



# The Conceptual Metaphor and Its Application Value to Foreign Language Teaching

Xue Hu

College of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China

Email: hx1789280747@163.com

**How to cite this paper:** Hu, X. (2024) The Conceptual Metaphor and Its Application Value to Foreign Language Teaching. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e11451. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111451>

**Received:** March 17, 2024

**Accepted:** June 22, 2024

**Published:** June 25, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

According to the Conceptual Metaphor, metaphor is not primarily a linguistic ornament but also a basic cognitive process that is pervasive in both thought and perception. As a powerful tool for language learning, it has much application value to foreign language teaching. Specifically speaking, metaphor has a lot of positive effects on vocabulary teaching and thinking ability teaching.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor, Vocabulary, Thinking, Foreign Language Teaching

---

## 1. Introduction

Metaphor is a ubiquitous feature of natural language. It has been studied and theorized for over two millennia. The study can be divided into two stages: the traditional metaphor stage and the conceptual metaphor stage. Briefly speaking, most traditional theories have treated metaphor chiefly as a linguistic expression used for rhetorical or artistic purposes. Cognitive linguists have shown that metaphor is central to language and thinking [1]. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors in language (linguistic metaphors) and metaphors in mind (conceptual metaphors) are closely related to each other: the former having foundations in and expressing the latter [1]. Lakoff and Johnson first introduce conceptual metaphor in their book *Metaphors We Live by* and give its definition “The essence of conceptual metaphor is understanding and experiencing

one kind of thing in terms of another [2]”. That is, metaphor is taken as one of the basic cognitive instruments that structures our way to understand abstract concepts. So this paper focuses on the conceptual metaphor and from the perspective of cognitive linguistics to talk about its powerful function of expanding the capacity of vocabulary and developing the thinking ability.

According to the research on conceptual metaphor theory at home and abroad, it is found that scholars have gradually begun to regard metaphor as the connection between “thinking” and “language” to understand complicated languages from the cognitive perspective by using conceptual metaphor. They also realize that conceptual metaphor theory can be applied to practical language teaching.

Lazar was the first to advocate the use of metaphors to expand learners’ vocabulary. In his view, developing language learners’ ability to understand metaphorical vocabulary and to use and create metaphorical vocabulary helps learners to expand and accumulate words. And Kovecses and Szabo were the first to experimentally prove that training second language learners the conceptual metaphor awareness to learn idioms is 25% more effective than students who learn idioms using traditional methods. Verspoor claimed that metaphor and image schema can stimulate learners’ “meaning learning” and cultivate learners’ language consciousness in the process of vocabulary teaching. Cognitive linguists believe that the development of a word’s extended meaning is based on human metaphorical thinking. The meanings are not chaotic and unfounded but are inextricably linked, which is also because this has become a powerful basis for applying conceptual metaphor theory to language teaching, especially polysemy teaching. Among them, Berendi *et al.* proved through three experiments that cultivating and improving language learners’ awareness of conceptual metaphors is helpful for them to understand and remember polysemous words.

On the basis of the study of Western scholars, Chinese scholars also applied a series of conceptual metaphors in English vocabulary teaching on the basis of our basic education courses in order to meet the requirements of curriculum reform and the changes in curriculum standards. The research mainly includes the following two aspects: On the one hand, some scholars have studied English courses in basic education in China from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory and current curriculum standards. On the other hand, some scholars implemented teaching experiments and employed a variety of experimental tools including tests, questionnaires, interviews, etc. to explore multiple methods of vocabulary mastery based on the conceptual metaphor.

To sum up, scholars at home and abroad all proved that conceptual metaphor had much value to foreign language teaching, which has a positive influence not only on vocabulary teaching but also on recognition, thinking, application, reasoning and other thinking levels. Therefore, this paper focuses on the analysis of its application value to foreign language teaching in vocabulary and the ability of deep thinking so as to give new insights into foreign language teaching.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

### 2.1. Definition of Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson put forward in their work *Metaphors We Live By* “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in our thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. [2]” This is known as the conceptual metaphor theory. To put it simply, in the cognitive linguistics, metaphor is no longer taken as a rhetorical device. Instead, it is regarded as the basic means that people use to think, to understand and to act. In virtue of conceptual metaphor, people tend to use a familiar or existed concept to understand the abstract concept.

