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An Exploration of the Abstract Cognitive Function of Metaphors and Semantic Shifts

Shu Hongcheng
School of Culture and Education, Tianfu College of SWUFE, Deyang, Sichuan , China
***Corresponding author, E-mail:2205894590@qq.com**

Abstract
Metaphor, a rhetorical device that has been widely used since ancient times, is not merely confined to the realm of rhetoric. It is a key mechanism for human beings to explore and understand abstract concepts and to drive the continuous evolution of word meanings. This article delves into the profound significance of metaphor and its crucial role in the process of human abstract cognition, aiming at analyzing its significant driving force in the process of semantic shifts. Firstly, the article traces the origin and development of metaphor-related concepts. From ancient literary works to modern psychological thinking, metaphor has always accompanied the progress of human civilization, gradually evolving from a simple rhetorical device into an important tool for understanding the world and expressing thoughts. Then, the article explores the significance of metaphor in the human cognitive process. Metaphor can help people understand and express abstract concepts that are difficult to describe directly, such as emotions, time and space. By clever use of metaphors, people can concretize these abstract concepts, thereby better grasping the essence of the world. Furthermore, the article elaborates on semantic shifts through examples of the abstract cognitive function of metaphors. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a cognitive process. It enables humans to understand and explain the unknown and abstract concepts through the known and concrete ones, thereby promoting the continuous evolution and enrichment of word meanings. Finally, the article argues that metaphor embodies the economy of language, expressing complex and abstract ideas in a concise and clear way, which conforms to the inherent laws of human cognition of the world. Metaphor serves as a bridge connecting the concrete and the abstract, the past and the future, enabling people to better understand and cope with this ever-changing world.

Keywords
Metaphor, Abstract cognitive function, Semantic shifts

1 Introduction

Stepping into the 21st century, humanity is confronted with a series of emerging terms, concepts and internet buzzwords such as economic globalization, information explosion, the global village phenomenon, digital economy and artificial intelligence. All these demonstrate the powerful function of metaphor in abstract cognition towards people's life. From Aristotle's reference theory in ancient Greek philosophy to the cognitive theory of contemporary linguistics, many outstanding philosophers and linguists have perceived the universal

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connections among the things in the world, which are largely achieved by generalizing and abstracting the similarities among cognitive objects. Imagine if humans had to create a unique word for every cognitive object or concept, the vocabulary used for thoughts expression and communication would grow exponentially.

Fortunately, metaphor expands the original meanings of existing words and extends their connotations with its outstanding abstract cognitive function, enriching the semantics while avoiding excessive expansion of the vocabulary. It is an approach of simplifying the complexity and extending from the known to the unknown, which is an embodiment of the economy and simplicity of language, and it conforms to the inherent laws of human beings' understanding of the world while exploring the unknown.

To deeply understand the evolution laws of word meaning, it is necessary to define the concept of metaphor and explore its abstract cognitive functions. Case study as the research method is adopted to meticulously trace and explain the semantic shifts of words. The significance lies in assisting readers grasping the deep-seated reasons for polysemy and semantic shifts in words, and thereby recognizing the value of metaphor in human exploration of the unknown world.

2 Review and Definition of Metaphor

This chapter aims to help readers gain a deeper understanding of metaphor by reviewing and tracing the research of renowned scholars on metaphor theory. In human history, metaphor theory has undergone a long development from ancient Greek Aristotle (384-322 BC) to contemporary cognitive linguists, and scholars have continuously deepened their understanding of metaphor. Aristotle[1]35 believed that metaphor is a manifestation of discovering similarities in things, while contemporary cognitive linguistics emphasizes the cognitive function of metaphor.

In the long history of over two thousand years, the development of metaphor theory has yielded fruitful results. Aristotle, Quintilian, Kotai, and others proposed the referential, substitutive, and transitive theories of metaphor, respectively. Matthew, Halliday, Chomsky, and others proposed the theory of metaphorical variation. Kennedy and others elaborated on the classification theory. Richards and Braque proposed the viewpoint of the interaction between metaphors. Searle and others developed the theory of linguistic philosophy, analyzing metaphors from a pragmatic perspective. Cohen et al. analyzed the function of metaphor from a semantic perspective while contemporary linguistics tends to interpret metaphors from the perspective of human cognition[2]1-25.

