

A DATA BASED INVESTIGATION INTO CHINESE EFL LEARNERS METAPHORICAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

With metaphoricity of language gaining increasing recognition among modern linguists , language researchers are now more concerned about the EFL learners metaphorical competence — the ability to metaphorize both at lexical and grammatical levels , seeing similarity between categories or perceiving relevance of one thing to another , much as native speakers of English habitually do . In the light of Lakoff's and Halliday's metaphor theories , this paper analyzes the spontaneous oral performance of forty Fudan University freshmen , reveals a significant difference between our college students and native speakers , and proposes tentative suggestions on how to improve EFL learners metaphorical competence in the Chinese contexts .

Key words

metaphorical competence ; lexical metaphor ; grammatical metaphor

1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language in the Chinese context has long been constrained by the unavailability of necessary technical facilities , well-trained language teachers , and most importantly by the backward teaching pedagogy . These constraints have given birth to a discouragingly poor performance of the English learners (particularly their oral inadequacy) — the very target of increasingly biting criticism from professionals and laymen as well .

With a pressing need to address the “ shift from a goods and services economy to an information economy ” (Halliday 2003 : 7) and the emphasis the College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) lays on the oral proficiency , the importance of cultivating the oral competence has gained more recognition in the past few years . One manifestation is the administering of oral examination to students who have performed well enough on the written College English Tests (Band 4 and Band 6) , which in turn gives rise to much discussion among language researchers in China in this regard . For example , Chen & Tao (2001) probe into the backwashes of oral exam ; Jin et al . (2004) makes a study of some relevant factors that contribute to the oral competence of those who pass CET-4 ; Wen (2006) carries out a follow-up study of the students' oral vocabulary development trend and its features .

These discussions , though meaningful and thought-provoking , fail to incorporate one of the latest linguistic trends — the study of metaphor . This being the case , we will look into the students' oral competence from the metaphorical perspective , both lexical and grammatical , by examining the actual oral performance of 40 students in Fudan University . In the process both qualitative and quantitative analysis are employed in the hope that such statistical analysis and reflection can enlighten language teachers in their choice of teaching strategies and decision on what to highlight in the classroom .

Metaphorical competence is defined here as the ability to metaphorize both at the lexical and grammatical levels , seeing similarity between categories or perceiving relevance of one thing to another , in the way that native speakers of English consciously or unconsciously do .

2 . Rationale

Though the study of metaphor dates back to Aristotle ,the recognition of metaphor as more than a rhetorical device ,merely ornamental in function ,is fairly modern (see Richards 1936 ;Black 1962). Richards (1936 92)argues metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language and we cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it . A most eye catching landmark on the road to the full appreciation of metaphor is Lakoff &Johnson s seminal *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) ,and their theoretical construct is now commonly labeled as the cognitive approach . Some points of this radically new approach to the metaphor study are enlightening to the language teaching profession and ,together with Halliday s grammatical metaphor theory ,actually constitute the source of inspiration to us in making this investigation .

Firstly ,echoing Richards ,Lakoff and his colleague strongly believe that metaphor is not something that occurs only in the domains of poetry ,art and flowery language . Instead ,it is an indispensable part of other kinds of discourse ,professional or nonprofessional . According to them ,over 70 % of the English expressions are derived from metaphorical concepts . This belief seriously questions the validity of the traditional belief that “ what is literal is not metaphorical ” (Lakoff 1993 ,in Ortony 1993 204). Their skepticism has led to the critical reflection on what might be called conventional ,frozen ,or dead metaphors ,and convincingly proved that many of our everyday concepts are structured by these conventional metaphors . Metaphor ,in their vein of thought ,is thus by no means a deviant phenomenon as the traditional linguistics impresses upon us to think ,but rather a norm in the actual language use . The cogent Lakoffian argument for the metaphorical nature of language can thus be reasonably taken as a yardstick against which we can evaluate the performance of the EFL learners .

