

Study on The Essence of Metaphor

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Abstract—Based on the definitions of metaphor, this paper illustrates the origin of metaphor and some popular theories of what metaphor really is. At the same time, due to the fact that people's cognitive ability develops with the times, three stages of metaphor development also get detailed explanation.

Keywords—metaphor; essence; substitution; comparison; interaction; figurative; cognitive; philosophy of mind.

I. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor was originated from the Greek word “metapherein”, in which “meta” means “exceeding” and “pherein” means “carrying”. As for the exact definition of metaphor, we can get it from various dictionaries:

Definition 1: Metaphor, a figure of speech, is “a word or phrase which is used for special effect, and which does not have its natural meaning.” “In a metaphor, no function words are used, something is described by stating another thing with which it can be compared.”[1]

Definition 2: Metaphor, I. A figure of speech in which a word or expression normally used of one kind of object, action, etc. is extended to another. II. Used by G. P. Lakoff in the 1980s of a general pattern in which one domain is systematically conceived and spoken of in terms of another.[2]

Therefore, the former holds that metaphor is just a figure of speech in which two things are compared by saying that one is another, but not with any word as “like” or “as”, while the latter holds that metaphor is both a figure of speech and a mechanism of knowing another thing.

II. ESSENCE OF METAPHOR

As discussed above, when it comes to the definition of metaphor, different people stand on various positions, standing for their respective understanding of the nature of metaphor and the emphasis they prefer to place. As a result of the fact that people stress different aspects in it, two standpoints have been formed. One is that, centering on cognition, metaphor functions as the organizer of our conceptual system. The other is that metaphor's role in metaphor understanding is to polish the text and emotionalize readers. Generally speaking, in academic field of metaphor studies, there exist three opinions: theory of substitution, theory of comparison and theory of interaction, each playing important roles in various stages.

A. The theory of substitution

According to Aristotle, there are several types of metaphor: to substitute category for species, to substitute

species for species and to substitute species for category, etc.. The common point among them is to replace one word with another word.

Then, substitution in metaphor is to substitute one thing for another thing or to take advantage of another word to demonstrate a certain relationship, while the referred two things or words are mostly irrelevant. For example, in “My pet dog left me yesterday”, the speaker must feel heartbroken when the pet dog died. But he/she felt a must to tell it to others in order to share her grief. “Die” has the basic meaning of “away”, “out of the world”. There are many ways to express it, such as “pass away”, “go to west”, or “disappear” etc. “Leave” can be used to replace “die”. In “Maybe the story will evaporate overnight”, evaporate has a similar function.

B. The theory of comparison

According to this theory, the founding of metaphorical relationship between objects must be based on the similarity between them by comparing the two semantic features of the two words or phrases. And the two objects in any metaphor can not be arbitrarily replaced just based on semantic meaning.

Examples

[1] a: Angry women are tigers.

[1] b: ZZ is China's Ronaldo.

In [1] a, angry women and tigers are not in the same synonymous domain. While in [1] b, although ZZ and Ronaldo are human beings, only those who can make many goals on football course can be addressed as Ronaldo. We can test it in a reverse direction. Maybe no one would accept such saying “Tigers are angry women.” While “Ronaldo is China's ZZ” is reasonable, it will only be a laughing stock because people always compare a promising young generation to a senior one but not the reverse.

In this theory, when it comes to comparison, it is generally based on three points, the similarity, the original meaning and symmetry. About the comparison of similarity, Aristotle provided his explanation: When metaphor is used to name the unknown thing, the name should not be chosen from boundless objects but from those similar to it or with the same origin. Therefore, the audience will notice the relationship clearly and immediately. As for the comparison of the original meaning, according to Aristotle, metaphor is simile of original meaning of words or phrases without such function words as “like” or “as”. This theory is based on the comparison of original meaning from common sense.

C. *The theory of interaction*

Richards[3] holds the idea that the forming of metaphor depends on the mutual influence between Tenor and Vehicle, which, specifically, is the interaction between the two. The so-called interaction means that the original meaning and the referred meaning enjoy mutual influence always. Only in this way, will the meaning of the user and the mechanism used in the formation of the meaning be understood thoroughly.

