

Interpreting Conceptual Metaphors: Between Context and Co-text

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Abstract

The paper aims to highlight the importance of analogy, co-textual markers and contextual inferences in the interpretation of conceptual metaphors. The study has been conducted on authentic texts, namely excerpts from the three Presidential Debates in 2008 America. The linguistic approach draws upon Lakoff's and Goatly's cognitive theories on metaphor, as well as Grice's Maxims of Conversation.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor, analogy, context, co-text*

Analytical Framework

In the cognitive approach, the metaphor surpasses its role as a simple linguistic device or figure of style/ trope, becoming part of human conceptualisation. Both metaphors and image schemas are conceptual structures that reflect how people perceive and understand the world around them. They constitute a means of verbalizing our everyday experiences. Lakoff (1987) advocates a transfer of features from a Source Domain to a Target Domain [see 5]. The reader must be aware that metaphorical mappings involve both human and non-human entities.

Starting from the assumption that on the one hand, earlier theorists emphasise the conceptual or ideational purposes of metaphor and downplay its interpersonal and foregrounding functions and on the other hand, they even lack authentic context of use, Goatly [3, 37] develops a new approach on metaphor in terms of the morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relationships between Vehicle terms (i.e. the Source domain) and Topic terms (i.e. the Target domain), their similarities and/or analogies being termed as Grounds. The meaning expressed by the speaker's proposition is context and co-text dependent. It must be interpreted in close association with the social context, collocation and *colligation* (in Goatly's terms, colligation represents the syntactic relationship between the two words in a metaphorical expression). Goatly [3, 136-138] proves how previously neuter terms can acquire negative semantic features due to the text construction on clines of hyponymy. For instance, in an extract from the American teenage magazine *Seventeen*, by the end of the text 'problem' becomes the superordinate term for oily skin and scalp, acne and even stress. Constructed as problems, the co-hyponyms share the negative implicature of their hyperonym.

Using examples from the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, Goatly [3, 251-255] accounts for various metaphorical patterns, such as:

- General reifying – a process by which abstract entities can be seen as maneuverable ('handle a problem'), either created ('construct a theory') or destroyed ('dissipate energy'), as concrete items having various shapes ('shred of evidence'), located in space and interacting with the other entities ('gather strength'), perceived visually ('seek peace');
- Specific reifying – physical qualities integrated in metaphorical expressions just to exhibit their abstract values. The most common example pertains to Lakoff's Orientational metaphors, such as 'power is UP' or 'basic/elementary is DOWN' [3, 282];
- Animizing and personifying metaphors – abstract entities evince [+ ANIMATE], [+ HUMAN] features as in 'the reign of terror' or 'economic growth' [3, 285-286];
- Materializing abstract process – mental processes, knowledge, understanding are made visible to certain degrees ('to outline a situation', 'brilliant idea', etc.);
- Process = Process – transfer metaphors in which both the Topic and the Vehicle represent perceptual or material processes, for example COMPETITION IS WAR or SOUND IS SIGHT/ SOUND IS LIQUID;
- Object/Substance = Object/Substance – transfer metaphors in which Topics and Vehicles are first-order entities, instances of object personification (MONEY IS LIQUID; COUNTRY = HUMAN BODY) or human depersonification (HUMANS ARE BUILDINGS, HUMAN = CLOTH)

The metaphorical interplay may consist in the interaction occurring either within the network of analogies or between lexical items. In the former case individual lexical items may realize multiple metaphorical analogies, while in the latter, metaphorical expressions can be involved in 'extension', 'opposition', 'reversal' and 'diversification' due to the allegorical combination of analogies [3, 297].

Metaphorical Representations of the American Health Care System

The following excerpts have been taken from the First Presidential Debate [see 2] held in America in 2008. The first mention of the issue concerning the health care system belongs to John McCain:

MCCAIN: So the point is, I want people to have tax cuts. I want every family to have a \$5,000 refundable tax credit so they can go out and **purchase** their own health care.

The transfer of features occurs from the Source domain of trade to the Target domain of health through the V-term 'purchase' and the T-term 'health care'. A transitive verb like 'purchase' is accompanied by the following conventional complements and adjuncts: [buyers] purchase [commodity] [from sellers]. By analogy: every family becomes a potential buyer, just as health care is associated with commodity/merchandise.

The G-term \$5,000 accounts for the price paid in the process of buying. The difference is that usually, the money is not *refundable*.

OBAMA: Just one last point I want to make, since Senator McCain talked about providing a \$5,000 health credit. Now, what he doesn't tell you is that he intends to, for the first time in history, tax health benefits.

