



A Metaphorical Research on Language – Thought Relationship

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Abstract. Language-thought relation has been explored in different perspectives, and diverse hypotheses have been proposed concerning this relationship such as the thought-as-speech theory, thought determination, linguistic determination and interaction theory. Metaphor is traditionally viewed as a linguistic phenomenon, which is now taken as a thinking method. The omnipresence of metaphor in speech and thinking provides us with a very good perspective into the research of language-thought relationship.

Keywords: Metaphor · Metaphoricity · Interaction

1 Introduction

When discussing the relationship between language and thinking, the authors in many general linguistics textbooks believe that there is a close relationship between the two. Language is the tool of thinking and voice is human speech organs of dedicating to the sound. It is the material shell of language. The relationship between language and thinking is not such a simple “dialectical bond” [1]. In fact, up to now there is no clear answer to the question concerning the link between language and thinking, which involves the nature of language. First, we can no longer trace back to the germination and development of the primitive language and cognition millions of years ago; Second, modern science and technology, especially physiology, psychology and cognitive science, have not yet been able to reveal the mechanism of “black box” in human brain. Because of the above reasons, every theory about the relationship between language and thinking seems to fail to provide sufficient evidence to make us clearly grasp the link between language and thinking.

As a figure of speech, metaphor has been studied for two thousand years. The “comparison” technique has been widely used in the Book of Songs, the earliest collection of poems in China. In this book, “Bi” is a kind of rhetoric device, which includes metaphor. In the West, Aristotle was the first person who systematically studied metaphor. His

interpretation of the nature and function of metaphor established the fundamental approach of metaphor research in western rhetoric circles for more than 2000 years [2]. Since this century, metaphor research has gradually evolved from the classification and description of a single figure of speech to a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional study. The scope covers psychology, philosophy, literature, art, linguistics and other disciplines. Language-thought relationship discussed from metaphoric thinking in this paper is based on such a research background.

2 Language-Thought Relation: Overview

2.1 Thought-As-Speech Position

2.1.1 Plato's View

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato once said: "When the mind is thinking, it is just speaking internally and silently, bringing up problems and answering questions...I reckon though is speech. We can judge it by the out-spoken statements. The only difference lies in that when we are thinking, we are silently speaking to ourselves, instead of speaking to others aloud." [3] According to Plato, thought is a silent language. Language and thought are logically linked and intrinsically inseparable. Based on this understanding, thinking is talking to oneself, or is a form of monologue.

2.1.2 Behaviourists' View

Thought-as-speech view is also essential to the Behaviorism Theory. Behaviorism dated back to the work of John B. Watson, a prestigious American psychologist and a radical behaviorist. Watson argued that psychological studies were not concerned with the mind or with individual consciousness. Rather, studies in psychology would be concerned merely with actions. In this way, men could be studied objectively, like cats and apes. Watson altered the notions of thinking and language into aspects of behavior. In Watson's behaviorism, thinking processes are represented by the objective ones like muscular or glandular responses and so forth [4]. However, for Watson thinking was no more than implicit speech movements or sub-vocal speech—subtle activities of the larynx that take place in the process of problem-solving. He claimed that speech was a form of behavior and correspondingly thought was a form of illicit (covert) behavior. He was able to elucidate thought in this way by stating that thinking go along with tiny manipulations of the tongue and throat muscles.

2.2 Independent Theory About Language and Thought

We could have an access to the account of independence hypothesis in the academic work mainly contributed by Vygotsky. This well established scholar held that speech and thinking are respective self-governing behaviors in the very young child. In the light of Vygotsky's theory, a kid's earliest effort to tackle problems indicate thinking without the involvement of language, and the earliest speech in the babbling period indicates speech without the involvement of thought. Vygotsky did not simply claim

that language is independent of thought. He studied the relation between thought and speech at the earliest stages of phylo-genetic and ontogenetic development. He proposed that the inner relationship between language and thought is a product of the historical development of human consciousness.

