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COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS: THE RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE IN THE LIGHT OF METAPHOR AND SEMANTICS

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Abstract

The article examines the relation between language and thought as it is conceived within cognitive linguistics, with particular attention to conceptual metaphor and to the model of meaning that follows from it. The author sets out the theoretical commitments that distinguish the cognitive approach from formal semantics — the treatment of language as continuous with general cognition, the encyclopaedic conception of meaning, and the rejection of a sharp division between semantics and pragmatics — and shows how these commitments transform the analysis of figurative language. Conceptual metaphor theory is presented not as a claim about ornamental speech but as a claim about the structure of abstract concepts, and the empirical evidence for it from psycholinguistic experiments, gesture research and corpus analysis is reviewed alongside the principal objections raised against it. The article further considers cross-linguistic and cultural variation in metaphorical mapping, illustrating the argument with Uzbek material, and discusses the methodological problem of identifying metaphor in discourse. It concludes that the cognitive approach yields a testable programme rather than a settled doctrine, and that its further development depends on typologically diverse data.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, embodiment, image schema, encyclopaedic semantics, polysemy, prototype, conceptual blending, cross-cultural variation, Uzbek.



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Introduction

The question of how language relates to thought is older than linguistics as a discipline, but for most of the twentieth century it was answered in a way that kept the two apart. Language was described as an autonomous formal system whose units and rules could be stated without reference to the conceptual and perceptual capacities of the speaker, and meaning was modelled as a relation between expressions and states of affairs, defined by truth conditions and largely independent of how human beings actually think. Cognitive linguistics, which took shape in the late 1970s and 1980s, was built on the rejection of this separation. Its central claim is that linguistic structure is continuous with the rest of cognition, that grammar is meaningful rather than purely formal, and that the categories of language are shaped by the same processes — perception, attention, categorisation, memory, bodily experience — that shape non-linguistic thought.

Within this programme the study of metaphor occupies a position that is easy to misunderstand. In the older view, metaphor belonged to rhetoric: it was a deviation from literal usage, an ornament that could be paraphrased away without loss of content. Cognitive linguistics reversed this evaluation by arguing that metaphor is not a property of words at all but a property of concepts, and that a great part of abstract thinking is carried out by means of it. If this is correct, then metaphor is not marginal to semantics but constitutive of it, and the analysis of metaphorical expressions becomes a way of investigating the organisation of the conceptual system itself.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relation between thought and language as it is construed in cognitive linguistics, and to assess the explanatory value of conceptual metaphor theory in the light of the evidence accumulated over four decades. Three tasks are addressed: to set out the theoretical commitments of the cognitive approach and the model of meaning that follows from them; to review



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the empirical support for conceptual metaphor theory together with the principal criticisms of it; and to consider cross-linguistic and cultural variation in metaphorical mapping, with illustrative material from Uzbek.

Literature review

The foundational statement of conceptual metaphor theory argued that expressions such as those describing argument in terms of war or time in terms of money are not isolated figures of speech but surface reflexes of systematic mappings between conceptual domains [1]. The theory was subsequently reformulated in more explicit terms, with mappings defined as sets of ontological correspondences that preserve inferential structure, and with the claim that the mapping proceeds from a concrete, well-structured source domain to an abstract, less structured target domain [2]. The complementary notion of the image schema — a recurring, pre-conceptual pattern derived from bodily experience, such as containment, path, balance or force — supplied the account of where the structure of source domains comes from [3].

A second line of work developed the grammatical side of the programme. Cognitive grammar treats lexicon and syntax as a continuum of symbolic units and analyses grammatical structure in terms of construal operations such as profiling, perspective and level of specificity [4]. Cognitive semantics in the typological tradition examined how languages schematise space, motion, force dynamics and event structure, showing that these schematisations differ systematically across languages while drawing on a shared conceptual inventory [5]. A third line generalised the two-domain model of metaphor into a theory of conceptual integration, in which elements from several mental spaces are projected into a blended space with emergent structure of its own [6].



