

Cultural and Cognitive Dimensions of Metaphor Aptness

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Abstract

This paper discusses cultural and cognitive factors that may affect the degree of the aptness of metaphors. A given metaphor may have different degrees of aptness across different cultures. Geographical features of the area and the role of the base concept in the lives of people are cultural aspects that may affect the degree of the aptness of a metaphor for people of a culture. A metaphor with 'lighthouse' as the base domain would have a higher degree of aptness for people living near the sea compared to people living far away from the sea. Folktales and religion are also important aspects of culture that may have some degree of influence on the aptness of metaphors. In summary, the cultural dimensions of the concepts that are involved in the base and target domains of a metaphor could affect the degree of the aptness of that metaphor for people of that culture. Finally, the roles of metonymic relations and semantic features in the degree of aptness are discussed.

Keywords: culture, metaphor aptness, metonymic relations

1. Introduction

Metaphor, the ubiquitous aspect of language and daily communication, is a form of language through which a word or phrase that literally refers to one idea or one thing is used to refer to a different idea or different thing (Carroll, 2008). In other words, a metaphorical statement describes and simulates one thing in terms of another thing. Metaphor is not just a tool for making language more beautiful; it is a way for thinking, reasoning, and imagining more effectively (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Sweetser, 1990; Turner, 1991). Metaphors can be studied from the perspectives of literature or psycholinguistics. In the area of literature, just aesthetic aspects of metaphor are studied. In this area, metaphor is seen as a tool to ornament language. From a psycholinguistic perspective, what is important is the process of metaphor comprehension. In this area, researchers are interested to know how metaphors are understood and how figurative meaning, which is not directly related to the surface form of metaphorical statement, is derived from that statement. Here, a fundamental question is how we go beyond the literal meaning of a statement and derive the metaphorical meaning, a process that poses some serious cognitive and sociocultural difficulties among L2 learners and challenges their conceptual meanings based on the existing literature (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987).

According to Carroll (2008), every metaphor in the general form of *X is a Y* consists of three main parts: topic (target), vehicle (base or source), and ground. *X* is the topic of the metaphor and *Y* is the vehicle. The ground of a metaphor is the implied similarity between topic and vehicle. For example, in the metaphor *John is a giraffe*, the topic (John) is described and understood in terms of vehicle (giraffe). The ground of this metaphor is the tallness of both John and the giraffe. In fact, metaphor is used to highlight a similarity between topic and vehicle. In a metaphorical description, the properties of vehicles are borrowed and attributed to the topic. This paper specifically focuses on metaphor aptness as a key feature of every metaphor (Mashhady et al., 2014). The following section looks at this concept and a number of studies that have been conducted on it. Then, cultural factors that may affect metaphor aptness are discussed.

2. Metaphor Aptness

The aptness of a metaphor is one of the inherent features of that metaphor. According to Chiappe, Kennedy, and Smykowski (2003), aptness is the degree to which a metaphorical statement expresses important features of the target. Blasko and Connine (1993) say that aptness of a metaphor is the extent to which the non-literal meaning of an expression is conveyed. The aptness of a metaphor refers to the degree of fitness between base and target. In other words, if the base of a metaphor is a good domain for describing the target, that metaphor will be apt. According to Jones and Estes (2005), if a salient feature of the base of a metaphor is attributed to a relevant dimension of the target, that metaphor will have a high degree of aptness. They add that aptness differs from conventionality in that it refers to the degree of fitness between base and target, while conventionality takes only the base into account.

It has been found that lexical decision on metaphorical features is dependent on metaphor aptness, particularly for unconventional metaphors (Blasko & Connine, 1993). The findings of a study conducted by Chiappe and Kennedy (1999) suggested that for more apt figurative statements, metaphorical statements were preferred to simile forms; on the other hand, for less apt figurative statements, the simile forms were preferred to metaphor forms. Bowdle and Gentner (1999) propose that in a comparison between metaphor form and simile form of a figurative statement, preference for metaphor form indicates that the statement is understood through a categorization process. On the other hand, preference for simile form indicates that the figurative statement is understood through a comparison process.