### 2.2. Classification of Conceptual Metaphor

Conceptual metaphors are classified into structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson with regard to the different cognitive functions [2].

Firstly, according to Lakoff and Johnson, a structural metaphor is “Cases where one concept is structured in terms of another”. In other words, metaphor can be seen as the overlapping of two concepts in which the cognitive structure of the existing concept is used to understand the structure of the abstract one.

While metaphor is a structural mapping from one conceptual domain to another, its cognitive foothold is image schema. Initially, image schema theory is proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in the conceptual metaphor. In daily life, the body is in contact with the objective world through actions and image schema is produced in our own environment. In the process of interaction with the world, we use image schema to understand the activities of the objective world, the significance of architectural activities by reasoning and making connections.

The typical example of the structural metaphor is ARGUMENT IS WAR. And expressions concerning to ABSTRACT are structured by the concept of WAR. For example,

- 1) Jason attacked every weak point in my argument.
- 2) She has never won an argument with him.

Secondly, orientational metaphor organizes a system of concepts with respect to one another, and most of these metaphors have to deal with spatial orientations [2]. People have spatial concepts like UP-DOWN, IN-OUT and CENTRAL-PERIPHERAL. These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment [2]. Therefore, people have concepts like SADNESS IS DOWN and HAPPINESS IS UP. For example,

- 3) Mary is a little bit down today.
- 4) I was feeling up when she told me I won the first prize.

Thirdly, ontological metaphor refers to people having the ability to comprehend abstract concepts like emotions and thoughts with the help of tangible ent-

ities. People usually understand abstract concepts according to physical objects or substances on the basis of their own experience and interaction with the physical world. In other words, ontological metaphor is conducive for people to understand these intangible abstract concepts like emotions, thoughts and state-of-beings based on the concrete physical entities that they are familiar with. The typical example of this kind of metaphor is container metaphor, that is, take the intangible and abstract event, behavior or state of being as the concrete and tangible container. Therefore, people use expressions like “Don’t load your life with too many things.” People metaphorically conceptualize the “life” as entities that can be loaded.

### 2.3. Working Mechanism of Conceptual Metaphor

Metaphor is omnipresent in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. The ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, in terms of which human beings both think and act [2]. In order to figure out the conceptual metaphor, learners must grasp the working mechanism of the conceptual metaphor.

The target concept, the source concept and the mapping scope are three elements of conceptual metaphor [2]. The target concept refers to the abstract concept and the source concept refers to the existing concept. To integrate the third element of the traditional system (the ground or base of comparison) into the cognitive view, we extend the descriptive apparatus by introducing the notion of mapping scope. The mapping scopes of metaphors reflect our conceptual experiences in dealing with the world around us. More specifically, we can distinguish three major components of mapping scopes:

Firstly, image schemas, which are firmly grounded in our bodily experiences. They include orientational schemas like “in-out”, “inside-outside”, “front-back” as well as the “part-whole” and the “path” schema. Secondly, basic correlations, which we do not experience bodily like image schemas, but which guide us to understand the events and actions in the world around us. Thirdly, culture-dependent evaluations, which are restricted to the members of a specific culture. In the Western culture, they include evaluative attributes like “rich”, “stupid” or “beautiful” (attributed to persons); “strong”, “aggressive” or “dirty” (for animals), and “valuable”, “durable” or “useful” (for objects).

Lakoff and Johnson defined the working mechanism of conceptual metaphor as metaphorical mappings that have the function of systematic correspondences from the source domain to the target domain [2]. Mappings are shaped and constrained by our bodily experiences in the world, experiences in which the two conceptual domains are correlated and consequently establish mappings from one domain to another.

