

## UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH IDIOMS FROM THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

NGUYEN NGOC VU\*

### ABSTRACT

*Teaching and learning English idioms has always been a challenge for both teachers and students. From the cognitive linguistics viewpoint, this paper discusses conceptual metaphor theory and proposes to apply it as an alternative approach to teaching English idioms. Through the conceptual metaphor analysis of example idioms, the author proves that idiom meanings are formed from conceptual metaphors rather than dogmatism and discusses some implications for language teaching.*

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor theory, English idioms, teaching idioms, cognitive semantics.

### TÓM TẮT

**Hiểu thành ngữ tiếng Anh dưới góc nhìn lí thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm của ngôn ngữ học tri nhận**

*Việc dạy và học thành ngữ tiếng Anh luôn gây nhiều khó khăn cho cả giáo viên lẫn học viên. Từ quan điểm của ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, bài báo trình bày thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm và đề xuất áp dụng lí thuyết này để dạy các tổ hợp thành ngữ tiếng Anh. Qua việc phân tích ẩn dụ ý niệm ở một số thành ngữ minh họa, tác giả chứng minh rằng nghĩa của thành ngữ được tạo thành từ các ẩn dụ ý niệm chứ không phải có tính võ đoán và trình bày những đề xuất cho việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh.*

**Từ khóa:** lí thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm, thành ngữ tiếng Anh, giảng dạy thành ngữ, ngữ nghĩa học tri nhận.

### **Introduction**

In most textbooks for students of intermediate or higher levels, it is clear that composite expressions account for quite a big number of lexical items that students need to learn (Achar & Niemeier, 2004). This is easy to understand as in order to communicate effectively and naturally, language learners need to be able to master English idioms (Gibbs, 1997). Due to their importance in language teaching, idioms

have attracted attention of researchers from many different disciplines like literature, ethnography and culturology. (Langlotz, 2006). All of this starts from a new view to the role of idioms in language teaching and translation. Previously, with the generative approach, it is believed that language is a system that can be explained using universal rules. However, there is more and more evidence showing that the mastery of a foreign language depends on one's ability to master composite expressions called "prefabricated units" or "prefabs". This article discusses how language teachers

---

\* Ph.D, in Linguistics, Dean of English  
Department-HCMC University of Education

can help their students learn idioms more efficiently through the conceptual metaphor theory

### ***Conceptual Metaphor Theory***

From the viewpoint of cognitive theorists, metaphor is defined as a domain through which abstract human experiences from the outside world are conceptualized based on more concrete experiences. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) states that lots of our mental experiences are created with metaphor via a limited set of image schemas, for example the image schema of a container. This 'container' image schema is created by our real 3D world experience of a container having the inside and outside space. Through his research, Lakoff has found out that the 'container' image schema has been used frequently to conceptualize non-spatial concepts. Emotion, which is non-spatial, can be conceptualized as a container when we say "empty words" or "to be in love".

At its basic level, conceptual metaphor is the motivation for many idiomatic structures. For example, "to let off steam" can be split into two components "let off" and "steam". Its dictionary meaning can be to let out or to show one's anger. According to the analysis of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), anger is often understood metaphorically as follows:

- Mind is a container
- Anger is a hot fluid in a container.

In the case of "to let off steam", the mapping from literal meaning of 'steam' to illiteral meaning of 'anger' is possible

cognitively. Hot steam has the power to move the engines. By letting off the steam, one's anger is gradually cooling down. By activating one's real world experience of steam and understanding the conceptual metaphor mechanism, he or she can predict idiom's meanings.

### ***Current practice in teaching and learning idioms***

Many learners of English develop the habit of learning by heart the equivalents of idioms in their mother tongue and then use those in communication. When teaching English in Vietnam, we have observed learners who own good command of English but have difficulties using English idioms and phrasal verbs. Consequently, they tend to avoid using idioms when producing the language and this makes their language sound unnatural. This problem was also mentioned by Moon (1997:60): "... language learners often avoid using composite expressions even in situations where the two languages have very similar expressions ... The cause of this is language learners are concerned about expressions considered equal between languages. They were taught to be careful about the small differences that can lead to confusion or misunderstanding."

Teachers also tend to avoid teaching English idioms although these expressions are important for developing language capability in learners. Some teachers believe that idioms are too difficult for learners. Evidence for this can be found in many language teaching

textbooks which only show a list of idioms grouped by themes or key words and then come gap-filling exercises for learners. That way of task designing only encourages students to learn by heart idioms' meaning from the context in which they occur. Students will not be able to understand how those idioms were formed or use them in real contexts when the contexts are different from what they have in the textbook. Sometimes, textbook also tries to provide learners with synonyms but they are not quite equal and can be confusing. For example, in Unit 10 of Grammar Practice textbook used by Department of English, HCM city University of Education, 'fill in' was explained using examples as follows:

- Can you fill in this form please? (complete)
- Our teacher was ill, so Mrs. Frost filled in. (take someone's place)

Then the textbook introduces phrasal verb "take over" as follows:

- A German company took us over last year. (buy a company).
- If you are tired, I'll take over. (take someone's place)

This way of explaining idioms makes students believe that 'fill in' and 'take over' can be used interchangeably. However, they are used in completely different contexts. In the current teaching context of Vietnam, it's very hard for learners to contact native speakers and ask them to explain idioms' origins. Therefore, they can only learn by heart the equivalent meanings in Vietnamese and use them in situations similar to

those in the coursebook. Obviously, with this way of learning idioms, learners will quickly forget what they have learnt and can't use the idioms effectively in actual contexts.