So you may end up getting a \$5,000 tax credit. Here's the only problem: Your employer now has to pay taxes on the health care that you're getting from your employer. And if you end up losing your health care from your employer, you've got to go out on the open market and try to buy it.

It is not a good deal for the American people. But it's an example of this notion that the market can always solve everything and the less regulation we have, the better off we're going to be.

Obama enlarges upon the same metaphor related to the marketability of health, by a simple play upon words based upon term substitution. In fact the substitutes represent the T-term and the V-term of the metaphor, thus warning about the effects of such a system: *a \$5,000 health credit* versus *a \$5,000 tax credit*. Considering the V-term 'tax' as a hyponym of 'money', the metaphor can be extended to HEALTH IS MONEY.

OBAMA: We have **to fix our health care system**, which is putting an enormous **burden** on families. Just – a report just came out that the average deductible went up 30 percent on American families.

They are getting crushed, and many of them are going bankrupt as a consequence of health care.

The subcategorisation frame of the verb 'to fix' includes the following contextual semantic features: [+<[(+ ANIMATE)]NP---[(- ANIMATE), (+CONCRETE)]NP>]. As far as its thematic structure is concerned, the first NP is assigned the role of Agent, the entity who performs the action, whereas the second NP functions as Benefactive. By analogy, the health care system is hence reified, represented as a problem, as a broken entity that needs mending.

The ontological metaphor HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IS A BURDEN is activated on the one hand due to the V-term 'burden' as hyponym of the more generic term 'problem' and on the other hand, due to the shared features contextually marked by the following phrases: 'enormous', 'crushed', 'bankrupt'. Thus, the reader constructs the Verticality Image Schema as a Source domain for a new orientational metaphor, namely PROBLEMS ARE HEAVY or PROBLEMS ARE DOWN.

The speakers come to discuss the issue of the health care system in the Second Presidential Debate [see 2] as well, which clearly proves that neither of them is willing to accept his opponent's standpoint.

Placing it third on his list of priorities, McCain speaks about the health care system in terms of affordability and availability:

MCCAIN: As far as health care is concerned, obviously, everyone is struggling to make sure that they can afford their premiums and that they can have affordable and available health care.

The ontological metaphor HEALTH IS MONEY is therefore activated. Despite the fact that the V-term is not explicitly mentioned in the co-text, the reader can infer it due to the qualifying adjectives 'affordable' and 'available' that premodify the head noun 'health care'.

While ‘affordable’ can stand for the G-term of the V-term like ‘money’, the adjective ‘available’ can make us infer ‘quantity’ as the V-term. Through the interplay of analogies, HEALTH IS MERCHANDISE metaphor is once again catered for with further Grounds.

OBAMA: Health care is priority number two, because that broken health care system is bad not only for families, but it’s making our businesses less competitive.

In Obama’s opinion, health care must be ranked second after energy. From a syntactic perspective, Obama performs two copulative predications and one complex transitive predication, as follows:

- equative copulative predication: *Health care is priority number two*, having the structure Subject - copula Verb - Subject Complement;

- attributive copulative predication: *that broken health care system is bad*, evincing the structure Subject - copula Verb - Subject Complement;

- complex transitive predication: *it [health care system]’s making our businesses less competitive*, with the structure Subject – transitive Verb – Direct Object – Object Complement.

From a semantic perspective, each predication activates certain metaphors in which ‘health care’ represents the T-term. The V-term is available only in the first instance under the form of the Noun Phrase ‘priority number two’ which can be interpreted according to the analogy IMPORTANT IS UP.

Taking into account the second predication as well, we notice that other metaphors are also at stake here. The G-terms ‘broken’ and ‘bad’ belong to the Source domain of orientational metaphors, such as: HEALTH IS UP/ ILLNESS IS DOWN. The inherent semantic features of an adjective like ‘broken’ are [+CONCRETE], [+FRAGILE], [+FAULTY], which are generally associated with the thematic role of Patient, an entity which has been subjected to an action and suffered changes in state. Thus, Obama depicts the health care system as an affected entity, but he omits the Agent whose actions had such negative impact upon it.

Within the third predication, the Force Schema is activated, turning the health care system into an Agent which interferes with the economic system, acting as an obstacle in the latter’s development, hence becoming part and parcel of the process highlighted by the structural metaphor BUSINESS IS COMPETITION.

Obama’s ensuing speech provides further grounds for HEALTH IS MERCHANDISE metaphor following McCain’s thread of the argument as regards health insurance affordability.

OBAMA: And we provide a 50 percent tax credit so that they can buy health insurance for their workers, because there are an awful lot of small businesses that I meet across America that want to do right by their workers but they just can’t afford it. Some small business owners, a lot of them, can’t even afford health insurance for themselves.