Aristotle's[1]35 viewpoint is that metaphor is a manifestation of genius's exploration of the correlation and similarity of things. Metaphors connect seemingly unrelated things by discovering the similarities among them, making seemingly unrelated relationships clearer. He proposed that metaphor is a highly condensed form of simile, and the difference between the two is mainly reflected in the use of conjunctions. This viewpoint is referred to by some researchers as the application of Comparative Theory in metaphor. Genius is good at discovering the connections and similarities between things, such kind of instinct and intuition are difficult to acquire through postnatal learning. Currently, some literary and rhetorical works consider metaphor as a derivative of simile. Today's scholars generally believe that the main difference be-

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tween metaphor and simile lies in the use of connecting words in the ontology and vehicle. Metaphors often use the word “is” instead of words such as “like” and “as if”.

Ungerer F once pointed out, “Traditionally, metaphor is the expression of the direct meaning and metaphorical meaning of things in the concepts of ‘similarity’ and ‘analogy’.”[3]115. This viewpoint holds that the key to connecting things is to find similarities between them, and discovering similarities through analogy is the core element that extends meaning.

The term ‘conceptual metaphor’ was proposed and developed by two theorists, Lakoff and Johnson[4]154-175. Nowadays, some well-known conceptual metaphors such as “Time is money.” and “Thought is food.” have further evolved into sentences such as “That mischievous child always wastes time.” and “Students have absorbed the ideas of their masters”. In fact, time and thought are abstract concepts that people cannot touch with their hands, and verbs such as “waste” and “absorb” were originally used to describe the treatment of physical things, but when they are applied to these abstract concepts, they reflect the transcendental function of “conceptual metaphor”. By concretizing abstract concepts, conceptual metaphor helps people better understand and comprehend the world.

Chi Lixia[5] says that metaphorical language, as a deeper-level conceptual mechanism, is merely an external manifestation of conceptual metaphor. The abstract concept system, based on concrete concepts, helps people to gain experiences in person from different levels, thereby establishing a more complete structure of the sensory and perceptual system to develop higher-level concepts. This indirect way of behavior is essentially called metaphor. Lin Zhengjun[6] believes that metaphor expresses abstract concepts by hiding the vehicle.

Taking “Time is money.” as an example, this metaphor cleverly links time and money with abstract and concrete concepts respectively. By using the verb ‘waste’, readers can feel the preciousness and limitations of time more intuitively in the sentence “That mischievous child always wastes time”. This case highlights the abstract cognitive function of metaphor. In a psychological thinking process, metaphor serves as a tool to establish the relationship between ontology and vehicle by comparing and analogizing the similarities between different things, transforming abstract concepts into concrete and perceptible images, thereby enhancing people’s ability to explore new things and the unknown world.

The significance of metaphor can be clearly seen from the above theories. From Aristotle in ancient Greece to Lakoff and Johnson in modern times, metaphor theory has undergone continuous development, fully demonstrating the crucial role of metaphor in cognition and language expression. Metaphor has a certain correlation or relevance with simile, but is not a simple representation of it. By comparing metaphor with simile, it reveals that metaphor is the process of seeking commonalities or similarities while ignoring their differences by comparing abstract with concrete things. It is a dynamic process of psychological thinking activity, which establishes a connection between the ontology and vehicle through conceptual abstraction of concrete objects, thus, helping people to have a deeper understanding and comprehension of the essential attributes of ontological things. Discovering and comparing similarities between things is an advanced abstract cognitive ability, and it is metaphor that enhances people’s understanding and comprehen-

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sion of the world. In the following, the abstract cognitive function of metaphors and their roles in semantic shifts will be explored with some specific examples.

3 The Abstract Cognitive Function of Metaphors

This chapter mainly explores the abstract cognitive function of metaphors.

Lin Zhengjun and Zhou Chenyang[7] hold that in the actual scenarios of language application, metaphorical constructions possess conceptual semantic functions, interpersonal rhetorical functions, and discourse construction functions. Fan Qi and Ye Haosheng[8], from the perspective of the embodied turn in cognition, have explored the cognitive functions of metaphor in aspects such as emotion, sensation of movement and body posture. Ye Hong[9] believes that similarity is the foundation for the construction of collocations. This article argues that metaphor is a tool to beautify expressions by wording, it helps to broaden cognitive horizons to shape diverse ways of thinking, and it enhances people's ability to understand complex worlds through the use of vocabulary in different contexts.