The degree of the aptness of a metaphor may be dependent on many factors. Since the degree of aptness is dependent on the degree of fitness between base and target, structural features of base and target domains are key factors that affect the degree of the aptness of a metaphor. From the perspective of comparative views, if the base and target domains of a metaphor are structurally similar, the degree of the aptness of that metaphor will be high. This is emphasized by the structure-mapping theory, which is one of the comparative views of metaphor comprehension. According to the structure-mapping, the relations between elements are the key factors in metaphor processing (Gentner, 1983). In other words, if the relation between elements in the base is similar to the relations between elements in the target, the metaphor will have a high degree of aptness. Here, the concrete features of elements may not be very important. What is important is how one element in the base is related to another element in the base. If two elements in the target have a similar relationship, that metaphor could be processed on the basis of similarity between these relations. It should be noted that similarity between relations may exist between two sets of relations, not just one pair of relations. The following section discusses some cultural factors that may affect the degree of the aptness of metaphors.

3. The Role of Culture in Metaphor Aptness

Results of a study conducted by Eskandari et al. (2020) indicated that there were significant differences between degrees of the aptness of metaphors for English and Persian native speakers. For example, the metaphor *A lawyer is a lighthouse* had a degree of aptness of 6.1 for English native speakers, while the degree of the aptness of this metaphor was 4.5 for Persian native speakers. This is a significant difference. Also, the metaphor *Insult is sword blow* had a degree of aptness of 5.9 for English native speakers, while the degree of the aptness of this metaphor was 7 for Persian native speakers. On the other hand, the degrees of the aptness of some metaphors were almost the same for English and Persian native speakers of the study. For example, each one of the metaphors *A job is a jail*, *A judge is a balance*, *Music is medicine*, and *A rooster is an alarm clock* had almost the same degree of aptness for English and Persian native speakers. This highlights universality and cross-cultural differences in metaphor and in the mechanisms that are involved in metaphor processing. Such aptness of metaphors can have their roots in

the variety of socio-cultural differences between Persian and English based on the current literature (e.g., Blasko & Connine, 1993; Eskandari et al., 2020; Shabani et al., 2019; Sweetser, 1990).

The specific question that is raised here is that why some metaphors have the same degree of aptness for people from different cultures, while others have different degrees of aptness for people growing up in different cultural contexts. To answer this question, we need to look at cultural aspects of concepts that are used as the source and target of a metaphor. This is particularly the case with the concept that is used as the source of a metaphor. As mentioned, the metaphor *A lawyer is a lighthouse* had a high degree of aptness for English native speakers. This could be explained by cultural and also geographical features, which are a part of the culture of English speaking countries. For those people who live near the sea or ocean, concepts such as ship, island, lighthouse, anchor, and sail could be proper options to metaphorically describe other concepts. In fact, it can be said that these concepts have a strong presence in the lives of people living in such cultural and geographical areas. The familiarity of people with semantic aspects of these concepts helps them to use these concepts to metaphorically describe other concepts. This could explain why metaphors in which these concepts are used as the source have higher degrees of acceptability and aptness for those people who live in such cultural and geographical contexts. In fact, it can be said that concepts related to the sea are a conventional way of describing other concepts that are less familiar for people living near the sea. In other words, since concepts related to the sea are more familiar for people living near the sea, they are good options for describing less familiar concepts. This could facilitate the process of understanding less familiar concepts. In English, there are many expressions in which the term *lighthouse* is used metaphorically. The sentences “*I’m lighthouse* rather than lifeboat. I don’t rescue, but help others to find their way to shore”, “Don’t forget that maybe *you are the lighthouse* in someone’s storm”, “*Lighthouse is the slave* of those who trim the lamps”, and “*The scars you share become lighthouses* for other people who are headed to the same rocks you hit” are just several examples in which the term *lighthouse* is metaphorically used to describe other concepts. It seems that the metaphorical use of *lighthouse* is much commoner in English than in Persian. The cultural and geographical features of English speaking countries could explain why such metaphorical uses are commoner in English compared to Persian. Therefore, it would be no surprise to see the metaphor *A lawyer is a lighthouse* has a higher degree of aptness for native speakers of English compared to Persian native speakers.

