

## Metaphor analysis in the educational discourse: A critical review

ZHENG Hong-bo<sup>1</sup>, SONG Wen-juan<sup>2</sup>

(1. College English Section, Zhejiang Wanli University, Zhejiang 315101, China;

2. College of Foreign Languages, Ningbo Dahongying College, Zhejiang 315101, China)

**Abstract:** Metaphor analysis is based on the belief that metaphor is a powerful linguistic device, because it extends and encapsulates knowledge about the familiarity and unfamiliarity. Metaphor analysis has been adopted in the educational discourse. The paper categorizes the previous relevant research into 3: interactions between learners and institutions, teachers' perceptions of teaching and learners' beliefs of learning. And a critical review of 3 kinds of studies and suggestions for further research are ensued.

**Key words:** metaphor; metaphor analysis; belief

### 1. Defining metaphor analysis

Metaphor analysis, a method of discourse analysis, stems largely from the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in which they explored the role that metaphor plays in human cognition. The premise behind this methodology is that by examining the metaphors that human beings use in describing their experiences and beliefs, people can begin to uncover meanings beneath those directly and consciously, which are set forth by the writer or the speaker.

Since language is fundamentally metaphorical, people's conceptual system, which governs their everyday talk, thought and even action, is also fundamentally metaphorical. Metaphor is regarded as a way of thinking about or conceptualizing the world. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 232-233) suggested that a large part of self-understanding is the "search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives... The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself".

Moser (2000) argued that metaphor analysis is useful for accessing tacit knowledge and exploring "social and cultural processes of understanding" (p. 5). While Bullough and Gitlin (1995) stressed the power of metaphor analysis to provide insight into assumptions that both "characterize a concept and drive action" (Bullough, 1991, p. 51).

The study of metaphor has gained acceptance as a legitimate alternative to conservative and conventional perspectives in exploring how participants think.

### 2. Application of metaphor analysis in education

Metaphor creation has been used in academic settings to encourage learners' insight and understanding. Metaphors are created to illuminate and solidify their understandings. For example, in *Teaching Is Like...?*, a group of teachers reported on the effect of writing and talking about the metaphors they created to symbolize their views of themselves as educators. They concluded, "Writing a metaphor for their work can focus and energize educators" (Hagstrom, et al., 2000, p. 24).

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ZHENG Hong-bo, lecturer of College English Section, Zhejiang Wanli University; research fields: corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics.

SONG Wen-juan, lecturer of College of Foreign Languages, Ningbo Dahongying College; research fields: translation studies, applied linguistics.

The belief that an analysis of metaphor use is a reliable way of making otherwise unvoiced assumptions explicit, which has informed the methodology of a number of recent of educational research.

It seems fair to say that research in this area has so far tended to fall into 3 categories: studies which deal with the interactions between learners and institutions (Hoffman & Kretoivics, 2004), studies which consider teachers' attitudes towards or perceptions of teaching (Oxford, et al., 1998) and studies about the learners' beliefs of learning (Bozlk, 2002).

### **2.1 Education model and metaphor**

During the past few decades, more and more educators and researchers have succeeded in freeing their minds sufficiently to embrace or imagine many metaphors of teaching and learning to live by. The existing literature mainly discusses the metaphors demonstrating the way in which students relate to faculty and educational institutions, for example, concept depicted in the student as client metaphor; expectations generated from the students as customers metaphor; implications of the students as junior partners metaphor (Comesky, McCool, Byrnes & Weber, 1992).

Hence, many new metaphors describing the interaction between students and their institutions of higher education have been proposed. Three frequently used metaphors are "the student as a customer" (Comesky, et al., 1992; Schwartzman, 1995), "the student as a product" (Sirvanci, 1996), and "the student as employee" (Hoffman, & Kretoivics, 2004). These 3 metaphors have emerged from the quality movement in the for-profit sector of business and industry.