Mappings are described as a predetermined set of corresponding points between the source domain and the target domain for understanding one domain in terms of another. Mapping can be thought of as a road map, which forms the

basic understanding of how one travels from the starting point (source domain) to the destination point (target domain). Each of the points along the road in the process of reaching the destination would establish meanings to the journey until the destination is reached, e.g., Lakoff and Johnson listed LOVE IS JOURNEY in an effort to illustrate how mapping works. The correspondence between the source domain and the target domain is presented as follows:

- 1) “The vehicle” corresponds to “the love relationship”
- 2) “The destination” corresponds to “common goals”
- 3) “Travelers” corresponds to “lovers”
- 4) “The obstacles” corresponds to “difficulties”

As to the sentence LOVE IS JOURNEY, “the vehicle”, “the destination”, “travelers”, and “obstacles” can be grouped into the source domain JOURNEY, whereas “the love relationship”, “common goals”, “lovers”, and “difficulties” are grouped into the target domain LOVE. Since the systematic similarities and correlation between these two concepts can be experienced by human beings, LOVE IS JOURNEY can form a metaphorical mapping.

Metaphor consists of the projection of structure from one domain to another of a different kind. A basic type of this metaphorical projection is to metaphorically elaborate and extend a basic schema from the physical domain to the non-physical one. So structurally speaking, metaphor projects the framework of the source domain to the target domain [3]. In addition, the definite internal structure of image schema provides the basis for a large number of metaphorical mappings. The mapping from the source domain to the target domain follows what Lakoff mentions that the invariance principle for metaphorical mapping preserves the image-schema structure of the source domain in the way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain [2], *i.e.*, people’s knowledge of a particular source domain should predict their understanding of a dissimilar target domain that is partially structured by that source domain. There is some preservation of image-schematic structure.

### **3. Conceptual Metaphor’s Application Value to Foreign Language Teaching**

According to cognitive linguistics, metaphor is taken as one of the instruments that structure human being’s thinking and action. Actually, it has much application value to foreign language teaching. This paper mainly explains two kinds: vocabulary teaching and thinking ability teaching.

#### **3.1. Value in Vocabulary Teaching**

It is extremely essential for foreign language learners to master and apply vocabulary, however, it is a big problem for most language learners in their learning process. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods such as the affixing method, example sentence method, repeated memory method, method of combining sound and shape meaning, etc., have some positive effects on the memory of

words, whereas, they cannot penetrate into the vocabulary, as a result of which learners feel words and meaning are completely two-dimensional, arbitrary and isolated [4]. It is not really helpful for the students to fully understand the words and to develop the ability to use them in a proper way in the long term. Therefore, most students only can rote learning, rather than learn vocabulary from a cognitive perspective. As a result, massive words become a heavy burden for students to learn a foreign language and gradually, students lose enthusiasm for foreign language learning.

It is found that there are also some researches which reveal that metaphors can help with general vocabulary retention. Boers recognized that grouping new vocabulary around the conceptual metaphors from which it had been derived would also help students improve their understanding and uptake of the words. [5]. Moreover, it is valuable for students to enlarge the capacity of vocabulary, especially the polysemy.

For instance, the fundamental meaning of the word “head” is one part of our body, moreover, it is also the top of our body, so it also means the top of something. Our head includes the brain which restores many neurons that control our body to act and think, is the most important biological organ. So it means something of the most important function as well. “Head” also can be used as a prefix, such as “headquarter” which means the top of the quarter and of the important function of an organization.

Therefore, it is very crucial for teachers to consciously guide their students to establish the relationship between metaphor and foreign language learning, teach them the metaphoric knowledge in their target language and take feasible steps to cultivate students’ hidden metaphoric awareness and metaphoric competence. Under the circumstances, students would be more capable of using techniques of metaphor in their vocabulary acquisition. Improving metaphoric competence is a gradual process of accumulation, which can be developed through conscious instruction and practice.