A similar situation that can make the point clearer is the cultural context of Eskimos. Because of environmental and geographical features, Eskimos’ life is interwoven with snow. Therefore, those metaphors in which snow is used as the base could have a high degree of acceptability and aptness for Eskimos. Familiarity with snow and its inherent features make it a very good source domain for understanding less familiar concepts. According to Bowdle and Gentner (2005), the concept of the *snowflake* has a lot of features, each of which can be the defining feature of a metaphoric category. The term *snowflake* may refer to metaphoric categories such as things that are ephemeral or have a very short period of life, things that accumulate gradually, things that are unique, things that are associated with winter, things that are delicate, things that are white, or things that fall down slowly from a high location (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005). When

the term *snowflake* is used as the source of a metaphor, each of these metaphoric categories can be created in the mind of the comprehender. It is the nature of the target that determines which one of these metaphoric categories is fit. If the term *youth* is used as the target of the metaphor, the metaphoric category or the feature of 'being ephemeral and having a short period of life' is fit. This fitness makes the metaphor *Youth is snowflake* meaningful and understandable. If the term *child* is used as the target of the metaphor, the metaphoric category or the feature of 'being unique is fit. This makes the metaphor *A child is a snowflake* meaningful and interpretable. Familiarity with snow and its inherent features could make such metaphors easily understandable and apt for Skimos and those people who live in cold areas. The understanding of such metaphors may not be that much easy for people who live in tropical areas and those who have never seen snow in their lives.

The metaphor *Insult is a sword blow* was another metaphor that had different degrees of aptness for English and Persian native speakers in the study conducted by Eskandari et al. (2020). The significant difference between degrees of aptness may be explained on the basis of cultural differences. The term *sword* has been widely used in Persian literature, folktales, and religious narratives. Therefore, this concept is highly familiar for people living in the Persian cultural context. This could explain why this metaphor was a highly apt metaphor for Persian native speakers of the study. There are a lot of Persian statements in which a sudden negative shock is described as the blow of a sword. In fact, in the Persian language and culture, the term *sword* is a commonly-used tool for the metaphorical description of other concepts. For example, in one Persian metaphorical description, defeating rivals is described by a sword blow. *Her words were cutting sword* is another Persian statement in which the words of a speaker are described as a cutting sword.

The results obtained by Eskandari et al. (2020) indicated that while some metaphors had different degrees of aptness for English and Persian native speakers, some had the same degree of aptness for the two groups. For example, the degrees of the aptness of the metaphor *Music is medicine* were very close for English and Persian native speakers (8.1 and 7.9). This could be explained by the universal features of the metaphor. The source of this metaphor is *medicine*. This is a universal and worldly known concept. It is not specific to a certain culture or a certain geographical area of the world. All people around the world know what medicine is and what effects it has. It is also the case with the target of this metaphor. The concept of *music* and its semantic aspects are known to all people around the world. In fact, it can be said that the degree of familiarity of source and target of this metaphor is almost the same for people of different cultures in different places of the world. Medicine has the same function in the lives of people living in different places with different cultures. Music also has the same function in the lives of people living around the world. Both of them help people to get rid of some kind of pain, to reach tranquillity, and to enhance their psychological state. These universal features of *medicine* and *music* could explain why the metaphor *Music is medicine* is a universal metaphor and has the same degree of aptness for people of different cultures.

Discussing universality and cross-cultural differences of metaphor, Kövecses (2005) says that universal and near-universal metaphors function at a global level and do not specify minor details. For example, at a universal or conceptual level, the metaphor *The angry person is a pressurized container* does

not specify anything about minor details of the words used in this metaphor. At this conceptual or universal level, it is not clear what kind of container is used, what material fills the container, and how the pressure increases inside the container. Kövecses (2005) adds that although conceptual metaphors have universal features, there are some variations across languages and cultures. Among the causes of variations in metaphor, he refers to differential concerns, awareness of context, differential interests, and differential memory. Each one of these factors could have some impact on the aptness of a metaphor in one way or another.

4. The Role of Metonymic Relations in Aptness

Carroll (2008) classifies figurative language into five categories: metaphor, idiom, metonymy, proverb, and indirect speech act. Although this classification distinguishes between metonymy and metaphor, sometimes it is not possible to see them as two distinct figures of speech. Many metaphors are essentially based on metonymy. Similarly, it is not always possible to distinguish between metaphor and idiom because many idioms are essentially metaphors. There is a debate between two groups of researchers about the role of metonymy in metaphor processing. One group of researchers hold that event correlation metaphors are independent of metonymy (Grady, 1997a, 1997b; Grady & Johnson, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). In contrast, another group of researchers believe that correlation metaphors arise from or are connected with metonymy (Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Barcelona, 2000; Brdar & Brdar Szabó, 2007; Radden, 2002; Kövecses & Radden, 1998; Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Taylor, 1989). This section takes the latter view and specifically focuses on the role of metonymy in metaphor and its aptness. Kövecses (2013) argues that correlation metaphors arise from structural representations in a metonymy-based mechanism. He discusses several examples to emphasize the role of metonymy in correlation metaphors. The metaphor *Anger is heat* is a correlation metaphor that could be based on a metonymic relationship between anger and heat. Since the emotional state of anger is accompanied by an increase in body temperature, it could be said that the concept of 'heat' metonymically stands for 'anger' in this metaphor.