Secondly ,not only have they proved that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life ,but also convince us that metaphor is not just in language . It also resides in thought and action . “ The locus of metaphor is thought ” (Lakoff 1993 203). By this is meant that metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions ,but more fundamentally a form of thought with their own epistemological function ,otherwise “ we would expect different linguistic expressions to be different metaphors ” (Lakoff 1993 ,in Ortony 1993 209). In the light of their view ,what appear at first sight to be random metaphorical examples are not at all random . Take the following expressions for example :

spare a couple of minutes
valuable time
waste one s time
use one s time more profitably
run out of time
make time to do sth.
invest time in sth.

These expressions are all instantiations of the conceptual metaphor [TIME IS MONEY] . The revelation of the close relationship between metaphor and thought not only challenges the Saussurean tradition that emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the relation between signifier and signified ,but also accounts for the systematicity of metaphorical expressions we can easily find in language . It is then a plausible guess that metaphor is around as an important part of life for a competent language user ,who cannot help speaking metaphorically because his thought is facilitated or made possible by metaphor . Metaphoricity can thus serve as a criterion for us in measuring if the students can think in a native like way .

Most importantly ,Lakoff s conceptual metaphors are not only verbal phenomena ,but also subtly mediate how we experience the world . To be more specific ,they also influence language users physical behavior and are even the roots of material products of culture . In other words ,conceptual metaphors form the basis for culture . The [LOVE IS SWEETNESS] metaphor is a case in point . This conceptual metaphor explains why sweets are given to a loved one on St . Valentine s Day and matrimonial love is symbolized at a wedding ceremony by the eating of a cake . More interestingly ,statutes of “ Justice ” outside or inside western courtrooms have blindfolds just because of the [JUSTICE IS BLIND] metaphor .

Danesi & Perron thus argues that “conceptual metaphors and metonyms are not only the most likely sources of grammaticalization and lexicalization processes in a language, but they are also interconnected with other codes of the signifying order, providing the ‘conceptual glue’ that keeps the whole system of culture together” (1999: 181). In this sense, the awareness of conceptual metaphors can serve as a window onto a community’s present culture (Boers 2003) and a guide to its past. The close relationship between metaphor and culture suggests that if a language learner is appropriately metaphorical in his oral or written performance, he can be rightly regarded as culturally mature as well. This cultural sophistication is now generally taken as proof of language proficiency. But for the time being, any optimism is not justified, for, as Danesi tells us, even though “the student produced texts often manifest a high degree of verbal fluency, they invariably seem to lack the conceptual appropriateness that characterized the corresponding texts of native speakers” (1992: 191).

The metaphorical perspective we take in evaluating the students’ oral performance also obliges us to incorporate Halliday’s grammatical metaphor theory. Some people might say this theory can be taken as an attempt of the systemic functional linguistics to join in the metaphormania that has featured the past few decades of linguistic researches. But to our understanding, it should be more appropriately regarded as a logical result of his sociological and functional approach to language study.

Rather than taking language as a set of rules, Halliday accepts language as a system of meaning potentials, by the choice of which we consciously or unconsciously represent the physical world and establish or maintain a desirable interpersonal relationship. Language, seen in this perspective, is dynamic, constructive, and value-laden. In addition, Halliday also rejects the traditional stance on grammar and argues convincingly that the grammar of language bears an inextricable relation with meaning (Dong 2005: 146). In Halliday’s own words, “the grammar of any natural language is a theory of human experience” (2005: 216).

Halliday puts forward the theory of grammatical metaphor in his monumental treatise *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985). At the initial stage of his theorization, Halliday focuses on the transferences between different processes in the transitivity system as far as ideational function is concerned. In the following years (1995, 1996, 1999), Halliday is more interested in various forms of grammatical metaphors in technical discourses. These grammatical metaphors demonstrate a conspicuous trend toward thingness — nominalization. This nominalizing tendency results from the English speaking people’s propensity to conceive of the world as a collection of entities. What is more relevant to us is the observation made in *Construing Experience through Meaning*:

“While in technical and other elaborated forms of Chinese the nominalizing tendency of grammatical metaphor is every bit as prominent a feature as it is in English, it perhaps doesn’t penetrate as deeply into everyday discourse... the more nominalized form has not taken over in the encounters of daily life.” (1999: 301)

The contrast of the following two examples suffices to make the point clear.