Of course, beside the above-mentioned theories of the essence of metaphor in human history, there must have sprung up many other theories concerning it and they must have mushroomed once. But, comparatively, they enjoyed a shorter popularity, which is why they don't arouse much interest in scholars to study them more widely and deeply.

III. STAGES OF METAPHOR UNDERSTANDING

More than 2000 years have passed since people studied metaphor. In the history of metaphor studies, 1980 is always regarded as a time-marker. Before that, people regarded it as a figure of speech. After that, a notion of thinking is the most prevailing interpretation.

A. *The rhetoric angle of metaphor*

As discussed above, the English word "metaphor" comes from the Greek word "metapherein" which means that to move one or more features of a thing to another, describing a dynamic state. The reference might imply that the second thing "is" the original one.

For traditional rhetoric, metaphor is a figure of speech, just as mentioned in the definitions of metaphor. Metaphor studies were first aimed at describing metaphor's functions in literature. Aristotle in his books *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* stated his opinions on metaphor. He said that metaphor was a language tool that one word instead of another was used to mean the same. For him, to decorate is the main function of metaphor, especially for literary works. In any literary work, we can find the track of metaphor. For example, in Shelley's *Ode To The West Wind*, by describing the functions of the west wind, Shelley stated the warmly welcome of the coming revolution, which was also his own ambition. The last sentence "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" further demonstrated his positive attitude to the victory of revolution. Based on his own understanding of metaphor's importance on literature, Aristotle was remembered as the father of systematical metaphor study and his famous saying "the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor" is still singing in metaphor researcher's ears.

Therefore, in traditional study, following Aristotle, metaphor was assigned together with other figures of speech, such as simile, metonymy. Despite its limitation and deficiency based on time and condition, the traditional way provides people with an important perspective to study metaphor.

B. *The cognitive angle of metaphor*

Metaphor study has got certain attention in cognitive science and other fields since 1930s when the founder of the theory of interaction in metaphor study, Richards, converted

the former study tide. He pointed out the deficiency in traditional metaphor study, that is, it neglected the fact that metaphor basically is the intercourse between ideas, is the interaction between contexts. Therefore, he advanced the supposition that people naturally have metaphorical notion of thinking and people will achieve metaphor only by contrast, a conclusion that he arrived at after his personal attentive checkout of the nature of metaphor from the cognitive angle. Hence, it is accepted that metaphor is a language utterance phenomenon and a notion of thinking belonging to human beings only. Metaphor is "omnipresent principle of language" of humans. Statistics tell that there is one metaphor occurring in each three sentences in our daily life, which unconsciously provides a sound proof to the supposition made by Lakoff, in his *Metaphor We Live By*. Without metaphor, we have difficulty creating and appreciating the beauty demonstrated in literary works, because common vocabulary are quite pallid and boring, sometimes even lengthy when facing new things and abstract concept. Without metaphor, our society will slow down its developing steps because to explain the new things would cost too much time.

In 1980s, metaphor study achieved great achievements, among which *Metaphor We Live By* (1980) by Lakoff and Johnson was the most famous. In their book, they advanced a brand new researching angle. It says that metaphor is more a metaphorical concept system, a notion of thinking than just a figure of speech. It denied the former concepts of the nature of metaphor, such as the one in the comparison theory advanced by Aristotle and "metaphor is the inner language structure" study trend.

In their book, they focused on conceptual metaphor when they systematically regarded metaphor as a notion of thinking or cognition. They held the idea that the regularity of human cognition was reflected in the system of metaphorical concept, which includes two aspects. One is that, in order to help people know some part of one thing, conceptual metaphor usually focuses on the illustration of certain part of its analogical object. In order to support the explanation, they took "idea" as an example, in which, they said that in order to understand the abstract concept "idea", people would have their respective definitions based on their personal social experiences and practices and various cultural customs, based on which they would form several conceptual metaphors correspondingly: IDEA IS BUILDING; IDEA IS FOOD; IDEA IS PLANT; IDEA IS COMMODITY, ETC.. Such metaphors own the same object: IDEA, but any one just tells one part of it. For example, by comparing idea, an abstract concept, to a building, a concrete thing, Lakoff has made us understand the formation of idea because there are certain similarities between the two. For example, they have the similar structure. In "How can you build up your IDEA on your hearing but not your seeing?", BUILD UP is usually used in building, but we can understand what IDEA is easily because of the similarity.

