

# A Study on the Application of Multimodal Metaphor in English Idiom Teaching

Qunfang Zhang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *School of English Language and Culture, South China Business College of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: qunfang81@aliyun.com*

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, foreign scholars represented by Forceville have extended the study of conceptual metaphor to the interdisciplinary multimodal research field, and put forward the multimodal metaphor theory, which has attracted the general attention of scholars in various research fields. The rapid development of multimodal metaphor theory in the context of new media has also promoted the new development of English teaching, especially English vocabulary. With the help of multimodal metaphor theory, this study implements multimodal metaphor teaching model on the basis of expounding metaphor and multimodal metaphor theory, in order to explore how to use multimodal metaphor teaching model in English idiom teaching. Multimodal metaphor is applied in English idiom teaching through integrating many modes such as graphics and text, body movements and so forth, can not only improve students' interest in learning English idioms, but also enhance their metaphor recognition and understanding, so as to improve the learning effect.

**Keywords:** *English idiom teaching, Metaphor, Multimodal metaphor, Multimodality.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The expression of English idioms is often arbitrary and seems to have no rules to follow, which may puzzle students in learning. Therefore, how to effectively guide students to learn English idioms in teaching has become a topic worthy of discussion. Additionally, the existing studies show that conceptual metaphor is an important motivation for the semantic understanding of English idioms; Metaphor, as a way of thinking and cognitive means, can be used as a learning strategy and a special learning auxiliary means. In fact, language is conceptualized. Once the conceptual connection is established, the "arbitrariness" in language has rules to follow, especially English idioms. Based on this, this study attempts to apply multimodal metaphor to English idiom teaching, and explore the impact and implication of multimodal metaphor on idiom teaching.

## 2. MULTIMODAL METAPHOR AND TEACHING RESEARCH

### 2.1 *Metaphor and Multimodal Metaphor*

Since the 1980s, with the proposal of Metaphor Theory by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) [5], metaphor research has attracted scholars' great attention. They redefined metaphor in the conceptual way that is different from the traditional rhetorical way. They believe that metaphor is to understand and experience a certain kind of things through another kind of things. Metaphor belongs not only to language, but also to thought, behavior and activity. According to cognitive linguistics, the essence of human conceptual system is metaphorical, which is to better experience the target domain (usually abstract things) through the understanding of the source domain (usually concrete things).

With the wide application of multimedia technology, mankind has entered the multimedia information age. The advantages of text in the multi-dimensional digital information age have been gradually weakened, and other media symbols

---

\*Fund: This paper is a staged achievement of the "Research on 'the Belt and Road' Related Multimodal Metaphor on Corpus-based English Publicity Website" under the "Innovative Team of English and Chinese Comparative Research in the New Era" project of the South China Business College of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies [NG No. 2017298] and the general project of the Provincial Key Discipline level of the College.

such as image, sound and composition have begun to participate more in the process of information transmission and emotional communication. Therefore, the advantages of multimodality are becoming more and more prominent. As one of the means of multimodal communication, multimodal metaphor has attracted extensive attention and been studied by scholars. To understand multimodal metaphor, we must first clarify what a mode is. According to Forceville (2009) [4], "a mode is a sign system interpretable because of a specific perception process". (Forceville 22) This definition connects mode with human's five senses. Therefore, he divides modality into the pictorial or visual mode, the aural or sonic mode, the olfactory mode, the gustatory mode and the tactile mode. However, it is difficult to classify "mode" exhaustively. In order to facilitate research, Forceville (2009) subdivided modes into: (1) pictorial symbols; (2) written signs; (3) spoken signs; (4) gestures; (5) sounds; (6) music; (7) smells; (8) tastes; (9) touch. (Forceville 23) Based on this, Forceville (2009) divides metaphor into two categories: monomodal metaphor and multimodal metaphor. The difference between the two categories of metaphor lies in the different number of modes used in the source domain and the target domain to represent the metaphorical meaning. The former uses only one mode, while the latter has a variety of modes, mainly including image, music, sound and language.

## **2.2 Multimodal Metaphor and English Idiom Teaching**

After the proposal of the Metaphor Theory, Cameron & Low (1999) [2] extended the research scope of Metaphor Theory to applied linguistics, but their research did not involve the relationship between metaphor and English teaching. Chinese linguists began to study and apply Metaphor Theory at the end of the 20th century. With the development of science and technology, the focus of research has gradually changed from mono-mode to multi-mode. At present, the research on multimodal metaphor in China mainly focuses on the theory itself and its applications, and the research subjects mostly focus on advertising (especially print advertising), comics and so on. And it is believed that metaphor research has guiding significance for language teaching and metaphor theory can directly affect the teaching of second language acquisition (Shu Dingfang, 2000 [10]; Cai Longquan, 2003 [1]). Metaphor research

and language teaching is one of the seven themes of metaphor research. (Lin Shuwu, 2002 [7])

