

Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphor We Live By* published in 1980 has made the study of metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics a new development and become a hot research topic. Metaphor is no longer limited to a simple rhetorical device used in literature, but a cognitive mode connected with our way of thinking and perceptual experience. Its essence is to use one thing to understand another thing and people use metaphors to understand and create connections between two different things. *The Great Gatsby*, written by Francis Scott Fitzgerald, is one of the greatest American works of the 20th century and is full of metaphors, which are the key to building the profound meaning of the book. It paints a panorama of the Jazz Age and the disillusionment of the American Dream. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this paper studies the metaphor of classic sentences in this book, hoping to help readers better understand this book. At the same time, the interpretation of conceptual metaphor theory based on text is helpful for us to grasp the daily application of metaphor effectively.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; Cognitive Linguistics; *Metaphor We Live By*; *The Great Gatsby*.

1. Introduction

Traditional studies generally regard metaphor as a rhetorical phenomenon, but since the 1970s, scholars have gradually realized the connection between metaphor and language cognition, and began to emphasize the nature of thinking and cognitive function of metaphor. Therefore, scholars begin to study metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics was born in the context of the second generation of cognitive language and the philosophy of experience, and is committed to opposing the mainstream linguistic conversion generative grammar. Scientific cognitive linguistics includes many subjects, including psychology and cognitive science. We believe that every language was invented, used and spread through human cognition. In essence, cognitive linguistics is a research paradigm, not a one-sided theory of language, but a collective name of different cognitive language theories.

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson co-authored *Metaphors we live by*, the book in which they presented the theory of conceptual metaphor and the systematic exposition of the cognitive function of metaphor. This book has influenced the study of metaphor in cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguists no longer regard metaphor as a rhetorical method, but study the cognitive mechanism of metaphor from the perspective of human cognition.

Metaphor is used in many classic literary works; many scholars combine classical literature works when studying metaphor in cognitive linguistics. For example, Xie Shijian and Lang Rujuan [1] studied the body metaphor in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. [1]. Liu Yan [3] analyzed the conceptual metaphor in *the Bluest Eye* by black female writer Morrison. Conceptual metaphors run through *The Bluest Eye* itself. The novel uses conceptual metaphor to deconstruct white values, reconstructs the historical and cultural values of blacks, and shows the discrimination and unequal treatment suffered by blacks in the past and now.

Therefore, we also use metaphorical theory in cognitive linguistics to analyze literary works. The work we chose is *The Great Gatsby* [4]. *The Great Gatsby* is written by the American writer Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. The book is set in New York City and Long Island in the 1920s. In the 1920s,

the air is filled with the atmosphere of singing, drinking and money. Gatsby's life ended in tragedy, and Gatsby's tragic life was like fireworks, leaving only a flash of bright and eternal disillusionment. Gatsby's life symbolizes the elegy of the Jazz Age. *The Great Gatsby* has left a profound mark in the history of American contemporary literature.

The metaphors can be seen everywhere in *The Great Gatsby*. The use of metaphor in this classic work adds depth to the text, which fascinates many readers. The key to understanding the deep meaning of this book is to understand the large number of metaphors used in the text. For a long time, scholars have used literary theories to analyze this book, such as New Historicism theories to discuss the disillusion of the "American Dream" or the literary rhetorical function of metaphor in the book. Few people have used conceptual metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics to analyze this book. Therefore, we applied the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson to study the metaphors of some popular classic sentences in this book. At the same time, this study is helpful for us to dig out the deep meaning of the book, and research the literary nature of the book. Furthermore, combined with the study of the text can make the conceptual metaphor theory easier to be understood and mastered by people.