In contrast to Vygotsky, the well known scholar by whom the independence of language and thinking merely for these very young children was conceptualized, Fodor describes independence in the usage of language among adults. It could be said that Fodor's focal point was clearly the independence proposal. Fodor in 1983 puts forward that the brains has a inner cognitive structure together with an array of specialized and self-directed modules which are dedicated to linguistic information processing. Within such a module, when processing starts, it progressed without the influence from the facts or details that emerges somewhere else in the cognitive structure, a feature of these components known as informational encapsulation. It is supposed to allow the rapid operation within the system, to some degree like a reflex, with no consideration given to (and hence be prevented by) potentially pertinent facts and details arising from somewhere else in the cognitive structure.

The modular theory argues for some specialized processing units devoted to executing language-related function and uniformed by the sophisticated cognitive process.

2.3 Thought Determination

In Aristotle's opinion, speech is the sign of psychological experience, while writing is the sign of speech. Human beings could not have a universal writing, nor could we have common pronunciation. But the psychological experience represented by these writings and pronunciation and the objects reflected in these psychological experiences are universal to us all. Aristotle's position on language-thought relation is obvious: language is the sign of thought and thought determines what people speak.

2.4 Language Determinism: Sapir and Whorf Hypothesis

Edward Sapir was known as one of the most important anthropologists and linguists in the United States in the early twentieth century. In 1929, he summed up his points of view on the relations among speech, thinking and reality in the next words:

We human beings do not exist alone in the objective place, neither alone in the society of collective activity as generally made sense of, but are to a great extent in the charge of a specific language that has grown to be the tool of exchanging information for their community. It is fairly a false impression to envisage that one gets accustomed to the real world essentially with no aid of language and that tongue is merely a secondary way of settling specific issues of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "reality" is, to a large degree, unconsciously based on the conventional speech practice of the group. No two kinds of speeches are always adequately alike to be regarded as representing the identical social reality. The worlds which diverse societies survive in do be dissimilar worlds, not merely the same world with various labels attached.

Therefore, as far as Sapir is concerned, there are as various diverse social or cultural worlds as there exist [5] speeches and as there is no real world that breaks away from the

particularities of speech. It is an almost impossible task to translate from one cultural world to another.

This drastically relativistic idea was continuously pushed forward in following decades especially by one of Sapir's students whose name was Benjamin Lee Whorf. Quite like Sapir ahead of him, Whorf was said to have discovered that fundamental concepts such as "moment" and "substance" are not ubiquitous but rely on the speech or tongues that these concepts developed in. Languages transform, so do the concepts. Also now that we think by means of concepts, people who converse in different tongues will think in diverse approaches. Currently, this viewpoint is commonly referred to as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

2.5 Language and Thought: An Interactive Relationship

The chief difficulty with Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that the hypothesis is practically impossible to check. How can we start to probe into the relation between speech and thinking the moment we have no immediate access to the cognitive world of another individual except by means of the tongue that this person speaks? For a large proportion of us, thinking and tongue are knotted so closely that any endeavor to work out the relation between the two appears to be destined to failure. If thinking is truly based on our speech and we cannot think without our language, how come we uncover that a great deal of what we are familiar with is almost not possible to put into words? It looks as if the information we can articulate, or make clear, in the kinds of language is only a tip of the iceberg, under which lies a huge collection of implicit knowledge that we rely upon for every second of our lives but which we would find it difficult to put to convey verbally.

One potential answer to the dilemma is to look at the trouble developmentally. In other words, we could ask the questions: during the progress of maturity for a kid, which one arrives first—thought or language? Is language acquirement an indispensable prerequisite for cognitive growth? If so—if the kid desires language to perform the function of thinking—then we would have some backup for Sapir-Whorf's notions, namely that the way we perform the function of thinking will rely on the language that we have picked up. Yet, it may be, somewhat to the opposite, which cognitive growth comes first and lead the growth of linguistic ability. In the light of this opposite view, the kid would at the beginning accumulate a range of fundamental concepts in the course of its direct contacts with the environment. Language would next encode concepts that the kid has previously formulated independently of language. Learning to speak would be simply an issue of translating from one system of concepts, to another system of words.

