speech which are likely to be obstacles for language learners due to the varieties of reasons. I shall specifically focus on language learners from China.

3.1. Metonymy

Table 1. Metonymy

Code	Metonymy Identification
M1	Over the next 74 days, we are all going to work very hard together to win this state – just like we did in the primaries – and to win the White House for the American people.
M2	They are the same people who paid Bill and Hillary Clinton over \$150 million dollars for speeches since Bill left the Oval Office.
M3	When you are like the Clintons, getting \$69 million dollars in political contributions from Wall Street and Big Banks...
M4	Then, to further cover-up her crime, she deleted 33,000 emails to keep them out of the hands of authorities and the American public.

3.1.1. Analysis of Metonymy

For some words or usage which are likely to be metonymic in meaning, learners may find it difficult to identify them and understand what they are talking about. The establishing the meaning of a word in context can help learners identify metonymy. This essay will focus on several typical examples, all of which may be the obstacles to learners due to various reasons. The table 1 includes some possible metonymic expressions which may pose difficulties to the learners of English. Then, all of them will be analyzed on by one.

In M1, there are two words which can be viewed as metonymy: STATE, THE WHITE HOUSE. The meaning of STATE can be inferred from the context as people may naturally associate American voting/ election system with it. It is not difficult for those learners who are familiar to American election system. It can be seen that the 'state'(*place*) stands for the votes (*entity*) from the states. and the 'White House' is the official home of American president. Trump

uses it referring to American presidency, which shows a part-and-part relationship.

In M2, the 'Oval Office' literally means an oval-shaped office, actually referring to American president's private office in the White House or the American presidency itself. For those learners who are lack of culture-related knowledge, he or she may fail to understand the metonymy although Mandarin also has similar expression, using *place* to refer to *person/ position* (see 3.1.2).

'Wall Street' in M3, a street in New York, is reviewed as the financial centre of the United States. Here it can stand for American stock market.

In M4, the 'hands' are part of one's body, referring to the control or constraint.

The use of metonymy above can achieve some effects. For example, metonymy can be seen as a shortcut which can offer access to a broad knowledge framework by using a single word or phrase.

3.1.2. Cultural Comparison and Contrast

The metonymy here (M1, M2) is not so difficult for an English language learner from China to comprehend as similar expressions are ubiquitous in Mandarin. For example, people will use 'Zhong Nan Hai' (an imperial garden in Central Beijing) to stand for the State Council. Also, in ancient Chinese, 'Dong Gong' (Eastern Palace) is where a prince lives. People use it referring to the prince. Similarly, 'Zhong Gong' (central palace) is where an empress live. It can also be used for referring to an empress or the position. But the challenge for Chinese learners is that due to the lack of knowledge about American culture, they are likely to be confused about what 'state', 'the White House' and 'the Oval Office' refer to.

3.2. Metaphor

Table 2. Metaphor

Code	Metaphor Identification
P1	When Democratic policies fail, they are left with only this one tired argument. It's the last refuge of the discredited politician. They keep going back to this same well , but the well has run dry .
P2	The real divide in this election is not between left and right , but between everyday working people and a corrupt political establishment that works only for itself.
P3	But this week the curtain was lifted.
P4	The veil was pulled back on a vast criminal enterprise run out of the State Department by Hillary Clinton.
P5	But these examples are only the tip of the Clinton Corruption iceberg .
P6	Then, to further cover-up her crime, she deleted 33,000 emails to keep them out of the hands of authorities and the American public.

3.2.1. Analysis of Metaphor

For metaphor-hunting, the word's meaning should be established in context first. It is followed by determining if there is a different meaning in other contexts which tend to be more tangible, concrete, or related to body action. More importantly, the contextual meaning can be understood in comparison with the basic meaning.

In P1, the figurative phrase 'go back to the well' may pose difficulty for learners of English. If they want to make it clear what 'the well' is, learners need to 'establish the word's meaning in context' and analyses the comparison of contextual meaning with the basic meaning. Combing the

context, 'the well' can be interpreted as 'original source'. So, this figurative phrase may refer to 'return to a reliable source'.

In P2, 'the left and right' do not refer to a relation on the space, but instead stand for two different political views or two group of people who have the two political views. The source domain of the metaphor is space / direction, and the target domain is one's attitude. Similarly, STANDING IN THE MIDDLE can refer to remaining neutral.

In P3, the metaphor 'the curtain was lifted' literally refers to an action of lifting the curtain, and people can naturally associate it with the result of the action (something hidden in the dark may be exposed to the sunshine). So this metaphor can be interpreted as 'the news was made public or disclosed'. That is, Clinton's corruption has been made public. Similarly, in P4, the challenge for a learner may be the figurative phrase 'the veil was pulled back'. If a learner wants to comprehend the meaning of it, he / she will naturally think of the function of a veil. Actually, P4 has the similar meaning with P3. It can be interpreted as the disclosure of the crime.