2. The Development of Metaphor

Previous studies have regarded metaphor as a rhetorical phenomenon and ignored its essence of thinking and cognitive function. The publication of *Metaphors we live by* in 1980 ushered in a new era in the study of metaphor cognition. The book analyzes the nature, structure and types of metaphor from a cognitive perspective. Lakoff and Johnson [6] wrote, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." Take Shakespeare's famous analogy that "All the world is a stage". We can find that metaphor is a metaphorical mapping from the source domain to the target domain. Lakoff finds that there are four forms of mapping: First, compound schema mapping: For example, in the conceptual metaphor "argument is war", the compound schema of one experience domain "war" is mapped to the corresponding schema of

another experience domain “argument”. Each mapping involves multiple entities in two domains and the relationships between the entities. In short, complex schema mapping is to map knowledge about the originating domain to the target domain [7]. Second, image schema mapping: Image schemas are those topological and directional structures that are kinesthetic in nature and have enough internal structure to accommodate inference. For example, the schema mentioned above. Most conventional metaphors are mappings of image schemas. Third, one-shot rich-image mapping. Fourth, Aristotelian metaphor mapping: This is the most frequently cited metaphor in classical metaphor literature (as opposed to cognitive theory). In addition, take “LIFE IS A JOURNEY” for example. The target domain LIFE and the source domain JOURNEY represent the mapping relationship of the system. The beginning of the journey corresponds to the starting point of life, the scenery and experiences along the journey correspond to various encounters in life, and the end of the journey corresponds to the end of life. It can be seen that metaphor is essentially a cognitive mechanism based on human experience in the process of human interaction with natural and social environment. In addition, the metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature [6]. For example, when we describe emotions as “I’m feeling high,” we often associate emotions with location, which suggests that our thoughts and actions are metaphorical in nature, based on our physical experience. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concept’s structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system is largely metaphorical [6]. Their theory has changed the way the public understands the world in relation to their own experience. In general, it can be seen that metaphor is essentially a cognitive mechanism based on human experience in the process of human interaction with natural and social environment.

The current trend of metaphor research is that cognitive linguistics interprets the nature of metaphor differently. After more than 20 years of development, the research content of conceptual metaphor theory has been greatly enriched and its contribution to the development of cognitive linguistics is self-evident. We can use conceptual metaphor theory to explain the generation of new meaning of words, some syntactic rules, intonation and so on. Since the 1980s, the study of conceptual metaphor theory has become a hot topic in cognitive linguistics. Since 1990s, the number of related papers in China has increased rapidly. At present, more and more scholars pay attention to conceptual metaphor theory in China, which has great research potential. Conceptual metaphor belongs to one of the important theoretical categories in the study of discourse in linguistics. From the perspective of structuralism, conceptual metaphor also includes surface and deep structures. Hu Tiesheng [8] said, “Discourse is the most external manifestation of theoretical structure. Although discourse is not the main part, the main part can be analyzed through the study of discourse.” In this sense, conceptual metaphor theory has been shown more frequently in the creation of literary works, thus attracting high attention in the field of literary language research. Therefore, based on the theory of *Metaphors we live by*,

written by Lakoff and Johnson, this paper analyzes the conceptual metaphors used in *The Great Gatsby*.

3. Three Types of Conceptual Metaphor

In *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff and Johnson divide conceptual metaphor into three types: ontology metaphor, orientation metaphor and structure metaphor.

3.1. Ontology Metaphor

When we describe abstract ideas and concepts, we need to think of them as physical entities. By putting concepts in physical form, we can describe them by borrowing meaning from the physical world as Lakoff and Johnson [6] put it in the book, “Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them and, by this means, reason about them”. For example, “my mind isn’t operating”, “I’m a little rusty”, “He broke down”, etc. These depictions of the human mind compare the mind to a machine in the physical world. In this way, abstract thoughts can be expressed by us in words. In general, ontological metaphor is based on direct perception experience, experience is an important concept in cognitive linguistics. Since Lakoff and Johnson [6] argue that the conceptual system of the human brain is metaphorical in nature, then, in other words, the empirical basis of metaphor is the cognitive basis of human beings. In this way, ontology metaphor associates abstract things with visible things in reality and allowing abstract concepts to be expressed.