More significantly, teaching as persuasion metaphor has been offered as a new pedagogy for the new millennium (e.g., Murphy, 2001; Alexander, Fives, Buehl & Mulhern, 2002).

### **2.2 Teaching with the aid of metaphor**

Since metaphor functions as a cognitive instrument of observing the world and creating new senses, it is significant to introduce metaphor into language teaching. According to Ortony (1975, p. 45), "metaphors are necessary and not just nice" and he explained that there are various ways in which metaphor can facilitate learning. Metaphor can impress a concept or idea through the powerful image or vividness of the expression. Metaphor can also capture the inexpressible information that what a metaphor conveys is virtually impossible to express in any other way without losing the potency of the message.

The cognitive turn in linguistics has shifted attention to problems of meaning, idiomaticity and metaphoricity in language. For teachers of foreign languages, these insights may be useful for traditional hurdles in language teaching and learning, and may provide more efficient and creative ways of presenting English language data for learners from other cultures.

The pedagogical usefulness of metaphors as a teaching and memory device has a strong research literature. Many of the early researches sought to demonstrate the role of vivid image-evoking metaphors in complex memory tasks. For example, the awareness of cognitive metaphor would offer a more solid and comprehensive tool for the teaching/learning of figurative expressions. The research of metaphor's applications in vocabulary teaching found that the introduction of metaphor in teaching does make memorizing some senses of a word much easier. The research of its application can also be done into idioms and proverbs. The comparative analysis of Chinese and English metaphorical uses can also be a strand of current research.

The application of metaphor in teaching foreign language can contribute to the research on SLA (Second Language Acquisition), and deepen and broaden the research on metaphor as well. Metaphor theory can help extend learners' understanding of different senses of a single word and enhance speakers' or hearers' ability of

communication (CAI, 2003).

Therefore, it is periodically advocated that metaphors should be used in direct classroom instruction to aid learners' understanding of subject content through analogy between familiar experience and new concepts or to raise learners' awareness of specific everyday uses of language, for example, exploring metaphors in science (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p.154).

### **2.3 Belief studies with metaphor analysis**

Nowadays another interesting way of collecting participants' beliefs and attitudes by metaphor analysis interests more and more researchers. The way is asking people to complete statements with metaphors as they wish.

Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988). Since 1980s, beliefs from second/foreign language learners and teachers have become an important field of research. Research in the field of teachers' thinking shows that teachers' teaching behaviors are guided by cognitive psychological processes that construct theories, beliefs, metaphors and mental models.

But prior belief of learners or teachers is a theoretical construct that is not directly observable. As Johnston (1992, p. 125) has indicated, the prior beliefs "are not usually consciously articulated without some assistance". So these prior beliefs need to be made explicit, and identifying, analyzing, and critically reflecting on metaphors help this process of making them explicit. As Berliner (1990, p. 86) noted, for teachers, "Metaphors are powerful forces, conditioning the way we come to think about ourselves and others". As Thornbury (1996, p. 284) noted, without adjustments at the level of awareness of prior beliefs, "the effects of training may only be superficial".

## **3. Analyzing beliefs via metaphors**

Research of beliefs and practices with metaphor analysis has examined a number of issues, including the concept of "teacher" as pre-service teachers perceive it (Bullough, 1991; Saban, Koçbeker & Saban, 2006), the role of teachers (Clandinin, 1986; Block, 1992; Oxford, et al., 1998), the role of textbooks (McGrath, 2002; McGrath, 2006), thinking and actions of experienced teachers (Sakui & Gaies, 2003), learners' different perceptions about language teaching (Salomone, 1998).

### **3.1 Metaphor and teachers' teaching belief**

Teachers' beliefs constitute one of the dimensions of their cognition, an inclusive concept for the complexity of teachers' mental lives (Borg, 2003a) which has become a well-established area of analysis in second language (L2) teaching and learning. In particular, teachers' cognition refers to the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching what teachers know, believe, and think (Borg, 2003a, p. 81).