### *Solutions from conceptual metaphor theory*

Research from conceptual metaphor theory shows that images grounded deeply in idioms can be activated by making learners understand the underlying conceptual metaphor and trace back to idioms' origin. Vu (2006) showed that the meaning of many idioms, especially those of body part idioms are motivated rather than abstract. Consequently, in order to teach idioms effectively, teachers should not only ask students to learn by heart. Instead, they should encourage students to predict the origins of idioms and then help them to find out the illiterate meaning based on that finding. For instance, when teaching the idiom 'To be on the ropes', the teacher should first ask this question: "Where do you think the expression "to be on the ropes" comes from? Sports, food or sailing?" Most of the students will choose 'sports' or 'sailing' since ropes are only used in these two domains. The teacher can then explain the cultural and historical origin to help learners associate with a specific situation. In this case for instance, students associate with the image of a boxer rounded to the corner and having to use the rope as point of support. From this hint, students will be able to infer that 'to be on the ropes' means to be put on the wall or to be in a

desperate situation. Problem solving activities like this force students to think and thus memorize and use the idioms better.

Besides, explicit explanation of conceptual metaphors can also help students infer idioms' meaning to a great extent. From our previous research (Vu, 2008a), it's not very fruitful making students infer idioms' meaning only. In our research on idioms containing 'ears' (Vu, 2008b), it was found out that it was very hard for students to automatically identify the proper conceptual metaphor for decoding idioms' meaning. In order to help students do that, teachers need to give students direct instruction on underlying conceptual metaphors or metonymies that motivate those idioms. In the following idioms, if the teachers simply give examples and ask students to infer meaning, their students will have a lot of difficulties:

- Don't talk so loudly unless you want everyone to know. Bill has big ears you know.

- Hey, cloth ears, I asked if you wanted a drink.

- Warnings that sunbathing can lead to skin cancer have largely fallen on deaf ears in Britain.

- 'Do you want to hear what happened at the party last night?' 'Oh yes, I'm all ears'.

- In the past they've tended to turn a deaf ear to such requests.

- He's a powerful industrialist who has the President's ear.

- I'll keep an ear to the ground and tell you if I hear of any vacancies.

- I had half an ear on the radio as he was talking to me.

However, if the teacher explains to students that these idioms are motivated by the metonymy "the ears stand for attention", chance of getting students to infer the meaning will rise up. This was confirmed in another research on applying conceptual metaphor and metonymy to teaching idioms and proverbs of Thomas Li (2002, cited in Robinson & Ellis 2008). In his research, Li conducted an experiment on 394 foreign language students in China. The experimental group was given instruction on conceptual metaphor and metonymy theories as well as how to use them in decoding idioms' meaning. Post-test results showed that the experimental group outperformed the controlled group in learning English idioms.

In English, there are many two or three word verbs, also called phrasal verbs. In advanced language tests like Toefl, Cambridge CAE or CPE, those phrasal verbs appear with high frequency. Currently available grammar books and other textbooks do no more than encouraging learners to memorize. Streamline English Directions is a good example of mechanical drilling and practice. Almost all units in the textbook come with a list of phrasal verbs and gap-filling exercises for learners to work on. These phrasal verbs are grouped in terms of verbs (take, give, look ...) or in terms of particles (up, down, on ...). The aim of

these practice exercises is to drill and help learners memorize the idioms. However, from classroom observation, students tend to forget these items after several weeks. In the department of English, HCM city University of Education, many students used to attend national English exams for the gifted. As the exams always have large number of phrasal verbs, these students tried to memorize a lot of these phrasal verbs. However, most of them complained that they would forget many of those items after several years. All of this comes from rote learning encouraged by teachers and textbooks. Research on conceptual metaphor theory (Vu, 2008) has given strong evidence that idioms' meaning is grounded in conceptual metaphors. For instance, all of these phrasal verbs are motivated by the conceptual metaphor "MORE IS UP – LESS IS DOWN":

- They put up the price on that model by five dollars.
- They brought their children up in the countryside.
- Production went up at the plant by 15 percent.
- The car sped up and passed the slow driver.
- It's really heated up these past few days.
- Can you turn the sound up?
- The local economy has really picked up since the new factory was built.
- The quarterly profits went down from the second to the third quarter.