3.1.1. Container Metaphor

Container metaphor is also mentioned in the *Metaphors We Live By*, which is also a kind of ontological metaphor. The empirical basis of metaphor is the cognitive basis of human beings. This cognitive basis is the kinesthetic image schema. An important basis for Lakoff and Johnson’s experiential philosophy is also kinesthetic imagery. There are many kinds of kinesthetic image schemas, all of which are based on physical experience. These image schemas include container schema, part-whole schema, associative schema, center-edge schema, origin-path-goal schema, up-down schema, front-back schema, linear sequence schema, pressure schema, etc.[9]. For example, category is understood in container schema, rank is understood in up-down schema, relation is understood in associative schema, and causative is understood in pressure schema. Take the container schema, for example. The empirical basis of the container schema is that we view our body as a container and inside other containers. Lakoff and Johnson [6] argue that we are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus, we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside. It is also connected to our immediate sensory experience. For example, He is in love. By adding “in” to “Love”, we are comparing “love” as a container.

3.2. Orientation Metaphor

Most of these metaphors are related to spatial orientation, such as up and down, high and low, center and periphery. For example, “I’m feeling high”, “His mood sank”, etc. What these metaphors have in common is that they associate

location with emotion, morality and thought. Lakoff and Johnson [6] propose in the book “Since there are systematic correlates between our emotions (like happiness) and our sensory-motor experiences (like erect posture), these form the basis of orientational metaphorical concepts (such as happy is up). Such metaphors allow us to conceptualize our emotions in more sharply define terms and also to relate them to other concepts having to do with general wellbeing (e.g., health, life, control, etc.)”. In a nutshell, the locational metaphor, like the ontological metaphor, derives from our most immediate perceptual experience.

3.3. Structural Metaphor

Structural metaphor is richer than metaphorical metaphor and ontological metaphor, and structural metaphor is transferred from one conceptual system to another. These two concepts have different cognitive domains, but their component structures in their respective fields correspond to each other and are basically the same. For example, in the structural metaphor of “Argument is war”, a whole set of structural concepts of “war” are borrowed to understand “argument”. “War” implies these things: “attack”, “defense”, “counterattack”, “winners” and “losers”, “tactics”, etc. When we describe “argument”, we say, “Your claims are indefensible”, “His criticism was on target”, “She shot down and destroyed my arguments”, “He attacked the argument”, etc. The structure of metaphor determines the thought itself and influences how we think. Structural metaphor is to construct another concept from the structure of one concept, and its mapping belongs to partial mapping. Therefore, it is inevitable that when we understand the target domain through the source domain, one aspect is ignored and another aspect is highlighted. In other words, a structural metaphor can construct a set of discourse system or even a way of thinking, which is difficult to get out of once we fall into. For example, “trade as a war”. It shows that we emphasize competition and confrontation in trade and neglect win-win cooperation and other aspects of trade.

4. A Case Study of Conceptual Metaphors in Classic Sentences of *The Great Gatsby*

Metaphor is used everywhere in *The Great Gatsby*. Therefore, in order to make the study typical, this paper selects some classic sentences in *The Great Gatsby* for analysis.

(1) Ontology Metaphor

“He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.” [4]. “it” is preceded by “into” and followed by “out”. The “it” here is conceptualized into a container, which belongs to the container metaphor and ontology metaphor category. In this sentence, the container metaphor can better express Gatsby’s devotion and persistence in pursuing his dream and achieving his goal.

“Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on.” [4]

Here, “conduct” is metaphorically described as a building entity that can be built on rocks and mud. Abstract human behavior can be conceptualized as a building entity so that

people can describe it. This metaphor belongs to ontology metaphor. This sentence vividly depicts that different people have different conduct, and different behaviors arise from different social backgrounds and experiences.

(2) Orientation metaphor

“I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice.” [4]

Here, the azimuth concept of “low” is projected onto the sound concept of “low”. The cognitive and physical experience of this metaphor is: here the vocal organ is treated as a vessel and the sound as a substance. If you add a substance to a container, the more you add, the higher the position of the substance and the louder the sound. On the other hand, the lower the position of the matter, the lower the sound. This sentence vividly describes Daisy’s soft voice with an orientational metaphor, showing her gentle and elegant behavior.