### **3.2. Value in Thinking Ability Teaching**

As we all know, learning a foreign language is not an easy task. People mostly spend much time learning a foreign language, because it is different from the language we talk with in daily life and hidden beneath language is a diverse way of thinking. Our native language can be seen as the source domain, which people are extremely familiar with. The foreign language is the target domain, which people are unknown and want to learn about. There are certain relationships between the two languages, however, it is not clear. Besides, there is a certain distance between the mother language and the foreign language. That is to say, metaphoric competence which refers to skills needed to work effectively with metaphor [6] can inspire different thinking ways and be seen as the bridge to connect two languages, so as to fill the gap and reduce learning load. Successful metaphor comprehension and production involves the ability to understand one

entity in terms of another (apparently unrelated) entity [7]. To some extent, cultivating and developing metaphoric competence is a powerful cognitive tool and it is cognitively economical for students to learn foreign language.

Due to the mechanism of metaphor, developing metaphoric competence requires the discovery of similarities between two different things, the combination of the knowledge or experience in two different cognitive domains and the gradual transition from expanding scopes of words usage to the creative use of metaphor. Thus, on the basis of a large amount of knowledge as the source of mapping between source domain and target domain, learners also need the ability of imagination and creativity. The process of understanding and creation will largely exercise students' ability of deep thinking, such as imagination and creativity.

In addition, because metaphor which comes from the interactive experience with the outside world is a conceptual tool, metaphoric competence is an underlying structure of conceptual fluency. The metaphorical awareness provides learners with more alternatives that learners are activated to make their expressions more colorful and appropriate according to the context.

Since one of the main features of metaphor is its semantic conflict, learners cannot rely on the traditional logic to interpret the meaning of words, as a result, they turn to depend on their imagination, association, guessing and some other means to interpret the meaning. In this way, linear thought turns into multidimensional thought, which consequently promotes the deep processing of cognition [8].

#### **4. Conclusion**

In cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor is taken as one of the basic cognitive instruments that structure our way to understand abstract concepts. It connects "thinking" and "language" to understand the complicated language. The mechanism of metaphor follows the mapping from the source domain to the target domain and the metaphorical mapping preserves the image-schema structure of the source domain in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain. On the basis of the mechanism, scholars at home and abroad realized that conceptual metaphor theory has much value in foreign language teaching, which can be applied to practical language teaching, especially to vocabulary and the ability to think. However, this paper solely concentrates on the discussion of the value of conceptual metaphor to foreign language teaching, more practical and detailed measures need to continue to be explored.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### **References**

- [1] Rewiś-Łętkowska, A. (2019) The Linguistic, Conceptual and Communicative Di-

- 
- mension of Metaphor: A Corpus Study of Conversational Polish. *Journal of Pragmatics*, **153**, 80-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.03.005>
- [2] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Zhao, J.K. (2022) Metaphor, Metonymy and the Extension of the Meanings of Polysemous Words. *Studies in Literature and Language*, **24**, 19-27.
- [4] Miao, Z. (2023) Metaphor in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching and Its Implications. *English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies*, **5**, p 85. <https://doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v5n2p85>
- [5] Boers, F. (2000) Metaphor Awareness and Vocabulary Retention. *Applied Linguistics*, **21**, 553-571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/21.4.553>
- [6] LOW, G.D. (1988) On Teaching Metaphor. *Applied Linguistics*, **9**, 125-147. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/9.2.125>
- [7] Littlemore, J. and Low, G. (2006) Metaphoric Competence, Second Language Learning, and Communicative Language Ability. *Applied Linguistics*, **27**, 268-294. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/aml004>
- [8] Guan, Y.F. (2014) Metaphor: An Effective Facilitator to English Vocabulary Learning. *Proceedings of 2014 International Conference on Humanity and Social Science*, Guangzhou, 26-27 December 2014, 121-125.