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Empirical support has come from several directions. Psycholinguistic studies of figurative comprehension found that conventional metaphorical expressions are not processed more slowly than literal ones, contradicting the classical assumption that a literal interpretation must be computed and rejected first [7]. Experimental work on spatial and temporal reasoning showed that habitual metaphorical patterns influence non-linguistic judgements about time, and that speakers of languages differing in their spatial encoding of time differ correspondingly in these judgements [8; 9]. The refinement of the theory through the notion of primary metaphor, which grounds complex mappings in recurrent correlations in experience such as the co-occurrence of affection and warmth, gave the embodiment claim a more precise formulation [10], and the broader framework of grounded cognition placed it within a general theory of conceptual representation [11].

The theory has also attracted substantial criticism. One objection is that evidence from linguistic expressions cannot by itself establish claims about conceptual structure, since the reasoning risks circularity: the mappings are inferred from the expressions and then invoked to explain them [12]. A second objection, developed within the tradition of research on figurative language, holds that conventional metaphors are understood not by cross-domain mapping but by attribution to an ad hoc superordinate category, a mechanism closer to categorisation than to analogy [13]. A third, more moderate position derives from structure-mapping theory, which treats metaphor as a species of analogy in which relational structure is aligned, and predicts that novel and conventional metaphors are processed by different routes [14].

Finally, cultural and methodological studies have shaped the current form of the debate. Comparative work established that metaphorical mappings vary along several dimensions — in the range of source domains available, in their



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elaboration, and in the aspects of the target they highlight — while showing that some mappings recur with remarkable frequency across unrelated languages [15; 16]. Corpus-based investigations demonstrated that the distribution of metaphorical expressions in actual usage is far more uneven than introspective examples suggest [17], and the development of explicit identification procedures made the analysis of metaphor in discourse replicable rather than intuitive [18; 19]. The place of metaphor in persuasion and ideology has been examined by critical metaphor analysis [20], while general expositions of the field have consolidated its theoretical apparatus [21; 22].

Methods

The study is theoretical and analytical. It combines a comparative review of the primary literature of cognitive linguistics, a critical examination of the evidence adduced for and against conceptual metaphor theory, and a descriptive analysis of illustrative Uzbek material. The Uzbek examples are treated as illustrations of a theoretical point rather than as a corpus-based claim about frequency, and the argument is accordingly framed in qualitative terms.

Results and discussion

The cognitive commitment and its consequences for semantics. The distinctive assumption of cognitive linguistics is that the study of language must be answerable to what is known about human cognition in general. From this assumption several consequences follow directly. Meaning is treated as conceptualisation rather than as a relation to the world, so that two expressions may pick out the same situation and still differ in meaning because they construe it differently. Meaning is treated as encyclopaedic: the semantic pole of a word is not a compact bundle of defining features but a point of access to an open-ended body



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of knowledge, which is why what counts as part of a word's meaning cannot be settled once and for all [4]. And the boundary between semantics and pragmatics loses its theoretical significance, since contextual adjustment is regarded as intrinsic to interpretation rather than as an operation performed on an already-complete literal meaning.

These commitments reorganise several classical problems. Polysemy, which formal approaches tend to treat as an inconvenience to be minimised by positing an abstract core meaning, becomes a central object of study: the senses of a word are analysed as a structured network radiating from a prototype by means of metaphorical and metonymic extension, and this network is itself evidence about conceptual organisation [21]. Categorisation is likewise reconsidered in the light of prototype effects, which show that category membership is graded and that instances differ in representativeness [23]. Historical semantics gains a systematic dimension: the recurrent pathways along which words shift meaning, notably from the domain of physical perception to that of intellection, are explained as the diachronic residue of synchronic conceptual mappings [24].

The structure of conceptual metaphor. On the standard account, a conceptual metaphor is a set of correspondences between two domains that preserves inferential structure. In the mapping of argument onto war, the participants correspond to opponents, the positions to territory, the objections to attacks, and the outcome to victory or defeat; expressions such as attacking a position or defending a claim are then not independent idioms but manifestations of a single underlying mapping [1; 2]. Three properties of such mappings are theoretically important. They are systematic, in that a single mapping licenses an open set of expressions. They are unidirectional: abstract domains are structured in terms of concrete ones and rarely the reverse. And they are partial: only certain aspects of



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the source are projected, so that each mapping simultaneously highlights some features of the target and hides others.