“So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” [4]

In this sentence, “back” which means location, is linked to “past” which means the passage of time is a metaphor for the “back” in the concept of location. Time is understood with the help of the azimuth metaphor. Time is like a line, with before and after, past and future. In this way, the abstract concept of time can be described. This sentence vividly shows that our life experience is like a boat sailing against the current, constantly retracing our past experiences and memories.

(3) Structural metaphor

“And so, with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.” [4]

Here, “Life” is metaphorically translated into “leaves”. In the book, the author uses the lush growth of leaves as a symbol of life coming back to life. With the change of seasons, trees go through the process of growth to decay. Life is like leaves. Lush green leaves like youth in life, and withered and yellow leaves like old age, life is coming to an end. The metaphor of life as leaves borrows from the conceptual system of describing leaves. Therefore, this sentence is a structural metaphor. This sentence compares life to a luxuriant leaf, and vividly shows that Gatsby thinks he is rejuvenated and full of expectations for life again.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the heroine Daisy's name “Daisy” is a structural metaphor. “Daisy” comes from the Old English meaning “little Daisy”. It is a very small flower with white petals surrounding a golden flower heart, which has strong metaphorical significance here. “Little Daisy” means “love hidden in the heart.” Daisy was Gatsby’s dream lover who had been hidden in his heart for a long time. But Gatsby’s tragic life is largely due to the fact that he has been living in his beautiful fantasy. Little daisies have white petals and yellow hearts. Here the author uses the color metaphor. The long process of human society and history has endowed these basic colors with rich cultural connotations and gradually formed specific metaphorical meanings. In Western color culture, white symbolizes purity, nobility and gentleness. In the novel, Daisy often wears white, which echoes the white petals of the little Daisy. It was white that made Daisy look pure and elegant and deeply attracted Gatsby. But, the yellow petals of the little Daisy are a metaphor for betrayal and deception. In Christian culture, yellow represents jealousy and betrayal. For example, in Da Vinci's famous painting *The Last Supper*, Judas, who betrays Jesus, is dressed in yellow robes. Daisy

cheated on Gatsby twice. The first time she married Buchanan, a wealthy man. The second time was to frame Gatsby for the accident, which eventually killed Gatsby. In addition, “her voice is full of money,” “High in a white palace the king's daughter the golden girl.” The “golden girl” here is the essence of Daisy. Therefore, we believe that the Daisy is a structural metaphor of the heroine’s name “Daisy”. It looks pure, gentle and innocent, but she is a material girl, and even betray others for this. The author’s application of structural metaphor and color metaphor profoundly portrays the character of the heroine and reveals the money-worship nature of the American dream and foreshadows the disillusionment of the American Dream.

5. Summary

The purpose of cognitive linguistics is to reveal language competence and the relationship between knowledge ability, especially the influence of cognition on language structure and language use. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the analysis of metaphorical phenomena in literary works can help us understand the significance of constructing cognition for literature. Cognitive linguistics provides a new perspective for the study of metaphor and makes people have a deeper understanding of metaphor and the mechanism of self-cognition. Based on the cognitive perspective, the author analyzes the metaphors of classic sentences in *The Great Gatsby* and finds that three kinds of metaphors in conceptual metaphors are used in these sentences, and different metaphors play different roles in the text. The use of these metaphors makes this great work full of profound meaning, which requires in-depth literary research and the help of linguistic knowledge to comprehend the profound philosophy of life and social value behind the work. For example, Fitzgerald uses structural metaphor to reveal the luxurious and extravagant nature of the American dream in the “Jazz Age” by telling the final disillusionment of Gatsby’s dream

and his life ended in tragedy. In sum, the conceptual metaphor theory of *Metaphors we live by* written by Lakoff and Johnson suggests that abstract things can be conceptualized through the level of our perceived experience and cognition, so that we can describe the abstract thing verbally. It can be said that there is no concept without metaphor, and metaphor expands our conceptual scope, furthermore, there is no language without metaphor, metaphor makes our language expression richer.

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