In the research on the practical application of multimodal metaphor, domestic scholars mostly explore the application of multimodal metaphor in teaching. It was proved in a research by Li Yi and Shi Lei (2010) [8] that it is feasible to apply multimodal metaphor in teaching. And several scholars conducted their research and found that multimodal metaphorical texts can improve students' writing level and train students' critical thinking. (Liang Xiaohui, 2013 [6]; Zhao Xiufeng & Zhang Hui, 2013 [13]) In some empirical studies, it is concluded that multimodal metaphor teaching method can promote students' mastery of English words. (Zhang Wei, etc. 2014 [12]; Chen Shan, 2018 [3])

At present, although domestic scholars have introduced multimodal metaphor into second language teaching research, generally speaking, the number of relevant studies is limited. Most of the "multimodal metaphor teaching methods/models" mentioned in the research merely stay on the surface, or even have nothing to do with "metaphor". They only present the teaching content in a multimodal form, completely ignoring the application of "metaphor" in teaching. Since multimodal metaphor helps learners to acquire metaphor more intuitively and deeply. If it can be applied to English teaching, especially idiom teaching, it will become a more operational teaching method. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the application of multimodal metaphor in English idiom teaching and its implication to English idiom teaching, so as to explore the feasibility of its application in English idiom teaching.

## **3. APPLICATION OF MULTIMODAL METAPHOR IN ENGLISH IDIOM TEACHING**

Language expressions can be influenced by various cognitive mechanisms, including metaphor, metonymy and conceptual knowledge. In the teaching of English idioms, on the one hand, the literal meaning and figurative meaning of a single idiom should be connected and taught systematically; On the other hand, based on multimodal metaphor, we should systematically analyze the metaphorical meaning of multiple idioms and summarize their motivation mechanism. For example, understanding the source domain is helpful to understand the general meaning of

conceptual metaphor. In the conceptual metaphor of "ANGER IS FIRE", "fire" is the source domain, which corresponds to the emotional target domain, that is, "anger". After determining the target domain, conceptual mapping, that is, the systematic correspondence between the source language and the target language, helps to define the more specific meaning of a specific idiom. Therefore, the application of multimodal metaphor in English idiom teaching is mainly through the following ways:

Firstly, conceptual metaphor is introduced to the students in order to improve students' metaphor awareness. Taking the instruction of conceptual metaphor "ANGER IS FIRE" in class as an example, the teacher can ask students to compare the similarities and differences between "Lu Huo Zhong Shao" and "blaze up / burn up". Some students may say that their literal meaning is related to fire, and they all mean "anger". When asked about the relationship between "anger" and "fire", the students said "anger is like fire"; The teacher then asked, "is there any other English Chinese idiom expressions reflecting 'anger like fire'?", Students gave rich answers: "add fuel to the fire/Huo Shang Jiao You", "breathe fire", "Huo Mao San Zhang", "Da Dong Gan Huo", "Qi Qiao Shan Yan", etc. The English and Chinese expressions here undoubtedly reflect the commonness and universality of human cognition. In this way, teachers naturally lead to the introduction of conceptual metaphor, that is, conceptual metaphor is a deep cognitive mechanism, which generally exists in human thinking and behavior. In daily language, some metaphorical expressions have similar meanings, because there is an inherent conceptual model in these expressions, which is conceptual metaphor. The (metaphorical) expression in language and conceptual metaphor are systematic, that is, the systematicness of conceptual metaphor. (Qu Zhanxiang 2008: 48 [9])

Then, the teacher handed out the students an English short passage full of metaphorical expressions containing 23 English idioms about "anger". Students were required to find out these idioms and classify them according to conceptual metaphors, including: "ANGER AS FIRE", "ANGER AS HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER", "ANGER AS INSANITY", "ANGERY PERSON AS A KINGDOM ANIMAL" and so on. Through some guidance, most students can correctly judge the conceptual metaphors embodied in idioms and classify idioms according to different types of

conceptual metaphors. This classification process undoubtedly deepens students' systematic understanding of conceptual metaphors.

Secondly, multimodal metaphor is applied to idiom interpretation, especially to connect vocabulary with visual image to promote idiom understanding and memory. Because visual images provide a meaningful connection between form and meaning, it is very beneficial for idiom learning to guide students to understand idioms while supplemented by idiom illustrations containing the key elements of relevant conceptual metaphor and conceptual mapping.

For example, in the idiom "blow one's top", literally "blow" here is interpreted as "explode", and "top" refers to the top of a person's head. Thus, "blow one's top" literally means "to blow up someone's head". This idiom embodies the conceptual metaphor "ANGER IS THE HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER". This conceptual metaphor is based on the relevant knowledge of the movement of hot fluid in a closed container: if the heat remains for a long time and cannot be discharged, the pressure will increase, eventually leading to the explosion of the container and the flying of explosives, causing potential damage. Thus, the illustration of this idiom (a head that seems to explode, with the top open and smoke coming out of the head and ears) can be supplied to students to aid their understanding of the idiom since the picture intuitively presents the source domain and visualizes the idiom "blow one's top". With the help of idiom illustrations, students confirmed that they can understand idioms more deeply.