Bullough and Gitlin (1995) noted that part of becoming a teacher involves accepting the metaphors that define the teaching experience. The seminal work, *Metaphor We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), drew attention to the significance of metaphor in everyday language use and within a decade of its publication educational researchers had begun to make claims in respect of teacher metaphors.

Thus, it is only by a process of critical reflection on metaphors (old and new), can language teachers understand and combine the unknown into what they already know (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottamp & Cohn, 1989).

#### **3.1.1 Pre-service teachers' belief**

The previous studies on teachers' beliefs with metaphor analysis have mainly taken the pre-service teachers or prospective teachers as subjects. These studies have examined and classified the metaphors that prospective teachers are formulated to describe the concept of "teacher" (Bullough, 1991; Saban, et al., 2006). For pre-service

language teachers, the identification and analysis of metaphors they use can be a basis of achieving coherence of thought and action in a teaching practicum (Bullough, 1991).

A review of the research literature also reveals that there are numerous metaphors for understanding the concept of “teacher”, each one providing a different schemata (Ben-Peretz, Mendelson & Kron, 2003; Black & Halliwell, 2000; Fenwick, 2000; Mahlios & Maxson, 1998; Markgraf & Pavlik, 1998; Oxford, et al., 1998; Parsons, Brown & Worley, 2004).

### 3.1.2 In-service teachers’ belief

Munby (1986, p. 201, as cited in Thornbury, 1991, p. 194) suggested that “one fruitful way to begin to understand the substantive content of teachers’ thinking is to attend carefully to the metaphors that appear when teachers express themselves”.

#### 3.1.2.1 Role of the teacher

Metaphors are also an important part of teachers’ personal practical knowledge that shapes their understanding of their role as teachers (Pajak, 1986; Clandinin, 1986). Pajak (1986, p. 123), for example, maintained that metaphors can be a means for teachers to verbalize their “professional identity”.

In English language teaching, different representations of metaphors have been suggested (e.g., Block, 1992; Oxford, et al., 1998). Block (1992, p. 44), for example, used the term “macro-metaphors” that covers general representations of the role of the teacher. He said the 2 most common of these macro-metaphors used are the “teacher as contracted professional” and “teacher as a providing parent”.

The earlier research done by Marchant (1992, pp. 33-45, as cited in McGrath, 2006, p. 172) elicited similes, on the grounds of their greater transparency, for the words “teacher”, “student” and “classroom” from 102 undergraduate in a teacher preparation program at an unnamed university of the Mid-western in the U.S. and 104 experienced teachers following masters programs. Factor analysis revealed the respondents’ similes could be grouped into 8 “interpretable” factors (e.g., authority, caregiving, production, captives) and that there was some internal coherence (e.g., similes within the authority construct included “animal trainer” for teacher, “wild animal” for student and “jungle” for classroom).

Oxford, et al. (1998) investigated teachers’ metaphors in L2 teaching. Their results (in the form of a typology of metaphor usage) and analysis of metaphor usage were generated from narrative case studies from various literature reviews on language learning experiences. Oxford, et al.’s (1998) typology covers 4 perspectives of teaching: (1) Social order: for example, teacher as manufacturer, teacher as competitor; (2) Cultural transmission: for example, teacher as conduit, teacher as repeater; (3) Learner-centered growth: for example, teacher as nurturer, teacher as lover, teacher as scaffolder, teacher as entertainer; and (4) Social reform: for example, teacher as acceptor, teacher as learning partner.

There are other metaphors of the teacher people come across in the literature: teacher as coach, teacher as consultant, teacher as performer, teacher as orchestra conductor.

Most frequently cited and referred research is Cortazzi and Jin (1999, pp. 149-176). They explored teachers’ and students’ metaphors of teaching, learning and language, and found that “metaphors are a bridge to learn more about teachers and students” (p. 173).