- Turn down that horrible music!
- Please keep the noise down in this room!
- It's really cooled down these past few days.
- Computer prices have really come down recently.

In the above examples, particles "up" and "down" are always associated with increase or decrease in size, number or strength. As a result, teachers only need to explain to the students how conceptual metaphor "MORE IS UP – LESS IS DOWN" works and provide some examples instead of making students learn by heart. Besides, when armed with knowledge of that conceptual metaphor, students are more likely to infer meanings of other phrasal verbs formed with "up" and "down".

In a similar way, temporal conceptual metaphor starts from our conventional conception of time as a straight line running from the past to the future with the past in the back and the future in the front. As a result, phrasal verbs with "ahead" and "forward" are used to talk about future while those with "back" and "behind" are used to refer to the past. With such understanding of conceptual metaphor "FUTURE IS AHEAD – PAST IS BEHIND", students can predict meaning of the following idioms:

- What lies ahead?
- Let's think ahead to next season.
- I'm looking forward to seeing them again.

- I've put my watch forward one hour.
- The house dates back to the 16th century.
- Never look back, never have regrets.
- She was trying to leave behind a difficult adolescence.

When somebody has power or control over other people, we think about that person as being in a higher position. Therefore, phrasal verbs with “over” and “up” express the idea of somebody having control or more power than other people. In contrast, phrasal verbs with “down” and “under” are about people being controlled or in weakness. With the conceptual metaphor “POWER IS OVER/UP – WEAKNESS IS UNDER/DOWN”, teachers can help students infer meaning of the following expressions:

- He was lording it over me.
- The Emperor ruled over a vast area.
- They have come up in the world.
- She's been moved up to a more responsible job.
- The police clamped down on drinking in the streets.
- The rebellion was swiftly put down.
- Prisoners are kept under constant surveillance.
- We had to knuckle under and do what we were told.

Apart from making students aware of conceptual metaphor and metonymy to infer idiomatic meaning, teachers should also provide background cultural knowledge. This is especially useful for

idiom categories that are cultural-specific. In several cases, due to the difference inside the source domain due to cultural gaps, students will find it much harder to decode idiomatic meaning. As a result, background cultural knowledge that teachers provide for the students will help considerably. For example, most Vietnamese students find it hard to understand why English people say “as pleasant as a summer breeze” since in Vietnam, summer is very hot, humid and uncomfortable. Cultural knowledge is the key in this case. England is in the temperate zone with cold weather most of the year. For English people, summer is the best season associated with warmth and enjoyable outdoor activities. Temperature in summer in England is usually more or less 20<sup>0</sup> C, which is ‘cold’ for many Vietnamese. If Vietnamese students understand this, they will find the expression “as pleasant as a summer breeze” does make sense.

### *Summary*

If the underlying conceptual structures that motivate idioms’ meaning are explained, it is more likely that language learners infer the meaning and retain it longer. This contrasts with the common view held by language teachers and textbook writers that idioms’ meaning can’t be predicted and they must be learned as a whole in their context. However, context alone is not helpful for students and it does not help them to retain what they have learnt. From the examples given, it is shown that explicit

teaching of underlying conceptual metaphors that motivate idioms' meaning not only leads to better learning but also makes learning idioms more interesting. Idioms, in nature, are structures formed through men's conceptualizing of the

diverse and rich outside world. Consequently, once teachers and students focus on exploring those structures, they are doing an interesting exploration journey themselves.

#### REFERENCES

1. Achard, M., & Niemeier, S. (2004), *Cognitive linguistics, second language acquisition, and foreign language teaching*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
2. Gibbs, R. W. (1997), "Idioms and mental imagery: the metaphorical motivation for idiomatic meaning", *Cognition*, vol 36.
3. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980), *Metaphor We Live By*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
4. Langlotz, A. (2006), *Idiomatic Creativity: A cognitive-linguistic model of idiom-representation and idiom-variation in English*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
5. Moon, R. (1997), Vocabulary Connections: Multi-Word Items in English. In N. Schmitt & M. J. McCarthy (eds), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Nguyễn Ngọc Vũ (2006), "Về một cách giải thích nghĩa của thành ngữ từ góc độ ngôn ngữ học tri nhận", *Kỷ yếu Hội thảo Ngôn ngữ học trẻ*, Nxb Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội, Hà Nội.
7. Nguyễn Ngọc Vũ (2008), "Hoán dụ ý niệm "Bộ phận cơ thể người biểu trưng cho sự chú ý" trong thành ngữ chứa yếu tố "mắt", "mũi" và "tai" tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt", *Tạp chí Ngôn Ngữ*, (9).
8. Robinson, P., & Ellis, N. C. (2008). *Handbook of cognitive linguistics and second language acquisition*. New York: Routledge.

(Received: 29/8/2011; Accepted: 26/9/2011)