According to its subcategorisation frame, the verb ‘to afford’ selects the following contextual semantic features to characterize its arguments: [+ <[(+Animate)]NP --- [(+Expensive)]NP/VP>]. The use of the modal verb ‘can’ in its deontic meaning, i.e. ability, accounts for the same metaphor. However, it also functions as a co-textual marker for analogies, such as: WEALTH IS UP/ POVERTY IS DOWN.

Moreover, Obama's argumentation technique in this excerpt, reduced to the following syllogism contributes to the metaphorical interpretation as well. The premises from which he starts are:

- (1) We help small business owners 'to buy health insurance for their workers'
- (2) Many small business owners 'want to do right by their workers'

The listener infers that buying health insurance for their workers is the right thing to do. The moral dimension is thus introduced; therefore, Health is no longer thought of as Merchandise, but as Commodity, which evinces the inherent meaning of [+Useful] entity. Taking everything into account, we suggest that HEALTH IS MERCHANDISE metaphor highlights the process taking place between two or more actors, whereas HEALTH IS COMMODITY metaphor emphasizes the product, as well as the buyer. By the end of the Second Presidential Debate, the latter instance gains more and more ground, becoming sometimes explicitly underlined in its corresponding simile, as in the following excerpt: "Senator, selling health care coverage in America as the marketable commodity has become a very profitable industry. Do you believe health care should be treated as a commodity?"

Despite being faced with a Yes/No question, Obama flouts Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Manner [see 4], elaborating upon the suggested and well-known metaphor, thus avoiding a direct answer. At a certain point, he states that business organizations consider that McCain's solution would lead to 'the unraveling of the employer-based health care system'. The Noun Phrase exploits FAILURE IS DIVISION analogy in its reversed form, due to the colligation of the V-term 'to unravel' with the T-term 'employer-based health care system' which points to the intricacy of the policy.

As the question above was formulated by a member of the audience during the 2008 live Debate, it means that our approach proves to be successful, the line of our argument is correct and all our claims are confirmed.

During the Third Presidential Debate [see 2], drawing upon what had already been discussed, the moderator Bob Schieffer asked the two candidates: "Given the current economic situation, would either of you now favor controlling health care costs over expanding health care coverage?" In fact, they are asked to choose between affordability and availability.

The first to answer the question is Obama who claims that his plan will be able to cover both issues at the same time. The story he begins with raises the problem of Relevance and even Quantity, in Grice's terms. Then, he focuses upon possible solutions to solve the crisis.

OBAMA: And we estimate we can cut the average family's premium by about \$2,500 per year.

Once again, abstract terms such as 'the average family's premium' are depicted in more concrete terms, due to the use of a transitive verb like 'to cut'. The thematic structure of this predicate in the above excerpt evinces the presence of an Agent Noun Phrase 'we' functioning as Subject and a Patient 'the average family's premium' functioning as Affected Direct Object. The speaker's aim is to emphasize the radical changes that Americans should expect if he is to become president.

By contrast, McCain keeps delivering his speech in the same elusive thread of the argument. He starts by describing the current situation, passing from what 'should' be done and what people 'need', to a more emphatic speech as regards the future changes.

MCCAIN: And it really is the cost, the escalating costs of health care that are inflicting such pain on working families and people across this country.

Activating the Verticality Schema and the Force Schema, McCain performs a complex transitive predication that selects ‘the escalating costs of health care’ as Stimulus and ‘working families and people across the country’ as Experiencers.

In the end, Obama manages to make McCain admit that he will tax the Americans’ present health care benefits, thus ending this critical discussion, however, without resolving their differences of opinion.

Conclusions

The cognitive approach considers political discourse as necessarily a product of individual and collective mental processes [1, 51]. What is important in textual linguistic analysis is to identify the way in which alternate ways of referring to the same entities can provide different meanings.

The study has been conducted on authentic texts which are likely to outline the speakers’ beliefs as they are in real life. The excerpts under focus have proved the added value of the co-text when interpreting conceptual metaphors. As regards the context, it should be appropriately used especially when making pragmatic inferences. An adequate combination of both approaches leads to a thorough analysis of any type of discourse.

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Rezumat

Lucrarea își propune să evidențieze importanța analogiei, a itemilor co-textuali și a inferențelor pragmatice în interpretarea metaforelor conceptuale. Studiul s-a efectuat pe un corpus de text autentic, și anume extrase din cele trei dezbateri prezidențiale din Statele Unite ale Americii, 2008. Abordarea lingvistică se inspiră din teoriile cognitive asupra metaforei susținute de Lakoff și Goatly și din maximele conversației formulate de Grice.