As a social member in the society, everyone is inevitably involved with people and things around them to gain life experience in the world. Later, as individuals grow older, their life experience becomes increasingly rich, the accumulation of life experience also promotes the continuous improvement of their cognitive abilities, and their manipulation of metaphors becomes more mature. The creative use of metaphors has a positive impact on human cognitive abilities, especially their abstract thinking skills. Therefore, metaphors play an important role in the development of human abstract cognitive abilities. Zooming in on human life, it can be found that almost everyone lives in a world full of metaphors. The abstract cognitive function of metaphors can be summarized into the following three points:

Firstly, metaphors lay a solid foundation for people to explore the unknown territories. The pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is a common aspiration of humanity. The application of beautiful wording is particularly important in expressions. Metaphors can embody people's psychological associations and imaginations through existing vocabulary, achieving unexpected effects in language expressions. It allows people's emotional world to be fully demonstrated. Some intricate feelings are difficult to express directly, but it is easier to apply metaphors to highly abstract and associate psychological thoughts with existing vocabulary. Thus, it not only enriches human delicate emotions, but also expands the connotation of words, which enables people to get a deeper understanding of the overall relationship among words.

Secondly, metaphors help human beings to expand their cognitive domains. Many things in the world have not been known or discovered yet, and some things, although discovered, are difficult to name. It is because the naming of these objects or things has gone beyond the scope of relying solely on the existing grammars or wording. For example, the lantern pitcher plant is named after its flowers that resemble lanterns. Another example is Xian He Cao (which is Agrimonia Herb), whose entire plant grows long white hair. If it is named as "Bai Mao Gan" in Chinese Pinyin based solely on such characteristic, it would appear too rough and rude. Such naming method is only a simple description of the objective physical form of the plant or herb, however, the naming method of metaphorical device is different.By naming metaphorically,

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it highly extracts the prominent features of concrete things, and it explores the naming of things that share common characteristics with it on the basis of visualization. Naming the plant with white long hair as Xian He Cao concretely in Chinese pinyin(which is Agrimonia Herb in English) can fully embody its characteristics to people[10]215. From the perspective of the laws of human understanding towards things and their perception of the world, it is easier to understand the concrete and physical world. The reason is that humans come into contact with and feel the surrounding physical or geographical world from birth. Metaphors are the bridges that connect concrete and abstract things, so naming things in a metaphorical way is often conducive to a more lasting human cognitive memory. By analogizing this plant with red-crowned crane, metaphors can enhance human's ability to perceive the unknown world.

Thirdly, metaphors enrich language expressions and shape human beings' advanced thinking mode through the use of vocabulary in different contexts. When humans think about the use of the same vocabulary in different contexts, they have the opportunities to discover the connection between concrete and abstract things. Language users may perceive a high degree of similarity between the material and the spiritual world, which drives them to develop more advanced ways of thinking from complex and diverse things, concepts and language expressions. It enables humans to view problems and phenomena from multiple dimensions and levels, improve their ability to analyze things comprehensively, and ultimately enhance their overall cognitive abilities.

4 Metaphor's Explanation of Semantic Shifts

This chapter delves into how metaphor elucidates the mystery of semantic shifts.

Hong Zhengyi and Huang Huaxin[11] hold that the cognitive mechanism of metaphor is not a single process of analogy or categorization. Both the symmetrical analogical process and the asymmetrical categorization process are retained as part of semantic generation in the understanding of metaphor. Lu Weizhong and Li Yi[12] believe that although the same thing or object can be expressed by choosing different source domains and vehicles in English and Chinese, and even each language has its own unique metaphorical thinking and expression methods, it undoubtedly highlights the individual characteristics of languages, which reflects the flexibility and creativity of human beings in metaphorical thinking and expression.

Firstly, "semantic shift" is like a feast of word meanings, it enriches or transforms the connotations of words by constantly infusing new wine into the original meanings. Metaphor, the spirit of language, has the core function of achieving "the beauty of concise speech". When people attempt to grasp two different but comparable things with the same word, metaphor ingeniously connects them together. This comparability, the commonalities or logical connections between things, is the foundation upon which metaphor exerts its magic. It serves as a bridge to establish connections between different things through similarity or logical relevance. Human thinking and imagination, like an unceasing creator, constantly give birth to new expressions. Metaphor further provides the possibility of expressing infinite meanings within a limited vocabulary. If each meaning required a brand-new word, it would undoubtedly impose a heavy burden on human cognition. In fact, the essence of language lies in communication and learning; which simplifies complexity and

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conveys wisdom. Therefore, language users, in practice, constantly expand the meanings of existing words through metaphor under the principle of economy of words.