#### 3.1.2.2 Role of the textbook

Some researchers begin to gain some insights into teachers’ views of English language course books from the metaphors they use to describe them. For instance, McGrath (2002; 2006) discussed teachers’ beliefs concerning language teaching textbooks as reflected in their use of metaphors and similes elicited from Brazilian or Hong

Kong teachers of English and suggested varying degrees of textbook dependence.

### 3.1.2.3 Teachers' metaphor and teachers' practice

While Clandinin (1986) suggested that metaphors are indications of the way teachers think about teaching and also guide the way they act in the classroom. Not only are metaphors a wonderful way to portray teachers' understanding of teaching, they are a helpful way for teachers to focus on their own teaching style. By studying their own teaching metaphors, they can reflect on the methods and practices that accompany particular metaphors and how they impact their classroom.

And Marchant (1992, as cited in Thornbury, 1991, p. 194) referred to papers by Tobin (1990) which offered evidence that teachers' classroom practices are consistent with the metaphors they use about teaching.

Sakui and Gaies (2003) reported on a self-study by a Japanese EFL teacher and her beliefs about writing and teaching writing by analysis of the metaphors used by the teacher in diary entries and interviews. The findings pointed out the importance of teachers' beliefs on action as well as the close relationship between beliefs, identities and changes in metaphors may signal changes in conceptions of teaching.

## 3.2 Metaphor and learners' belief

As Wenden (1986, p. 3) said, all studies on universal language processing strategies and communication strategies focus on the cognitive aspect but they do not examine the learners' perception of what they do to learn or manage their learning. They do not seek to present the process of L2 learning from the learners' viewpoint.

The increase in research into beliefs about SLA went hand in hand with the shift in focus from the teaching to the learning perspective, and thus to the learners. One essential element of student cognitive development is reflection. Reflection is a meta-cognitive effort that enhances past learning and makes new connections to aid future learning. Handy (1998) stated, "We learn by reflecting on what has happened". He continued, "...we must also provide more opportunities for reflective learning..." (p. 19). Asking students to reflect on themselves as learners and to create metaphors is one way of providing opportunities for student reflection.

To use another metaphor, beliefs are like a lens which people use to interpret, or rather, to re-interpret, what happens around them. As has been widely claimed, people's attitudes and beliefs are reflected in the language they use, it should be possible to gain some insight into students' views of English language learning from the metaphors they use to describe them.

However, the analysis of learners' beliefs and classroom practices has not received a fair level of attention in SLA teaching and learning except some sporadic efforts made (Swales, 1994; Bozlk, 2002; Kramsch, 2003).

### 3.2.1 Studies abroad

The earlier relevant efforts on the use of metaphors to elicit beliefs and attitudes on language learning can be traced to Krasnik (1986) and Thornbury (1991). But their efforts did not receive proper attention until recently.

Swales (1994) used pictorial metaphors to elicit learners' belief of 12 adult female students at beginning-level in Dubai. The study shows there are noticeably no machine metaphors, no communication metaphors, and no pictures of the mind as a computer. All the metaphors are firmly rooted in natural elements such as land, village life and family. This obviously relates closely to their own political and social experiences as women in the Third World countries. And the researchers suggested pictorial metaphors can provide a useful vehicle for getting L2 learners at all stages to make explicit their own view of language learning. This is particularly helpful at the beginner or pre-intermediate stage when learners lack the meta-language in the L2 to explain their own theories of language learning.

In a follow-up to the same study, Bozlk (2002) asked students in a general education cluster course to create metaphors for themselves as learners at 4 points during an academic year. The metaphors were then analyzed and

categorized. Results indicate 4 categories were used: animal, object, human and action. These metaphors represent 4 themes: the process of learning, concern for retention of information, feelings of being overwhelmed and the usefulness of information learned. Students showed an increasing ability and willingness to offer metaphors over the course of the 4 surveys. The value of the insight resulting from the metaphors for college faculty was explored and 7 implications were discussed.