The other idea is that metaphor is vehicle. Therefore the relevant words that are influenced by metaphorical concept make up an organic system. As the object of human cognition, the vehicle of a metaphor has multi-layered and

multi-lateral features. One or several features of vehicle may make up a metaphorical concept. On the formation of such a concept, other features of vehicle would naturally come into being. For example, the metaphor IDEA IS PLANT might be caused by the fact that both idea and plant share the same process in growing up. In this saying, some features of plant as development, death, fertilization, watering, and sunlight would be extended in our mind.

Therefore, we can conclude that metaphorical conceptual system originated from human experience. Human beings have become accustomed to interpreting and experiencing new and abstract things based on metaphorical concept. More specifically, people usually understand some abstract concepts by using some concrete things that they're familiar with. For instance, life is abstract for us, which is difficult for people to illustrate what life is like exactly to others, therefore they create the metaphorical concept: LIFE IS A JOURNEY, in which, the source domain is journey and the target domain is life. In understanding this metaphor, various features of the "journey" domain could be systematically mapped on the "life" domain. Hence, we will know that, like a journey, there are starting and ending in life, and there are ups and downs in life. The following expressions explain the above-mentioned usage in detail.

He's been a head start in life.

He is standing at a crossroad again in life.

He promised he would let no one get in his life after that accident.

Where would you want to be in your life?

As an 80-year-old man, he has experienced all ups and downs in life.

C. Metaphor from Philosophy-of-mind Angle

The connection between metaphor and philosophy of mind has just been mentioned in recent years. Some scholars, such as Liao Qiaoyun and Xu Shenghuan[4], noticed that in understanding how metaphor works and how to understand such phenomenon, we may take advantage of some knowledge concerning philosophy, as the two have something in common, especially they both get human intellectual involved. Therefore, in *How to Understand Metaphor by Mind*, they explain the process and the mechanism involved in understanding metaphor by way of philosophy of mind, which has been quite popular in China and has led to rich results in this field.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, we can understand the functions of metaphor on our life. Just as Lakoff[5] said, "Metaphor is omnipresent in our daily life, in our language and our thought and behavior. The general conceptual system of our thought and action is basically metaphorical." Metaphor provides human beings a method to observe and understand new and abstract things.

First, metaphor provides possibilities for readers to understand the writers' mind. As discussed in "Rhetoric View of Metaphor," metaphor has been warmly welcomed and widely employed in literary works, especially in poetry. By taking advantage of metaphor, not only can poets express

their abstract thought briefly and clearly, but also can they sometimes express their certain affection or feeling which they dare not say directly. And their works can always stimulate readers' infinite imagination and heated discussion.

Second, metaphor provides people with a brief and clear mechanism to observe the world. We know that in ancient times, when human language was still in its primitive stage, most things around them could not be described clearly. When human beings employed words they had known to describe things they were not familiar with, such as blood, idea, etc., they thought blood was just like sea, thought, or cloud, etc. So, we can say that most words about non-living things were metaphors of human body or their corresponding feelings. For example, when using foot to say the bottom of a mountain, the metaphor "the foot of the mountain" came into being. Metaphors, such as "the leg of the time", "the hands of the clock", and "the eyes of the needle" have the similar background. By adopting metaphor, people can bridge the gap between the known world and the unknown world.

The last but not the least important is that metaphor can help in creating new meanings, that is, to name new things or to bestow old things new meanings. For example, in order to avoid misconception, Lakoff himself didn't follow others' vocabulary choice "tenor" or "vehicle", he employed the word "domain" which implies that there is a great meaning network behind a simple metaphor.

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