Another example is the metaphor *Intimacy is closeness*, which is a correlation-based metaphor. Since the state of intimacy between two individuals is usually accompanied by close physical distance, it could be said that the two concepts of 'intimacy' and 'physical closeness' are metonymically related. Therefore, the metaphor *Intimacy is closeness* can be seen as a correlation metaphor that is based on a metonymic relationship between source and target of the metaphor. If the metonymic relationship between source and target of a metaphor is strong, that metaphor has a high degree of aptness.

Among the metaphors that were studied by Eskandari et al. (2020), the metaphors *Anger is eruption* and *Music is medicine* had a high degree of aptness for both English and Persian native speakers. This could be explained on the basis of metonymic relations. As mentioned, the concept of 'anger' is metonymically related to the concept of 'heat'. Similarly, the concept of 'eruption' is metonymically associated with the concept of 'heat', as volcano eruption is accompanied by the production of heat. Therefore, the two concepts

of 'anger' and 'eruption' are metonymically related to the concept of 'heat'. In this case, it can be said that anger and eruption are in an indirect metonymic relationship with each other. In fact, they are related to each other through the concept of 'heat', which is metonymically related to both of them. Also, the concept of 'anger' is metonymically related to the concept of 'loud sound', as many people usually shout or produce loud sounds during the emotional state of anger. The concept of 'eruption' is also metonymically related to the concept of 'loud sound', as the eruption of a volcano is accompanied by a loud sound. Again, it can be said that the two concepts of 'anger' and 'eruption' are in an indirect metonymic relationship with each other. In other words, since the concept of 'loud sound' is metonymically related to the two concepts of 'anger' and 'eruption', these two concepts are metonymically related to each other through the concept of 'loud sound'. Therefore, it can be said that the two concepts of 'anger' and 'eruption' are metonymically related to each other in at least two ways. This double-route metonymic relationship could explain why the metaphor *Anger is eruption* has a high degree of aptness.

A similar explanation can be applied for the metaphor *Music is medicine*. In many cases, listening to slow music is accompanied by an emotional state of tranquillity and relaxation. It can be said that the concept of 'music' is metonymically related to the concept of 'tranquillity' for many people. Similarly, the concept of 'medicine' is metonymically associated with the concept of 'tranquillity', as medicine could be the cause of tranquillity. Similar to the previous metaphor, it can be said that the concept of 'tranquillity' functions as a metonymic bridge between 'music' and 'medicine'. In daily experiences, many people use medicine and music to tranquillize themselves. Therefore, it can be said that direct metonymic relationships *music ↔ tranquillity* and *medicine ↔ tranquillity*, and indirect metonymic relationship *music ↔ medicine* are strong relationships. These strong metonymic relationships could explain the high degree of the aptness of the metaphor *Music is medicine*. Several metonymic relationships between source and target, and strength of the metonymic relationship between source and target are two factors that could have a significant effect on the degree of aptness. In the following section, the role of a shared semantic feature of source and target in the aptness of a metaphor is discussed.

5. The Role of Semantic Features and Repeated Use in Aptness

Among theories that have been suggested to describe semantic spaces of concepts, distributed models of conceptual representations have a special place, as they have been very successful to describe many aspects of language comprehension. According to these models, every individual semantic feature of a concept is represented by a node in a connectionist network of nodes (Caramazza et al., 1990; Masson, 1995). From the perspective of these models, every concept is processed through the co-activation of its features and the nodes that represent those features (McRae et al., 1997; Moss et al., 2007; Tyler et al., 1996; Tyler & Moss, 2001; Tyler et al., 2000; Vigliocco, et al., 2004). These models assume a componential nature for the meanings of concepts (Taylor et al., 2011). That is, the whole meaning of every concept can be

disintegrated into smaller semantic units and sub-units. This assumption of distributed models of conceptual representations can help us to explain why some metaphors have a high degree of aptness.