Partiality is the property with the greatest consequences outside linguistics, because it entails that the choice of metaphor shapes reasoning. If a social problem is construed as a disease, the inferences that follow concern diagnosis, contagion and cure; if the same problem is construed as a conflict, they concern enemies, strategy and victory. The two construals do not merely describe the problem differently but make different courses of action appear natural, which is the basis of the analysis of metaphor in political and institutional discourse [20]. The theoretical point is that metaphor is not a way of decorating an argument already formed, but part of the machinery by which the argument is formed.

Embodiment and the grounding of abstract concepts. The claim that source domains are grounded in bodily experience is the most ambitious element of the theory. In its refined form it holds that complex metaphors are composed of primary metaphors, each of which arises from a recurrent correlation in early experience: affection correlates with physical warmth, quantity with vertical extent, intimacy with proximity, difficulty with physical weight [10]. Because these correlations are given by the structure of the body and its ordinary environment rather than by culture, the resulting primary metaphors are predicted to be widespread across unrelated languages, whereas the complex metaphors built from them are predicted to vary.

Evidence for this position comes from converging sources. Reaction-time studies show that conventional metaphorical expressions impose no additional processing cost relative to literal paraphrases [7]. Gesture accompanying speech reveals spatial patterns consistent with the metaphors expressed verbally, including in speakers who are unaware of using them. Non-linguistic tasks show priming effects between source and target domains, and cross-linguistic comparison shows that



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differences in the habitual linguistic encoding of time correspond to differences in performance on non-linguistic temporal judgements [8; 9]. Taken together, this evidence supports the weaker and more defensible version of the embodiment claim: that metaphorical structure is available to and recruited by thought, rather than that all abstract thought is metaphorical in every act of cognition.

The principal objections and what they establish. The methodological objection concerning circularity retains its force and has had a productive effect on the field: it is the reason why the identification of metaphor in discourse has been formalised, and why corpus evidence and experimental evidence are now expected alongside constructed examples [12; 18]. The categorisation objection is supported by findings that conventional metaphors behave in comprehension like class-inclusion statements rather than like comparisons [13], and structure-mapping research offers a principled reconciliation: novel metaphors are processed by analogical alignment, and repeated use conventionalises the mapping into a stored category [14]. None of these objections overturns the central observation on which the theory rests — that expressions for abstract domains cluster systematically around a small number of concrete source domains — but each constrains what may legitimately be inferred from that observation.

Cross-linguistic and cultural variation. If metaphorical mappings were purely bodily in origin they would be universal; if purely cultural, they would be arbitrary. The evidence supports neither extreme. Variation has been shown to operate at several levels: languages may share a mapping but differ in which of its aspects are elaborated; they may prefer different source domains for the same target; and they may embed the same mapping in different cultural models, which alters its evaluative colouring [15; 16]. Emotion concepts provide the clearest case. The construal of anger in terms of heat and internal pressure recurs across many unrelated languages, which is consistent with a physiological basis, yet the details



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— which organ is involved, whether the process is described as boiling, burning or bursting, and how the resulting state is evaluated — differ from culture to culture. Uzbek material illustrates both sides of this picture. Anger and grief are regularly expressed through the heat of internal organs, as in constructions built on burning inside; the seat of emotion is located in the liver and the heart rather than in an undifferentiated interior, which reflects a cultural model with a long literary history in the region. Knowledge and understanding are expressed through vision, as in expressions meaning that a matter has become visible or clear. Life and time are construed as motion along a path, and moral qualities are mapped onto physical dimensions such as height, weight and straightness. The general mappings are familiar from the literature on European languages; the specific vehicles and their evaluative associations are not, and it is precisely this combination of shared skeleton and divergent elaboration that a typologically informed cognitive linguistics needs to account for.

Two methodological cautions follow for work on Uzbek and comparable languages. The first is that the presence of an expression in a dictionary is not evidence of its currency: claims about conceptual organisation require distributional evidence from usage, since introspection systematically over-represents vivid and lexicalised cases [17]. The second is that translation equivalence must not be mistaken for conceptual equivalence: an Uzbek and an English expression may be mutually translatable while differing in the mapping that motivates them, and this difference is exactly what a cognitive analysis should be able to detect.

