

Culturally Grounded Metaphors: The Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract

The conceptual metaphor theory locates metaphor in head but there are some scholars (Quinn 1991; Gibbs 1999) who argue that the ontological constructs on our mental maps cannot be ignored and may occur prior to metaphor in influencing concept formation. Recent works suggest that some primary conceptual metaphors may be so basic to human experience that they occur in all or most cultural context (Grady 1999) but in contrast complex metaphors are “built out of primary metaphors plus forms of commonplace knowledge: cultural models, folk theories, or simply knowledge or beliefs that are widely accepted in culture” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:60). In this article I will try to peep into the cultural grounding of the metaphors with the help of few examples of Hindi.

Key Words: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Metaphor in culture, Embodiment and metaphor, Cross-cultural metaphors, Cultural models.

Introduction

Cognitive linguistics highlighted the importance as well as the ubiquity of metaphors in everyday language use. It emphasizes the interrelation between language, mind and culture in which metaphor has always played a fundamental role in communication. Metaphor is considered a fundamental aspect of human cognitive faculty which plays a dynamic and creative role in production of meaning, construction of knowledge and in understanding reality. The most basic assumption in cognitive metaphor theory is that there is a set of basic metaphoric concepts –conceptual metaphors– around which we conceptualize the world. The concepts that our ordinary conceptual system includes structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.

Cognitive semantics maintains that human mind is embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the peculiarities of our bodies and the specifics our physical and socio-cultural environments (e.g. Gibbs 1994, 2003; Johnson 1987, 1999; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). Conceptual metaphors are not mere flights of fancy, but they have a basis in bodily experience. Culture is one of the main pillars in embodied cognition. The major question in cognitive linguistics pertaining to culture is whether metaphors only reflect the culture or it constitutes culture. This aspect of culture and metaphor is valuable for cross-cultural.

Universality and Variations in Concepts

Empirical studies of conceptual metaphors have revealed that some of the conceptual metaphors are universal, some of them are widespread and still there are some which are cultural-specific (Kovecses 2005). While dealing with the question that why are metaphors universal? Kovecses (2005:34) writes:

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If metaphor is based on the way the human body and brain function and we as a human beings alike at the level of this functioning, then most of the metaphors people use must also be fairly similar, that is, universal – at last on the conceptual level.

With the empirical evidences Kovecses (2005) showed that some metaphors like HAPPINESS IS UP, HAPPINESS IS LIGHT, HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, THE ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER, and the EVENT STRUCTURE conceptual metaphors may be universal because they can be derive from certain universal aspects of human physiology.

In addition to the universality of conceptual metaphors based on human physiology or common bodily experiences it is expected to have cultural variation in metaphors and metonymy because the governing principles and key concepts will differ from culture to culture or cultural group to cultural group. It is a well-established fact that natural and physical environment affects languages. The environment affects its lexicon primarily and consequently it shapes conceptual systems of human beings and metaphor as well. Speakers living in a certain environment will be tuned to the things and phenomena that are characteristic of that habitat and they will make use of these things and phenomena for the metaphorical comprehension and creation of their conceptual universe.

Lakoff and Johnson on Metaphor and Culture

At the very initial level of the development of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory it is claimed that conceptual metaphors are deeply grounded in our bodily experiences and culture. In the beginning of the ground breaking work of Lakoff and Johnson there is a discussion of ARGUMENT IS WAR conceptual metaphor to demonstrate the experiential basis of metaphor which is deeply rooted in culture. Lakoff and Johnson mention that though there is no physical battle but many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war, (argument is perceived as verbal battle) and therefore our argument is structured in terms of war. And in this sense the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this particular culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing. But imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war but in terms of dance. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently.

While discussing the orientational metaphors which give a concept a spatial orientation (HAPPY IS UP) Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 14) emphasize that such metaphorical orientations have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. Though the polar oppositions up-down, in-out, etc., are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures the future is in front of us, whereas in others it is in back.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) refer to the role of culture in relation to primary and complex metaphors. They maintain that “complex, everyday metaphors are built out of primary metaphors plus forms of commonplace knowledge: cultural models, folk theories, or simply knowledge or beliefs that are widely accepted in a culture” (1999: 60). Focusing on the A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor they wrote that in their culture there is a profoundly influential folk model according to which people are supposed to have a purpose in life, and there is something wrong with you if you don't. If you are purposeless, you are seen as "lost," "without direction" in your life, as "not knowing which way to turn." Having purpose in your life gives you "goals to reach" and forces you to map out a way to reach those goals, to see what other intermediate goals you would have to reach to get there, to contemplate

what might be standing in your way, how to get around obstacles, and so on. Therefore in this culture the cultural beliefs given below are motivating the metaphor:

1. People are supposed to have purposes in life, and they are supposed to act so as to achieve those purposes.
2. People are supposed to have destinations in life, and they are supposed to move so as to reach those destinations.