The metaphor *My job is a jail* is a good example that shows how a certain shared semantic feature of source and target may play a critical role in metaphor processing and its degree of aptness. In this metaphor, the semantic feature of 'restriction' is shared by source (jail) and target (my job). Although the nature of restriction and the entities that cause restriction in these domains are different, both of these terms refer to a restrictive situation for somebody. In fact, in the semantic spaces of 'job' and 'jail', there is a large number of semantic units or semantic features. Some of these semantic features are shared by these two concepts. Among these shared semantic features, the feature of 'restriction' play the main role in the metaphor *My job is a jail*. If the shared feature has a high degree of saliency in the source domain of a metaphor, that metaphor probably has a high degree of aptness. In fact, the saliency of a certain feature in the source domain makes it more accessible. The easy accessibility of this feature facilitates the process of metaphor comprehension and increases the degree of the aptness of the metaphor. This is consistent with the main argument of the salience imbalance model (Ortony, 1979).

Another example can make the point clearer. In the metaphor *Billboards are warts*, source (warts) and target (billboards) share the semantic feature of 'protrusion'. Although the two concepts of 'billboards' and 'warts' are different in many respects, the shared semantic feature of 'protrusion' makes this metaphor interpretable. In fact, although the nature of protrusion and the concrete characteristics of billboards and warts are different in these two concepts, both of these terms refer to a protrusion on some kind of surface. The saliency of protrusion in the source domain is a key factor in this metaphor. In fact, it can be said that the saliency of protrusion in the source domain of this metaphor is one of the key determining factors in the degree of aptness.

Another factor that can be important in the degree of the aptness of a metaphor is the repeated use of a concept as the source domain of many metaphors. When a certain feature of a concept is repeatedly used to metaphorically describe many concepts, it becomes conventional. For example, the feature of 'having the ability to harm' is a salient feature of the concept 'disease'. This concept is widely used to metaphorically describe concepts that are harmful. The repeated metaphoric use of 'disease' has made it a conventional concept for describing harmful concepts. The metaphors *Crime is a disease*, *Bribery is a disease*, and *Smuggling is a disease* are just three examples of such metaphors. In fact, the concept of 'disease' can metaphorically be used to emphasize the harmful nature of many concepts. The metaphorical description of harmful concepts through the source domain of 'disease' is highly common. The common use of this source domain makes such metaphors highly acceptable and increases their degree of aptness.

When we are talking about repeated use of a concept as the source domain of metaphors, we have to distinguish between two types of repeated use: 1) repeated use of a concept as the source domain of the same metaphor; 2) repeated use of a concept as the source domain of many different metaphors. The first type of repeated use has been called conventionality in the literature of the field (for example, Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Jones & Estes, 2005; 2006). It has been proposed that this type of conventionality is different

from and independent of aptness (Jones & Estes, 2005). The second type of repeated use is different from the conventionality of a certain metaphor. In this type, a single concept is repeatedly used to describe many concepts in a variety of metaphors. In all of these metaphors, a single salient feature of the source is attributed to a variety of concepts (target domains of metaphors). If a single source domain is used to describe many concepts in a large number of metaphors in a language, the degree of the aptness of these metaphors could increase.

6. Conclusion

Culture is a key factor in metaphor aptness. A given metaphor may have different degrees of aptness across different cultures. Geographical features of the area and the role of the base concept in the lives of people are cultural aspects that may affect the degree of the aptness of a metaphor for people of a culture. A metaphor with 'lighthouse' as the base domain would have a higher degree of aptness for people living near the sea compared to people living far away from the sea. For those people who live near the sea or ocean, concepts such as ship, island, lighthouse, anchor, and sail could be proper options to metaphorically describe other concepts. In fact, it can be said that these concepts have a strong presence in the lives of people living in such cultural and geographical areas. The familiarity of people with semantic aspects of these concepts helps them to use these concepts to metaphorically describe other concepts. This could explain why metaphors in which these concepts are used as the source have higher degrees of acceptability and aptness for those people who live in such cultural and geographical contexts. Folktale and religion are also important aspects of culture that may have some degree of influence on the aptness of metaphors. Finally, metonymic relations and semantic features of concepts that are used in metaphors are two possible factors that may affect the degree of aptness. The nature of the interaction between elements that affect metaphor aptness is a question that remains to be addressed in future studies.

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