Identifying metaphor in discourse. The question of how metaphor is to be identified reliably has become central to the empirical development of the field. Explicit procedures determine, for each lexical unit in a text, whether its contextual meaning contrasts with a more basic — typically more concrete, bodily or



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historically prior — meaning, and whether the contextual meaning can be understood by comparison with it [18]. Refinements extend the procedure to grammatical items and to indirect and implicit metaphor [19]. Such procedures do not settle the theoretical questions, and they raise questions of their own, notably how the basic sense is to be established without recourse to the analyst's intuition; but they make analyses replicable and comparable, which is the minimum condition for cumulative research. A further distinction, between metaphor that is used deliberately to invite a cross-domain comparison and metaphor that is merely conventional, has proved useful in discourse analysis, since only the former reliably engages the source domain in the mind of the hearer.

Metonymy and the limits of the two-domain model. Cognitive linguistics treats metonymy as a mechanism no less fundamental than metaphor, and in several respects prior to it. Where metaphor establishes a correspondence between two distinct domains, metonymy provides access to one element of a single domain through another that is salient within it, as when an institution is referred to by its location or a work by its author. The two mechanisms interact: many mappings that appear metaphorical on inspection turn out to have a metonymic origin, since the correlation in experience that gives rise to a primary metaphor is itself a relation of contiguity before it becomes a relation of similarity [10]. Recognising this dependence matters for analysis, because it explains why the boundary between metaphorical and metonymic readings is often indeterminate in actual discourse and why identification procedures must decide the question explicitly rather than assume it [18; 19].

Conceptual integration and the analysis of novel meaning. The two-domain model accounts well for entrenched mappings but less well for cases in which an expression yields structure present in neither of its inputs. The theory of conceptual integration addresses this by positing that elements from several mental spaces are



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selectively projected into a blended space, where they combine and develop inferences of their own [6]. The blend is temporary and constructed online, which makes the model suited to the analysis of novel figurative usage, of counterfactual reasoning and of complex expressions in which several mappings operate simultaneously. Its explanatory power, however, is purchased at a methodological cost: because a great many analyses can be represented as blends, the framework is more useful as a descriptive apparatus than as a source of testable predictions, and this asymmetry remains one of the open problems of the field.

Applications: lexicography, translation and language teaching. The cognitive account of meaning has consequences well beyond theory. In lexicography, the treatment of polysemy as a motivated radial network rather than an arbitrary list suggests that dictionary entries should present senses in an order that reflects their derivational relations, which makes them easier to learn and to remember [21]. In translation, the recognition that mappings vary in elaboration and evaluation explains a familiar difficulty: an expression may be rendered accurately at the level of propositional content while losing the conceptual mapping that motivates it, and the choice between preserving the image and preserving the sense becomes an explicit decision rather than an unnoticed loss.

In language teaching the implications are equally direct. Idioms and phrasal expressions, traditionally presented as arbitrary items to be memorised, can be grouped by the conceptual mapping that motivates them, and empirical studies of instruction organised in this way report better retention than list-based learning. For Uzbek learners of English, and equally for learners of Uzbek, the productive comparison is not between individual idioms but between mappings: identifying where the two languages share a mapping, where they share it but elaborate it differently, and where one language uses a source domain the other does not, gives



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the learner a systematic basis for prediction instead of an unordered inventory of exceptions [15; 16].

Conclusion

Cognitive linguistics offers a coherent answer to the question of how thought and language are related: linguistic structure is not an autonomous formal system but a reflection of general conceptual capacities, and meaning is conceptualisation rather than reference. Within this framework metaphor ceases to be a rhetorical ornament and becomes a mechanism by which abstract domains acquire structure, so that the study of metaphorical expression is at the same time the study of conceptual organisation.

The evidence assembled over four decades supports the core of this position while constraining its stronger formulations. Conventional metaphorical language is not processed as deviation; metaphorical patterns influence non-linguistic judgement; and the distribution of expressions across domains is systematic rather than random. At the same time, the objections concerning circularity, the role of categorisation in conventional metaphor comprehension, and the gap between linguistic and conceptual evidence remain substantive, and they define the methodological standards that current work must meet.

The most productive direction for further research is typological and corpus-based. The universality of primary metaphors and the extent of cultural variation in their elaboration can only be established on data from languages beyond the small set that has dominated the literature. For Uzbek this implies a concrete programme: the construction of an annotated corpus of figurative usage, the application of an explicit identification procedure to it, and the systematic comparison of the resulting mappings with those described for typologically and culturally distant languages.



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