Some of the most fascinating work from this developmental viewpoint has been carried out by Melissa Bowerman. She thinks that both theoretical alternatives—that acquisition of a certain language comes first and manages cognitive growth and that cognitive development comes first and directs language development—are too simple. In accordance with Bowerman, linguistic and cognitive developments go on in parallel, each guiding and sustaining the other. Language does not determine thought, nor does thinking determine language, but language and thinking mostly interact.

Let's see how language and thought interact in a child's learning period. The vital point to recognize is that concepts are in motion. They are in the constant process of

change and growth. Bowerman [6] illustrates this with the example of the “kick”. The kid takes notice of the word “kick” used in association with: (a) movement which involves the flexing of a limb, which may or may not be accompanied; (b) by the body that makes a sudden quick contact with an object; (c) the object being propelled into motion. On a subsequent circumstance, seeing a moth fluttering the wings, the kid also says i is kicking (flexing a limb). On another occasion, pushing her chest against the sink, she told her parents that she kicked the sink (sudden sharp contact). Yet on another occasion, when the kid’s toy-car collides with a tiny ball, which caused the tiny ball to roll along the ground, she says she kicked that ball even though no part of her body got in touch with it (sudden sharp contact, object propulsion).

Now, if we look at the kid’s expressions from the adult point of view, we may come to the conclusion that they are metaphorically rather than literally true. So, for instance, we might concur that—from the perspective of metaphor—the moth kicked with its wings. But the distinction that we, as adults, make between metaphor and literality assumes that the boundaries that separate one concept from another are by now definitely in place. We know where kicking ends and fluttering begins. Therefore, we can say that literally speaking the moth was just fluttering and rather than kicking. But these boundaries in terms of concepts are not given from the beginning in the life of the kid. Rather they slowly but surely come out or take shape within a history of verbal and non-verbal interaction with other people and things in the society. Based on the scarce linguistic knowledge of the concept “kick”, the child, with his not full-fledged mind, created all these literally improper and metaphorically true expressions. But we could see how linguistic knowledge interferes his seeing and learning things and how thought influences his linguistic expression.

3 Metaphor: Language and Thought Interaction

3.1 Historical Understanding of Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the most widely used rhetorical techniques in all languages around the world, and also the most frequently studied field in pragmatics.

For a long time, metaphor has been considered as a sort of happy extra trick with words—a device of the poetic imagination in which the poet coats his feelings to bestow on the language in which they are wrapped a touch of beauty or unfamiliarity. Accordingly, it has been relegated within this tradition to an ancillary function of mere embellishment. It is only in the early 1970s that its status started to be rethought.

The earliest western illumination of metaphor dates back from Aristotle’s “Rhetoric”. He wrote in his work that: When we use metaphor to replace the unstated things, similarity is the first factor that we should put into consideration, which will naturally remind people of the very object [7]. Apart from that, more than two thousand years ago, Chinese scholars gave the similar explanation of metaphor.

The discovery of modern biology shows that in the process of seeking similarities, people tend to make comparisons by reminiscing the old experiences, which provides the theoretical foundation of western metaphor. This is called comparison theory, which concludes the same emphasis like that of Chinese “biyu”.

It was concluded in western countries that the use of metaphor has some relationship with the function of thinking mode based on these comprehension abilities: sense of difference, sense of similarity and memorizing ability.

3.2 Metaphor and Patterns of Thought

Many rhetoricians discovered that metaphor exists not only in languages but also in people's thoughts and behavior even in every aspect of culture and daily life. People actually think with certain metaphors which is implied and general. Mark Johnson believes that the features of metaphor permeate in our conceptual system on which our patterns of thought depend [8]. And the reasons for the ignorance of metaphors as a pattern of thought are that it was regarded only as a decoration of the language; and the functions of which are continuously disputed.

Let us see some metaphors related with "education" in English:

Education is writing on blank paper or a tablet.

Education is mining.

Education is eating and drinking.

Education is going on a journey.

Education is piling up goods in a warehouse or store.

Some similar examples can also be found in Chinese. Here are also some instances about "education".

Teachers are the engineers of human souls.

Teachers are backbones of cultivating talents.

Education is cultivation.

Teachers are hard gardeners.