Secondly, in Ricoeur's theory of similarity, it indicates that similarity, like the soul of metaphor, plays a crucial role. It acts as an invisible bond, which tightly connects seemingly unrelated things and builds a kind of "kinship", thereby triggering "category crossing". This is a conscious act, where the original classification standards are broken in new contexts, traditional hierarchical conventions are overturned, and new relationships and connections are established between different things, giving new life to existing words. Ricoeur believes that excellent metaphors not only reveal similarities between things but also discover and create similarities between different things[13]27. Human's cognition of new things often relies on the things they are already known or familiar with. By discovering similarities and building associations, humans can ingeniously use existing words to diverge meanings and endow old words with new meanings. This creative cognitive approach has driven human invention and technological progress, becoming an inexhaustible driving force for human social development. Metaphor, like a magician, continuously extends and evolves the meanings of old words, promoting changes and advancements in human society at the material, institutional and spiritual cultural levels.

Furthermore, when a metaphor is applied to a new thing from scratch, it is like a rising sun, full of vitality and vigor in its "initial stage". As time goes by, its usage gradually becomes accepted, like a young person, entering the "development stage". When it is frequently cited and its usage becomes fixed, it is like a mature wise man, becoming a "conventionalized" metaphor, and people's sense of novelty towards it gradually weakens; however, truly valuable metaphors should be like an unceasing explorer, constantly innovating and breaking through. When innovative metaphors are widely spread and accepted by the public, they are like respected prophets, their original meaning scope continuously expanding, and even being included in dictionaries, which becomes an inexhaustible source of adding new meanings to old words. Metaphors constantly extend, develop and evolve the basic meanings of existing words like highly skilled painters.

Finally, when humans recognize things or objects around them, they are often more familiar with and close to simple and concrete things, while feeling strange and distant towards abstract and complex things or matters. If abstract and complex things are renamed every time, it will undoubtedly add a huge burden to human cognition. From the principle of economy in language, when humans use metaphorical thinking to evolve the original word meanings, they follow the cognitive law from low to high, from concrete to abstract, and from simple to complex. Metaphors open the door to different fields like a key, connecting things in different fields, thereby promoting the continuous semantic shifts. The following are some typical examples that show how metaphors play a key role in this process:

Example 1. Moon: ① The moon (its original meaning, like a brilliant pearl in the night sky, vivid and concrete) -> ② The moon and moonlight (derived meanings, like the embodiment of the moon, relatively abstract) -> ③ Satellite (derived meaning, like the moon's companion, even more abstract) -> ④ To wander aimlessly, to be lost in thought (derived abstract meaning, like being attracted by the moon's mysterious charm, even more abstract) -> ⑤ To waste time (derived abstract meaning, like idling away time under the moonlight, the most abstract). Additionally, in Chinese culture, the moon symbolizes some other beautiful

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connotations like “homesickness, reunion, and love”; while in Anglo-American culture, it is like “a capricious spirit”, symbolizing fickleness and eeriness.

Example 2. Bank: ① The riverbank or river embankment (original meaning derived from its root “bench”, in the early days, riverbanks were often built with stone blocks in the shape of benches, like benches guarding the river, concrete in meaning) -> ② Bank (derived meaning, like a riverbank guarding wealth, relatively abstract). With the development of the financial industry, people began to call the place where money and valuables were stored “bank”, and this usage gradually became widespread and fixed, forming the modern meaning of “bank”. This evolution process is precisely the effect of metaphor, extending a word originally related to riverbanks to the financial field, giving it new vitality.

Example 3. Cloud: ① Clouds in the sky (original meaning, like a painter in the sky, using white and gray to depict the natural landscape, concrete in meaning, the original meaning in a natural context) -> ② vt. To cover with clouds, to confuse, to make gloomy, to stain; vi. To be overcast with dark clouds, to be gloomy (derived meanings, like the changes brought by clouds, gradually abstract) -> ③ Cloud computing (derived meaning, like the ethereal yet powerful computing resources of clouds, even more abstract). In the field of computing, “cloud” is used to describe a distributed computing system based on the Internet, namely “cloud computing”. Here, “cloud” no longer refers to physical clouds but metaphorically represents the virtualization and networking characteristics of computing resources. Additionally, “cloud” is also used to describe an ominous atmosphere, such as“war clouds”, where “cloud” has undergone a metaphorical evolution, like a versatile dancer, showcasing different styles in different contexts.