In P5, Trump uses 'the tip of the iceberg' referring to several examples of Clinton's corruption, by which he is trying to emphasize the severity of Clinton's crime. This metaphor may be relatively easy for Chinese learners to understand as long as they can have the knowledge of the language.

In P6, 'crime' is an abstract concept which cannot be covered up, the action 'cover up' can merely be conducted on a concrete item. If a learner of English knows the meaning of the verb phrase 'cover up', he / she can comprehend the figurative language easily because there is no culture variation.

3.2.2. Cultural Comparison and Contrast

In P4, Trump uses 'the lifted curtain' to describe the exposure of Clinton's crime, which is difficult for Chinese learners to understand as the idiom 'zhi bao bu zhu huo' (paper cannot be wrapped by fire) is more frequently used in Mandarin by Chinese native speaker.

Although there are cross-linguistic variations between Chinese and English figurative language, similarities can be identified between the two different language. For example, in Mandarin, 'bing shan yi jiao' (a corner of the iceberg) is almost consistent with the meaning of 'a tip of the iceberg'. The verb 'yan gai' (cover up) usually co-existing with 'ni tu' (soil) can be metaphorically used with an objective, such as 'crime' / 'fact'. Besides these, 'the right wing and left wing' in Mandarin also stands for two political views.

4. Discussion

4.1. Reasons for Experiencing Difficulties

Cross-cultural Variation. Every language has its own figurative and metaphorical system, which may lead to the incompatibility with the figurative system of another language. For example, different languages have different expressions about 'making money'. Hungarians will 'look for money', and Russians 'work for money'. This discrepancy can cause misunderstanding for a second language learner from a different background, in that with misunderstanding, learners will consider what they comprehend as correct answers.

Non-understanding. There are two types of difficulties in metaphor comprehension: misunderstanding and non-understanding. Non-understanding occurs when learners

encounter some completely new figurative expressions which do not exist in their mother tongue. Non-understanding is usually caused by the lack of three types of knowledge: schematic, contextual, and systemic knowledge. Schematic knowledge mainly concerns background knowledge, contextual regarding knowledge of situation and what has already been said, systemic involving knowledge of language. In metaphor comprehension, contextual/schematic might be a bigger problem than systemic.

4.2. Suggestions for Overcoming Difficulties

4.2.1. Suggestion One: Using the Literal Meaning

If a learner of English wants to comprehend what a metaphorical expression means, it may be useful to use its literal meaning. Awareness should be raised in students that they can trace a word's literal meaning and ascertain which interpretations are the most appropriate when encountering challenging metaphor. For instance, in the metaphor WE ARE AT THE CROSSROADS IN THE RELATIONSHIP, the source domain JOURNEY is used to describe the target domain LOVE. When a learner of English cannot understand this mapping, transferring the literal meaning of it to the metaphorical meaning can help him / her have better metaphor comprehension. When one stands at the crossroad of a road, he had to make choice which way he wants to take. The literal meaning of it will help learner to reinforce the understanding, in that CROSSROADS is more concrete and perceivable.

4.2.2. Suggestion Two: Using the Context

This essay has discussed the main reasons that may lead to the metaphor difficulty. Some problems occur when a learner of English lack the knowledge of language as they cannot resort to the literal meaning any more. Using the context can help them aid comprehension at this moment. Learners can infer what the metaphor refers to from the context even though he / she has no idea about the literal meaning. It is found by psycholinguists that if an appropriate context is provided, people take no long to comprehend metaphors than to understand semantically comparable literal language. For instance, in the metaphor THE CURTAIN WAS LIFT, even though the literal meaning is obvious, learners still may be confused about what this metaphor refers to. Trump mentioned that Hillary was hiding, but all of her crimes has emerged. It can be inferred that LIFT CURTAIN is likely to have the similar meaning with the word revelation.

4.2.3. Suggestion Three: Using Corpus Lines

Learners can arrive at the appropriate meaning if corpus lines of the metaphor are used to aid comprehension. Metaphorical and metonymical expressions always include lexical items which come from their source domain. Therefore, it is reasonable to start from selecting a potential source domain. Success relies on the nature of the metonymic or metaphoric item. When some key features are involved learners may perform better. For instance, learners may find that the metaphorical phrase 'TO MUSHROOM' involves the growing speed of mushroom rather than the shape of it by using the corpus lines.

5. Conclusion

This essay has mainly identified metaphor and metonymy which could pose difficulties for learners of English in Trump's speech. At the beginning of this essay, the definition of metaphor and metonymy has been elaborated respectively.

Then, by analyzing some specific lexical units in Trump's speech, this essay has identified some challenging metaphor and metonymy for a learner of English in the text. This essay also explains some possible reasons for why a learner could experience these challenges. Non-understanding and misunderstanding are two main difficulties experienced by a learner of English. Lastly, this paper gives feasible suggestions for how a learner could best overcome these obstacles in a classroom context. Using the context, literal meaning and corpus lines may be helpful for learners to aid comprehension and overcome metaphor difficulties.

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