- 1) The job makes me feel very satisfied.
- 2) The job is a source of satisfaction to me.

Both clauses express roughly the same experiential meaning and are equally acceptable in terms of grammar. But 1) is virtually a word-for-word translation of the Chinese clause “Gongzuo shi wo gandao hen manzu”, the three Chinese verbs being encoded by three English verbs. 2), by contrast, employs only one verb “is”, which happens to be more grammatically functional than lexically meaningful. The expression of experiential meaning falls on the use of the nominal phrase “a source of satisfaction to me”. Against the statement we quote above, 2) is more likely to have been uttered by a native speaker of English, and 1) is a Chinese learner of English who has not yet thrown off the linguistic yoke that he has been subjected to by virtue of being a member of the Chinese community.

3. Research Design

3.1 Aim

This study aims at investigating two questions: (1) What is the status quo of Chinese college students

metaphorical competence in terms of lexical, ideational and interpersonal metaphors? (2) How wide is the gap between Chinese students and a native speaker in their respective oral performance regarding the different types of metaphor?

3.2 Source of Data

The subjects in this study are 40 first year non-English majors of Fudan University. They are selected out of the consideration that the students at Fudan University rank among the top three in their English proficiency gauged against the measure of National College English Test Band 4. When a wide gap is registered between their metaphorical competence and that of the native speakers, it follows naturally that much more efforts are required to improve college EFL learners' metaphorical competence nationwide.

The 40 subjects were chosen from about 1500 students who took an oral test at the end of their second semester at Fudan University. Such a selection was made in the hope of coming up with more telling evidence of our students' language proficiency because the 40 subjects performed by far better than the rest of the student population. As Xiong et al. (2005) and Jiang (2006) observe, the metaphorical competence of a second language learner is generally in direct proportion to their language proficiency.

In the oral test each student sat in front of a computer, on whose screen appeared pictures that reflected different social issues in China like bribery, the heavy burden on senior high school students in China, and parents' overprotection of their children. These issues are not demanding cognitively and thus should not bar them from demonstrating their oral capability. The subjects were required to give a brief description of the given picture and a short comment after one-minute of preparation. Their spontaneous oral performances were thus automatically recorded and later transcribed by the authors of this study.

In order to compare Chinese college students' metaphorical competence with that of the native speaker, eight native speakers (two of our American colleagues and six international students) were asked to give a similar performance. They were not told the purpose of the investigation before their performance.

3.3 Data Collected

A problematic issue in the study of metaphor is the lack of agreement on metaphoricity. In other words, it is by no means easy to distinguish between what is literal and what is metaphoric. Strategies like dichotomous literal-metaphoric evaluation by a panel of judges and double scoring metaphoricity measures have been employed across researches in this regard. But in this study we follow the "metaphor identification procedure" proposed by Pragglejaz Group (2007) as far as lexical metaphor is concerned. To put it simply, if a lexical unit (e.g. struggle) has a more basic current/contemporary meaning in other contexts (use one's physical strength against someone or something) than the given context (For years, Sonia Gandhi has struggled to convince Indians that she is fit to wear the mantle of the political dynasty into which she married, let alone to become premier.), and if the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it (We can understand abstract effort, difficulty, opposition and conflict in terms of physical effort, difficulty, opposition and conflict.), the lexical item is then counted as metaphorical (For more detailed illustration, refer to Pragglejaz Group, 2007).

When it comes to the identification of grammatical metaphor, we will follow Halliday's theory and count a language item as metaphorical if there is a remapping between grammatical categories and functions. Ideationally, if a noun or a nominal phrase is used to construe a process (congruently construed as a verb) or a quality (congruently construed as an adjective), then it is taken as a grammatical metaphor. Interpersonally, if there is an unconventional mapping between moods (e.g. interrogative mood) and functions (e.g. making a strong statement), or if a subject expresses his opinion without making his presence explicit in linguistic terms (like I think), we count the clause as a grammatical metaphor.