Lakoff and Johnson further add that there are cultures around the world in which this metaphor does not exist; in those cultures people just live their lives, and the very idea of being without direction or missing the boat, of being held back or getting bogged down in life, would make no sense (1999: 63).

‘Situated’ vs ‘Distributed’ Cognition: Gibbs’ View

Gibbs (1999) not convincing with the traditional view of cognition which assumes that representations are exclusively ‘in the mind’ supported ‘wide’ or ‘distributed’. Under this view the cognition is what happens when the body meets the world. He writes (1999: 153):

One cannot talk about, or study, cognition apart from our specific embodied interactions with the cultural world (and this includes the physical world which is not separate from the cultural one in the important sense that what we see as meaningful in the physical world is highly constrained by our cultural beliefs and values). ... Theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition which occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally-based.”

Gibbs (1999) further emphasizes that even image schemas which arise from recurring embodied experiences, and which often serve as the source domains for conceptual metaphors, might very well have a strong cultural component to them. Anthropologists have in recent years spent considerable effort looking at the role of embodiment in culture, and have in several cases shown how embodied experience itself is culturally constituted.

In this way Gibbs (1999) extended the cognitive models beyond the individual. He postulates that cognition arises and continually re-experienced when the body interacts with the cultural world. For him body creates the cultural world as much as culture defines embodied experience. Gibbs suggested that our use of metaphors to structure concepts (anger, time etc.) is strongly shaped by (a) how we culturally conceptualize of situations, like getting angry and sensing time, and (b) by our interactions with social/cultural artifacts around us. Gibbs suggestion of the culturally embodied nature of metaphor moves metaphor from the individual heads to the embodied and public world.

Cross-Cultural Metaphors: Kovecses’ View

Conceptual metaphors and the metaphors used in metaphorical linguistic expression vary cross-culturally. Kovecses (2005:67-68) has given three possible situation of cross cultural variation at the level of metaphor:

- I. Cases in which a culture uses a set of different source domains for a particular target domain, or conversely, a culture uses a particular source domain for the conceptualization of a set of different target domains.
- II. Cases in which the set of conceptual metaphors for a particular target domain is roughly the same in two languages/cultures, but one language/culture shows a clear preference for some of the conceptual metaphors that are employed. It seems to me that, at least within the same “sphere of civilization,” this kind of variation in conceptual metaphors is very common.

- III. There may be some conceptual metaphors that appear to be unique to a given language/culture. These require that both the source and the target be unique to the culture.

Kovecses (2005) has taken up the “cultural” challenge, discussing the controversy that surrounds the relationship between metaphor, body, and culture and making an attempt to resolve the issue by referring to the data from four languages: English, Hungarian, Japanese, and Chinese. Noting some differences as well as similarities across these languages in terms of conceptualizations of anger, Kovecses arrives at five elements, “(possibly universal) actual human physiology, conceptualized physiology (metonymy), metaphor, cultural model (with its schematic basic structure), and the broader cultural context”. He maintains that the cultural models of anger across the languages that he selected “are the joint products of metaphor, metonymy, (possibly universal) actual physiology, and cultural context”.

Cultural Models

In 1987 Holland and Quinn published an edited volume with an intention to explore the ways in which cultural knowledge is organized and used in everyday language and understanding. They are pertinent to demonstrate that that cultural knowledge i.e. the shared presuppositions about the world, plays an enormous role in human understanding and therefore they emphasized that the role of cultural knowledge must be recognized into any successful theory of the organization of human knowledge. In the introductory chapter they propose a term *cultural model* which is a sequence of prototypical event-schema which is hierarchically related to other cultural knowledge. It is shown that shared models play a critical role in thinking, allowing humans to master, remember, and use the vast amount of knowledge required in everyday life. Metaphor and metonymy are shown to have special roles in the construction of cultural models. The volume is the initial step to show how cultural models frame experience, supplying interpretations of that experience and inferences about it, and goals for action.

There are two orientations over the nature of relationship between cultural models and metaphor. The one orientation claims that cultural models even for abstract concepts exist without prior metaphorical understanding, that is, we have a primary literal understanding of them (Quinn 1991). The other orientation claims that cultural models for abstract concepts are inherently metaphorical, that is, they are constituted by metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff and Kovecses 1987). Therefore Kovecses (1999) raised more specific issue: does metaphor constitute or merely reflect cultural models? Since metaphors are ordinarily used in connection with cultural models that structure abstract concepts, the issue really becomes: do metaphors constitute abstract concepts (as structured by cultural models) or do they simply reflect them? To discuss this point is out of this article scope therefore we will leave this point here itself.