Kramersch (2003) also turned to metaphor approach to investigate beliefs about SLA held by learners. Kramersch illustrated convincingly her approach by first drawing on an analysis of college students' explicit metaphors for language learning, and secondly, on a metaphoric analysis of students' essays. She argued that learners and teachers construct representations of themselves, their experience etc., through metaphor, seen as mental spaces.

### 3.2.2 Studies in China

However, a remarkably fewer number of studies have been carried out in the context of China. WANG and XU (2006) took a metaphoric cognitive approach to the English majors' belief system concerned with English teaching and learning with reference to the model set by Cortazzi and Jin (1999). The study mainly adopted the descriptive researching method, the subjects concerned in the open questionnaires to elicit their metaphoric expressions as required data. The statistical analysis of the valid data reveals: (1) metaphor, as a tool of representation and reflection, is an indispensable part of the learners' cognitive study; (2) learners' English teaching learning beliefs are based on their own life and study experience and manifest certain cultural trend and value orientation.

ZHENG's (2008) study was developed as a simple, economical questionnaire to allow the researchers to survey learners' images of their English learning. The study investigated and classified students' metaphors about English learning and the concept of teacher. After eliciting and categorizing the data, the research showed there are clear, patterned images of their English learning in subjects' metaphors. Specific metaphors used by students to describe teaching were contextually analyzed. Several major conceptual categories have emerged, for example, tool, consumption, journey, sports and nature metaphors for English learning; friend and sunshine metaphor for concept of teacher. Such images cluster in such categories as mountain-climbing, consumption, friend and sun.

These metaphors provide some insights into the images that a selected group of English language learners hold about teaching and learning English language in China. This research indicates metaphor creation can provide useful insight into the student audience and can also serve as a strategy for encouraging student reflection.

## 4. Suggestions for the future research

Here, the author just discussed what these metaphors illuminate, but what these metaphors shape, prompt and produce are not tasted. This study pointed to several areas that could be of interest for future research. For example, how high school students view their English learning and their ideal teacher should be investigated as well as difference in conceptual metaphors concerning subjects' racial, class, gender, family and education background. The ensuing discussion can be addressed to the metaphors which successful English learners offer.

Another area for study will be the cause-and-effect relationship between students' choices of metaphors and their actual action and behavior. Studies should focus on that such metaphors have significant implications for learners' perceptions of their own responsibility for their performance as well as their subsequent behavior towards the English learning. Perhaps, a closer look into the issue is warranted and could yield interesting results.

Furthermore, metaphors about teaching and learning provided by learners in different stages of college English learning is worth exploring.

## 5. Critical evaluation of metaphor analysis

In a nutshell, in the field of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is no longer thought of as a mere decoration of language, but functions as a cognitive instrument. It pervades people's everyday language. Language and thought are correlated and indispensable.

Since language is fundamentally metaphorical, the conceptual system that governs people's everyday talk, thought and even action is fundamentally metaphorical. Metaphor is regarded as a way of thinking about or conceptualizing the world. From cognitive perspective, metaphor functions as a "bridge" for people to gain a better cognition and understanding of the new, abstract and not well-delineated concepts. Therefore, metaphor is adopted as an analytical tool in many discourses. However, the main deficit for this is "metaphors are selective and they represent a part, but not the whole, of the phenomena they describe" (Weade & Ernst, 1990, p. 133).

As Morgan (1997) pointed out, metaphors are also "a way of not seeing" (p. 5, emphasis in original). In short, any metaphoric lens that produces particular knowledge will also be distorted, biased, incomplete and potentially misleading (Morgan, 1997, p. 5). To counter this metaphoric myopia, some concede the limitations of a single metaphoric lens and opt instead for the multiple visions provided by employing more than one metaphor (Morgan, 1997).

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