Then, the teacher asked students to present the conceptual metaphors embodied in Chinese "blow one's top" and "Nu Qi Chong Chong" through pictures, and motivated the students to figure out the differences between English and Chinese idiom conceptual metaphors. Obviously, the Chinese idiom "Nu Qi Chong Chong" reflects the conceptual metaphor of "ANGER IS THE HOT GAS IN A CONTAINER". There are many such idioms in Chinese to describe anger. Based on the cognition of idiom metaphor, students can use pictures to create their own images of the conceptual metaphor. Undoubtedly, this learning transfer task is beneficial to learners. Therefore, the assistance of idiom illustration can help learners arouse the mental images related to these conceptual metaphors in their minds, and activate the metaphorical ability and learning transfer.

Finally, the metaphorical strategies of body movements is applied such as expression, gesture and posture to English idiom teaching. Human metaphor strategy covers a wide range. The research on human speech strategy is mainly based on body experience and action assisted teaching in teaching. Taking the English idioms about "anger" as an example, many idioms embody a conceptual metaphor "ANGER IS THE PSYCHOLOGY REACTION OF ANGER". When people are angry, some parts of the body have a certain reaction, including eyes, hair, face and hands. For example, some idioms related to eyes: look daggers at someone, one's eyes flash fire as a torch, star at me in anger, blind with rage, etc.; ones related to hair: lose one's hair, get in someone's hair, keep your hair on, bristle with rage, make one's hackles rise, etc.; ones related to face: scarlet with rage, get red with anger, with an angry look, burst into anger, etc.; ones related to hand: shake one's fist at sb., grab for altitude, etc. In teaching, students can be required to demonstrate the meaning of these idioms through gestures, role-playing and facial expressions. This practice can give full play to students' subjective initiative, so as to promote understanding and strengthen memory.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In short, multimodal metaphor is a metaphor whose source domain and target domain are represented by different modes respectively, so as to realize the effective interaction between symbolic information. In the multimodal environment, the representation of metaphorical meaning is richer. The use of intuitive pictures and videos increases the input of visual information. At the same time, the context created by multimodality has a certain explanatory power on metaphorical meaning and strengthens the expression of metaphorical meaning. In multimodal metaphor teaching, teachers can combine the results of metaphor research in idiom teaching, integrate the operational mechanism of metaphor with the associative cognition of idiom semantics, effectively coordinate and use multiple modes to stimulate students' sense of hearing and vision. And students can be guided to memorize words through intuitive association, and learn to pay attention to the multiple meanings, collocations and application of an English word, that is, to organize scattered language phenomena through metaphor. More importantly, multimodal metaphor teaching requires teachers to strengthen students' memory of teaching content, stimulate students' interest in

learning and enhance students' awareness of the use of learning strategies through multi-sensory stimuli such as hearing, vision and touch. Finally, students' ability to use idioms can be improved, which makes up for the deficiency of mono-modal metaphor teaching to a certain extent.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Qunfang Zhang.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Cai Longquan. Application of Metaphor Theory in Second Language Acquisition[J]. *Foreign Languages*, 2003(06): 38-45.
- [2] Cameron & Low G. *Researching and Applying Metaphor*[M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- [3] Chen Shan. Empirical Study on Multi-modal Metaphor Teaching of College English Vocabulary in the Context of New Media[J]. *Journal of Heilongjiang Institute of Technology*, 2018 (10): 108-111.
- [4] Forceville, C. & E. Urios-Aparisi. (2009). *Multimodal Metaphor*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [5] Lakoff, G. & Johnson M. *Metaphors We Live By*[M]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [6] Liang Xiaohui. Application of Multimodal Metaphor in English Writing Teaching — Taking Comparative Articles as an Example[J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2013(05): 24-31.
- [7] Lin Shuwu. Basic Status, Focus and Trend of Metaphor Research[J]. *Foreign Languages*, 2002 (01): 38-45.
- [8] Li Yi, Shi Lei. Multimodal Metaphors in Foreign Language Teaching as Future Research Direction [J]. *Technology Enhanced Foreign languages*, 2010(03): 47-49.
- [9] Qu Zhanxiang. Differences and Similarities in Metaphorical Cognition of the Emotion of Anger between Chinese and English[J]. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 2008(06): 48-51.

- [10] Shu Dingfang. *Studies in Metaphor*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000.
- [11] Wang Huajun. Overview of Multimodal Metaphor Research[J]. *Journal of Xi'an University of Petroleum*, 2012(03): 102-106.
- [12] Zhang Wei, Liu Xiaobin, Zhou Rong, Li Manna. An Empirical Study of Multimodal Metaphor's Application in College English Vocabulary Teaching[J]. *Modern Education Technology*, 2014(07): 63-70.
- [13] Zhao Xiufeng, Zhang Hui. Critical Metaphor Strategies in English Newspaper Reading Teaching — Taking the teaching topic of "China's Image Built by the Foreign Media with Multimodal Metaphor" as an example [J]. *Foreign language teaching*, 2013(04): 61-64.