Cross-Cultural Metaphorical Variation

Yu (2008: 249) postulates that for conceptual metaphors body is a source whereas culture is a filter. She writes:

while body is a potentially universal source domain from which bodily based metaphors emerge, culture serves as a filter that only allows certainly bodily experiences to pass through so that they can be mapped onto the certain target domain concepts .

Cameron (2003: 20-21) has argued that metaphors of different languages will vary with cultural factors, as well as with social and other factors. A conceptual metaphor may be similar in two cultures but expressed differently in the languages. Pupils in Bangladesh would find the *atmosphere is the blanket of gases* difficult to understand, but the same idea might be accessible

as the *atmosphere is the canopy of gases* because it links to experience of how the rainforest canopy works.

Quinn (1987) (Chapter7) has discussed how the concept of marriage is conceptualized metaphorically in American English culture. The metaphors for marriage provide a first set of clues to the cultural model of marriage in this culture. The conceptual metaphors of marriage identified and discussed by Quinn are: MARRIAGE IS AN ONGOING JOURNEY, MARRIAGE IS A DURABLE BOND BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE, MARRIAGE IS AN INVESTMENT.

In Hindi we also conceptualize marriage in terms of BOND but this bond is not only durable but it continues up to the seven terms of life. It is because of the concept of the rebirth in our culture. It is perceived in our culture that the bond of the marriage will not end in this life only but it will continue life after life. Therefore the conceptual metaphor for marriage in Hindi culture is:

MARRIAGE IS AN UNBREAKABLE BOND

əʃu:ʃ bəndʰən - unbreakable bond

MARRIAGE IS A BOND OF SEVEN LIFE TERMS

dʒənmō ke bəndʰən (the bondage of life after life)- marriage

saʃ dʒənmō ka bəndʰən (the bondage of seven life terms)

saʃ məhine mē hɪ ʃar ʃar ho gəʃa saʃ dʒənmō ka bəndʰən

Again it is cultural specific that marriage is not only the BOND between two people rather it is a bond between two souls also because of the concept of rebirth. In Hindi folk model marriage is conceptualize in terms of UNITY also. But oppose to the other cultures this unity not only operates at the level of person also unity at the physical level, social level, psychological level and at metaphysical level. For example:

vivah ɖo ɖɪlō ka mɪlən hɛ (psychological unity)

vivah ɖo pəɾɪvərō ka mɪlən hɛ (social unity)

vivah ɖo aʃmāō ka mɪlən hɛ (metaphysical unity)

But in our culture we do not conceptualize marriage with the metaphor of INVESTMENT and CONTRACT.

In English bravery is comprehended with the body-part lexis stomach or guts but in Hindi it is comprehended through the liver or heart (कलेज़ा, जिगर, दिल). For example the metaphoric use of stomach in English sentence “Ken does not have *stomach* for another fight” means Ken does not have courage to fight again. Here the conceptual metonymy STOMACH STANDS FOR BRAVERY seems to motivate the meaning of above mentioned sentence.

In Hindi ‘pregnancy’ is in metonymical relationship with ‘stomach’ but in English we do not have this metonymy: STOMACH STANDS FOR PREGNANCY

peʃ ɡɪrɑ:nɑ: - to cause an abortion

peʃ se honɑ: - to be pregnant

peʃ rəhna: - to conceive

In Hindi ‘stomach’ is metaphorically used for earning food or earning to live. The conceptual metaphor is: STOMACH IS EARNING TO LIVE

peʃ pɑ:lɪnɑ: - to earn one’s living somehow.

peʃ pəɾ lɑ:t məɾnɑ: - (to kick on someone’s stomach) taking away one’s living / to deprive of one’s means of livelihood

The same metaphorical meaning can be expressed by applying different conceptual metaphor FOOD FOR MOUTH IS THE LIVELIHOOD which is present in both in English as well as in Hindi:

English:

To take food out of the mouth of children (cruelly to deprive the needy / to deprive of one's means of livelihood)

Hindi:

muh se niva:la: tʃʰi:nəna: - (to snatch the food from one's mouth) (cruelly to deprive the needy / to deprive of one's means of livelihood)

Conclusion

Variation among languages and cultures is the clearest form of a social perspective in Cognitive Linguistics. We have seen that cultural model plays a significant role in the emergence of the new framework. In Cognitive Linguistics particularly in conceptual metaphor theory, there are many cross-cultural and cross-linguistics studies that confirm the interaction of culture in language and thought. Metaphors and metonymies are to a large extent cultural-specific. The domains of experience are not the same in every culture, therefore persons belonging to different culture, conceptualize the abstract things differently.

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