For example, in the following clause because his studies will either make or break the economic success of the family, "make or break the economic success of the family" is counted as a lexical metaphor because both "make" and "break" are more often followed by lexical items referring to concrete substance

rather than abstract concept as in this given context . In the same clause “the economic success of the family” is also classified as an item of ideational grammatical metaphor . The nominal phrase here construes a process :the family will become economically successful . The clause It is obvious that the students are faced with more and more pressure is an illustration of interpersonal grammatical metaphor , for “It is obvious that ...” is an implicit way of expressing one s opinions .

In calculating the percentage of metaphoricity ,we also follow Halliday (1985 38)in taking clause as the unit of data analysis ,by which is meant a string of words that convey a relatively complete meaning / semantic concept . The data collected were analyzed in the following steps :

(1) The total number of clauses and the number of clauses that bear lexical ,ideational and interpersonal metaphors were counted (Table 1)

Table 1 . The total number of clauses and the number of clauses bearing lexical three types of metaphor

	Total Clauses	Lexical Metaphor	Ideational Metaphor	Interpersonal Metaphor
Chinese EFL Learners	538	48	56	10
Native Speaker	181	63	72	30

(2) The discourses of Chinese EFL learners /non native speakers (NNS) were compared with those of the native speaker (NS) in terms of lexical ,ideational and interpersonal metaphors (Table 2) .

Table 2 . The percentage of the three types of metaphor used by NS and NNS

	Lexical Metaphor	Ideational Metaphor	Interpersonal Metaphor
Chinese EFL Learners	8 .9 %	10 .4 %	1 .9 %
Native Speaker	34 .8 %	39 .8 %	16 .6 %

As Table 1 indicates ,we have collected from the Chinese subjects 538 clauses ,in which there are 48 lexical metaphors ,56 ideational grammatical metaphors and 10 interpersonal grammatical metaphors . (e. g. The picture on the wall shows that the College Entrance Examination is around the corner . We all have experienced that period before since the preparation is very hard and the burden from outsideIs it scientific and necessary to place so much pressure on the students ?) In the 181 clauses we have recorded from the native speakers , 63 lexical metaphors , 72 ideational grammatical metaphors and 30 interpersonal grammatical metaphors were registered .

In terms of percentage (see Table 2) ,the students degree of metaphoricity is significantly lower than that of the native speakers . Lexically ,the native speakers are nearly four times as metaphorical as the Chinese students (34 .8 % vs .8 .9 %). Gram matically ,the native speakers are almost four times as incongruent as our Chinese subjects in the category of ideational metaphor (39 .8 % vs .10 .4 %) ,and over eight times more metaphorical interpersonally (16 .6 % vs .1 .9 %).

4 . Discussion

The data as described above lead us to the following considerations .

Firstly ,the Chinese students poor metaphoricity may be partly attributable to the anxiety they experienced when sitting before the computer . As some students claimed in our follow up interview ,they felt somewhat pressured when talking to a computer instead of a fellow student or a teacher . Pressed by the limit of the time (they have to finish their talk in two minutes) and the unnatural and mechanical “interlocutor ” ,they felt that their performance fell shy of their own expectation . The unnatural setting may affect negatively their performance . However ,it is reasonable to claim that the young generations today are actually familiar with the electronic device not to feel too threatened . Besides ,their usual oral performance in class does not manifest a higher level of both linguistic and metaphorical maturity .

Secondly ,though our 40 subjects score better (4 or 4.5 out of 5) than other students due to their

verbal fluency, this score doesn't count much, for the statistical data suggest that their seeming verbal fluency in communicative terms is not reinforced by a desirable degree of lexical metaphoricity that characterizes native speakers' language use (Danesi 2000 :13), thus lacking the conceptual appropriateness that typifies the language behavior of natives. The following few lines from a subject's talk on the social issue of bribery in China manifest such an asymmetry between language form and conceptual content:

- 3) As the economy develops very fast, there are more and more enterprises that are chasing after their interests, but they forget what they can do and what they shouldn't. And some businessmen just mingle those corrupted officers. And the government is just going down and down. The officers are not ... they should be the server of the people. They should serve people. But what they have done? We saw that they just impose some taxation and got some money.