All the metaphor structures about education emphasize on an important aspect of life like writing, mining, eating goods, engineers, cultivation and gardeners, which are basic simple concepts borrowed from culture and life to express the importance of education. Admittedly, these metaphors from the two cultures reflect different patterns of thinking and traditional ethics. Misunderstanding might come not from language obstacles but from cultural ones, which cannot be solved by translation itself [9].

3.3 The Way We Comprehend Metaphor

Comprehension of metaphor involves the interpreter's linguistic knowledge and metaphorical thinking process. The listeners have to work out the relevant resemblance between target and source domains (metaphorical thinking); meanwhile he has to be quite familiar with the literal language [10]. It is hard to imagine that a person, who totally has no knowledge (both dictionary knowledge and encyclopedic knowledge) of what a wolf is, could understand the metaphor "John is a wolf". On the other hand, if that person is quite aware of what a wolf is but does not employ metaphorical thinking when hearing this metaphor, he would feel at a loss as to how could a person be a wolf.

Much metaphorical language is on the basis of learned convention such as proverbs and idioms. Unfamiliar proverbs and idioms are, essentially, neither proverbial nor idiomatic. Let's see the proverb-"A river needs a spring" in the context as follows: "Even

if you are awfully successful at the moment, you had a great deal of help in the past. So you are supposed not to forget these people. Keep it in mind: A river needs a spring.” When a person encounters this proverb, he or she will endeavor to understand the item on the basis of the most available information and that would be compositionally based on the usual sense of the vocabulary and the syntax of these vocabularies. To understand this proverb accurately in this context, that person has to know the relationship between a river and a spring, and the importance of a spring to a river in time of drought; and then be able to map this framework onto the relationship between a great people and a helper. But what happens when the listener or reader has no knowledge of the relationship between a river and a spring? And what happens if the listener or reader is unable to employ metaphorical mapping? Surely, either way will lead to inability to comprehend the metaphor.

The interaction of knowledge and thought leads to the accurate understanding of novel metaphorical expression.

3.4 The Way We Produce Metaphor

The production of metaphor involves the producer’s knowledge (both dictionary and encyclopedic knowledge) and metaphorical thinking process [11]. In producing a metaphor the creator must first grasp the significance of a metaphorical relation before it is uttered. The producer must see the similarity or connection between the target and source domains. He must also have obtained a certain linguistic competence.

When a person invents a new device, figures out a notion, buys a cat or produces a soap powder, his foremost thought is to name it. All the names are almost never random creations produced by juggling the sounds of the speech into a novel order [12]. The typical means of creating a new name is to use words or morphemes by now in the language, either by expanding the semantic range of some words or by recombining the morphemes, which we could also call metaphorical extension. For example, when producing metaphorical expression “the foot of the mountain”, the producer must have known the word “foot” literally being the lower part of an animal. With this knowledge in mind, he associates the mountains with an animal having foot, head and body, and metaphorically extends the word meaning of “foot”.

Virginia woolf’s lapidary portrayal of the way of life of one of her characters: the aimless days of a protagonist that is briefly defined using everyday objects and acts. The metaphor is “She allowed life to waste like a tap left running”. The producer sees or imagines the similarity or association, that is thinking process, and he expresses them out through existing language symbols, and produces novel metaphorical expressions. That is the interaction between language and thought which contributes to more and more novel metaphorical expressions.

4 Conclusion

Metaphor is a kind of thought, it exists in thought. Language provides possibility to make the metaphorical thought manifest and understood. That is through metaphorical expressions, while metaphor as a thought gives rise to new and novel expressions through

analogy and mapping. Metaphorical expressions constitute an integral part of language and theorists arrive at the conclusion that “the metaphoricity of thought” through systematic research in metaphorical expressions while conventional, institutionalized and widely-used metaphorical expressions in any specific language direct or even control, to a certain degree, the speakers’ thought [13]. This article quotes cogent literature to elaborate how metaphor is conceived as thought not a rhetoric device, provides examples on how metaphor-as-a-thought influences and extends language to produce novel and more expressive metaphorical expressions, and elaborates how conventional and widely-used metaphorical expressions affect thought. We get a glimpse into the language-thought relation through a metaphorical research: wherever their origin is, language and thought, upon meeting, are inseparably intertwined, and inter-dependably promote the interaction between language and thought.

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