Example 4. Run: ① The act of running or moving (the original meaning in the physical world, like a little deer happily running on the grassland, concrete) -> ② Manage, operate, run (derived meaning, like a vehicle in motion needs careful management, relatively abstract). In the field of computer science, “run” has been given a new meaning, that is, to execute or run a program. For instance, in the phrase “Windows is running”, “run” is a metaphorical usage, it compares the physical act of running to the execution process of a computer program, just like an athlete running vigorously on the track, constantly moving forward.

Example 5. Dog: ① The specific animal “dog” (like a loyal companion to humans, concrete) -> ② A sycophant or flatterer (like the term “dog leg”, or Gou Tuizi in Chinese pinyin, which means “flatterer” in English, a derived and abstract meaning). Here, “dog” is like a versatile actor, taking on different roles and personalities in various contexts.

Example 6. Shanzhai (“山寨” in Chinese): ① The specific “shanzhai” (the original meaning like a simple dwelling in the mountains, concrete) in China, originally referred to simple dwellings or facilities in mountainous areas or rural areas -> ② Counterfeit, knockoff (derived meaning, like substandard products in shanzhai areas, gradually abstract). Here, “shanzhai” is like a magician, it skillfully transforms its original meaning into a new one, allowing it to display different charms in different contexts. In recent years, the term “shanzhai” has evolved and been given a new mission, which is used to describe the phenomenon of imitating, counterfeiting, or plagiarizing well-known brands and products. This expansion of the word’s meaning ingeniously demonstrates the extraordinary power of metaphor in the process of semantic general-

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ization, which acts like a bridge that skillfully transports a term rooted in the mountains to the vast world of business, giving birth to new connotations.

Example 7. “Vast knowledge is like the glittering stars in the night sky.” In this example, knowledge is endowed with the image of stars in the night sky. The hand of metaphor gently strokes, which vividly depicts the boundless and brilliant nature of knowledge. It is both vivid and profound, as if it tells the eternal theme of exploration and discovery silently.

Example 8. “Dreams illuminate the path ahead, just like the lighthouse of the soul.” In this example, dreams are personified as the lighthouse of the soul. Metaphor, with its unique connecting power, vividly depicts the guiding role of dreams in the journey of life. It is like a lighthouse shining brightly, guiding people through confusion and uncertainty, which inspires them to forge ahead fearlessly.

The cases above all demonstrate the core position of metaphor in the semantic shifts of words. It is like a skillful weaver, who connects things from different fields ingeniously, promoting the continuous expansion and deepening of word meanings. Meanwhile, metaphor is also the source of language expressiveness, making language more vivid and lively, full of rich connotations and charm.

The essence of metaphor lies in its magical power to rejuvenate old words with new meanings. It endows humans with powerful cognitive abilities, enabling them to transcend the boundaries of existing vocabulary and explore the extended and abstract meanings of words. This process not only makes polysemy possible but also profoundly reveals the inherent laws and mysteries of semantic shifts. Rico[14]103 holds that the effect of meaning stems from the interaction and influence among words in a sentence. Although they may vary in levels, they are all based on the similarity among things, demonstrating the infinite charm of human cognition. Research on semantic shifts shows that the meanings of words are constantly expanding, narrowing or transforming. Metaphor precisely builds a bridge of similarity between the tenor and vehicle, facilitating humans to simplify complexity, perceive the abstract from the concrete, which is a vivid manifestation of human cognitive laws. It can be said that it is human thinking and imagination, assisted by the magical power of metaphor, that continuously drive the evolution and semantic shifts of words, making the world of language more colorful and full of infinite possibilities.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, metaphor not only reveals the intrinsic mechanism of the continuous evolution of lexical meanings but also greatly enriches human expressions, allowing advanced thinking to be presented in a colorful manner. This study mainly focuses on the abstract cognitive function of metaphor and its explanation of semantic shifts in the evolution of word meanings. It argues that metaphor is an important mechanism for human cognition and language development. Future research can be refined to deeply explore the specific roles of different types of metaphors in semantic shifts and their close connection with human cognitive development.

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