In this short oral discourse, even if the subject exhibits a fairly high level of verbal fluency, with only one single pause to reorient and rephrase his expressions, there is still something not quite appropriate. For one thing, with only one proper lexical metaphor (chasing after their interests), this excerpt is not much pleasurable to listen to. The speaker certainly could have done a much better job if he had not just wrapped his L1 concept in target language words. Take his use of "mingle" for example (let us forgive the mistake of omitting the preposition "with"). To "mingle with someone" is to "stay with someone and talk with them". This particular speaker admitted in our later face-to-face discussion that he used the verb to categorize the concept "guanshanggoujie" or "muhoujiaoyi". What he should have said apparently is "give someone money under the table" and "have behind the door deals", which metaphorically construes the concept of disgusting malfeasance. For another, the use of the verbal phrase "going down and down" is a fair index to his awareness of the conceptual metaphor [DOWN IS BAD] in English. But with this phrase, the clause is hardly interpretable. Given the context, the student could have been more logical and coherent by saying "As a result, government officials are actually eating out of those businessmen's hands." To sum up, his choice of the English words and clauses doesn't dovetail the unconscious reasoning acceptable to the English cultural groupthink (Danesi 2004 :99). It is our conviction that such a lack of metaphorical competency is on the one hand a symptom of their cultural deficiency, for as Danesi & Perron (1999 :181) informs us, conceptual/lexical metaphors provide the "conceptual glue" that keeps the whole system of culture together. On the other hand, considering that conceptual/lexical metaphors are the most likely source of grammaticalization and lexicalization (ibid.), the lack of metaphorical competency on the part of the EFL learners is a very likely clue as to why the language development at the intermediate level progresses so slowly and painfully.

Thirdly, the Chinese students demonstrate a conspicuous preference for and even addiction to the grammatically literal ways of expression. Such ways of expression characterize the elementary and intermediate English texts, which mostly center on the material and concrete realities and thus employ verb or verbal phrases to construe the processes and conjunctions to embody the logical relationship between events, as is exemplified by 4).

- 4) Not all kinds of solar rays reach the earth because the earth is wrapped in a blanket of air which keeps out rays that might harm us. As man is now exploring space, he is going outside this blanket of air and has become interested in the dangerous solar rays.

(Danger on the Sky, in English Book IV, p.127)

Not that this way of expression is wrong — it is perfect for talking about the physical reality to children, but it would be inappropriate when used to talk about the abstract concept or intangible phenomenon, as one cannot avoid being grammatically metaphorical when talking about abstract things, and the lack of grammatical metaphor seriously undercuts the logicity and credibility of their discourses (refer to Zhu & Dong 2001 for illustration), rendering their utterances childish. The following few lines are excerpted from one student's comment on the issue of copyright infringement.

- 5) So ... in my opinion, I think, first, we should avoid buying those discs. When we meet some people who selling such pirate discs, I think we should refuse them. I think it is ... it is ... it is ... it doesn't respect those who pay as many ... as much efforts into making the disc. Second, I

think ,our government should make such laws to ... to say clearly ... to ... against the ... the such discs selling . And ... in this way ,Ithink there won t be many people selling such discs .

At the beginning of this excerption ,the student uses both “ in my opinion ” and “ Ithink ” ,which are ideationally empty and interpersonally redundant . To make matters worse ,he utters “ Ithink ” up to five times in this 45 second talk ,making his comment on the grave situation unacceptably opinionated and thus not worth taking seriously . Such undesirable overtone can be dispelled with the use of grammatical metaphors .

6) So ,it is a must to raise the intellectual property awareness in the consumers so that they would know better than to be lured by those discs . In this way ,the general public will learn to show respect for those who have made efforts to produce the discs . Second ,it is advisable for the government to make strict laws ,to define clearly ,that it is illegal to sell those discs . Step by step ,the whole society will agree that it is socially ,legally unacceptable to sell and buy them .

Therefore ,it is our conviction that in teaching English discourse such as 7) at the college level ,we should always go further beyond the word or clausal level and enable the students to appreciate both the motivation and functions of the grammatical metaphors .

7) The lack of standardization of manners results in an often angry ,chaotic society ,where every trivial act is interpreted as a revelation of the moral philosophy of the individual actor ,who is left standing naked in his mores .

(Why Manners Matter ,in 21st Century College English Book IV ,p .55)

To be more specific ,we can alert the students that “the lack ” can be regarded as the nominalization of “there is /are no ... ” ,“standardization of manners ” might be rephrased in the clausal form as “ manners can be standardized ” ,“trivial acts ” is the nominal version of “some acts are unimportant ” ,and “revelation ” can be demetaphorized into “something that has been revealed ” . This demetaphorizing process and contrastive analysis can cumulatively empower the students to articulate in a crystalline and convincing manner .

Fourthly ,in this study ,we calculate lexical metaphors and grammatical metaphors separately . This should not be taken as suggesting that there is a clear demarcation between them . As Halliday says ,“ metaphorical variation is lexico grammatical rather than simply lexical ” (1985 320) . Those with the experience of living in an English speaking community might agree with me that lexicogrammatically metaphorical phrases like sandwich generation ,inflated sense of power ,childproof are so ubiquitous as to be also something the native speakers of English live by (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) . The data we have collected from the students performance unambiguously tell us that they have no idea how to integrate the two types of metaphors organically in their speech . In other words ,lexical metaphor and grammatical metaphor might have been acquired by them as segregated rather than congregated meaning-making resources in their whole repertoire of linguistic choices . As a consequence ,the flow of information in their oral performance sounds unnatural . Take a look at the following example from the student s oral performance :

8) In this picture we can see a senior school student is preparing very hard for the College Entrance Exam . The picture on the wall shows that the College Entrance Exam is around the corner . The student is doing homework very hard . You can see there are piles of books on his desk . The clock shows us that it has already been 10 past 10 ,but he is continuing his homework . His parents are outside the door ,watching ... watching his performance and was very worried about their son .

In spite of the metaphoricity of the underlined parts in this discourse ,it still sounds awkward ,for the simple reason that the lexical metaphor (around the corner) and grammatical metaphors (the other underlined expressions) do not cohere to allow the discourse to unfold itself naturally ,forming a striking contrast with the oral production of one of the American colleagues when he describes the same picture :

9) In this picture ,a high school student is seen to be burning the midnight oil as the college entrance examination is just around the corner . The piles of books before him and his nervous expressions indicate the heavy pressure he must be undergoing at this moment . Also visible in the picture are

his parents , who are standing outside their son s room at this late hour and looking no less antsy than their son .

5 . Conclusion

Although the data for our study are rather limited , especially the data from native speakers , the above analysis and discussion clearly indicate that Chinese EFL learners metaphorical competence as reflected in their spontaneous oral performance is generally low and far from satisfactory , and there exists a stunningly large gap even between the top Chinese EFL learners and the native speakers . This poses a great challenge to us and at the same time points to the lines along which the English teacher can be a better facilitator . Encouragingly , empirical studies carried out so far at home and abroad (Jiang 2006 ; Mahmood & Nezhad 2007) demonstrate that metaphorical competence is learnable and teachable if conducted in orderly and systematic ways . This means that the English teaching profession should consider a Gestalt shift in approach by both drawing on the conceptual metaphor and grammatical metaphor theories and exploring with the students those “ metaphors in the wild ” as speakers and writers produce it in varying contexts (Pragglejaz Group 2007 1) . If metaphorical competence constitutes such an important part of what it means to know a language , language teachers are then well advised to invest more efforts in this regard so that we can at least facilitate this slow and difficult process particularly at the intermediate level of English learning .

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(Continued on p .95 ...)