COGNITIVE PROCESSING OF ENGLISH IDIOMS
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

NGUYEN NGOC VU[*]

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, idioms in English are treated as a composite expression from which meaning cannot be predicted from individual components. From the cognitive viewpoint, this paper revisits the mental processes in human brain when dealing with idioms and discusses the conceptual metaphor theory as an alternative to the traditional view of English idioms. From examples of English idioms analyzed, the paper proves that idiom meaning in English is activated by conceptual metaphor rather than being abstract.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, English idioms, cognitive processes.

TÓM TẮT

Tri nhận thành ngữ tiếng Anh và ý nghĩa đối với việc dạy học ngoại ngữ

Theo truyền thống, thành ngữ trong tiếng Anh được xem là những đơn vị nguyên khối mà người học không thể suy nghĩa từ các đơn vị cấu thành. Áp dụng quan điểm tri nhận, bài báo này điểm lại các quá trình tri nhận trong hoạt động của não người khi xử lí thành ngữ và trình bày lí thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm như là một giải pháp thay thế cho quan điểm truyền thống về nghĩa của thành ngữ tiếng Anh. Từ những ví dụ phân tích, bài báo chứng minh rằng nghĩa của thành ngữ được tạo thành từ các ẩn dụ ý niệm chứ không phải là võ đoán.

Từ khóa: *ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, lí thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm, thành ngữ tiếng Anh, các quá trình tri nhận.*

1. Introduction

While idiom researchers under the traditional view focus on investigating the structural and formal aspects of idioms, some cognitive linguists have a different view. Famous cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999), Raymond Gibbs (1997) used a systematic method to review the nature of semantics in idioms and the relationship between form and meaning of language. They have made important theories for cognitive semantics based on how we recognize, conceptualize and categorize the world around us. According to linguistic survey work carried out in this new method, idiom is apparently a subject matter that cannot be taken lightly. With the principle that language is not an autonomous cognitive ability, the cognitive linguists launched a new look comparing to generative view of language nature: "Language knowledge (i.e. knowledge of the meaning and form) is basically conceptual structure

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[*] Ph.D., Ho Chi Minh City University of Education; *Email: elearningvietnam@gmail.com*

and semantic expression is basically conceptual expression ... the expression about syntax, morphology, and phonology is also basically conceptual expression; because the sound and the mouthpiece must be generative at the output and be received to understand at the input of the cognitive processes that govern speaking and listening, reading, writing - which are two processes related to the brain" (Ly Toan Thang, 2005). It is from this fundamental viewpoint that the people following the school of cognitive linguistics think most of idioms are products of the conceptualization process and this is not merely a matter of language.

2.   The basic cognitive processes in the human brain

People generally rely on some basic cognitive processes to acquire, organize, store and process information. In this process, the human brain is not like a box containing the ideas and concepts but it is a complex network that is created, edited and changed for several times. The point of view that considers the cognitive activity of man as a complex network recently has been admitted by psychologists and physiologists. Accordingly, the information in the human brain is transmitted, saved or processed by the neuron sets and these neuron sets are the subnet nodes of a larger network. These networks contain billions of network nodes and are related crisscrossing each other through nerve networks. The thinking activity of human beings can be achieved due to the relationship, impact and continuous mutual influence of these network nodes. In other words, the knowledge is generated from the process of mutual interaction in the system of nodes and nerves. Cognitive linguists have applied the viewpoint of mutual interaction network system of the nervous system to explain the cognitive processes, which include language activities.

Based on the views mentioned above about the humnan thinking activity of, Langacker (1987: 100) considered mental experience of each person as a set of countless temporary or fixed cognitive facts. A fact, according to Langacker's view, may be any results of the operation process of the nervous system. It may merely be an irritant in a nervous neuron or also be a series of nervous signal transmitted in a rushing way on a large scale. To codify these mental experiences, the cognitive data must be arranged in an orderly manner. Langacker called the rearrangement of cognitive data as the entrenchment process. In that entrenchment process, the data may be adjusted, changed or entrenched. For the cognitive process to gain results, the collected data are not only adjusted or strengthened, but also connected together to form the substructures.

The comparative process helps human to be able to pair complex data with other facts and find out the similarities and differences between the sub-structures and also inside each substructure. The process of comparing the cognitive data has a very important role in the cognitive activity of human because through this process we set the boundaries between events or in other words, by virtue of which the humans have the ability to divide the objective reality (Langacker 1987: 101).

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If the process of entrenching, connecting and comparing the data helps people create mental representations that are clear and have high complexity, the process of abstraction allows us to perceive those mental representations in many different levels. To illustrate this, Langacker (1998: 5) had given examples to show that the same data can have different processing levels:

1. This black silk Armani shirt costs $ 2000

2. This shirt is very expensive

3. The thing is expensive

The examples above show that people can draw the schemas from the specific cognitive data depending on schematicity of such data. As defined by Langacker, the schema can be considered as a very complex network that is built by the specific data. In the three examples above, Langacker considered the third one as the schema that is created from the first sentence and the second sentence. The schemas have an important role for the organization and interpretation of the data collected by the human. These schemas can be projected to the less complicated spiritual structure and then it can be reorganized into a different mental structure. For example, when viewing objectively, people will see three broken lines in the figure beside as having no connection with each other. But our brains tend to reorganize the data obtained from the cognitive process into a meaningful structure. Therefore, we unconsciously connect the three broken lines together and cognizes is as a meaningful perfect whole: a triangle. This cognitive process can be explained by cognitive processes mentioned above. The partial perception of the image gives us three separate broken lines.
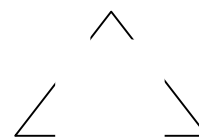
To reorganize these image data, a mental structure is created on the basis of the entrenchment and interaction process between the data. This new mental structure is called criteria by Langacker (1987) and it is used to assess the experience that has just been created. The schema of the triangle image above contains such criteria. Because the synthesis process of all the broken lines creates a structure in the image schema of the triangle, this schema is activated. When looking as a whole at the three broken lines, the schema of the broken lines is connected together and makes us get it as a triangle. Based on this description, Langacker gives a further process in the cognitive activity called the projection. Projection is the synthesis process of which a standard is entrenched S (entrenched standard) projected onto a cognitive target T. This projection process only takes place when standard S is activated based on the sub-systems associated with both S and T. The projection of schemas to group cognitive targets is an important part of the categorization process. Through the categorization process, data is organized into groups with the same points by excluding individual differences. The method of approaching categorization process of Langacker has synthesized the viewpoints of both the prototype theory and the traditional classification models. The models that Langacker made based on two category relations are separate but still

related to each other. They are the process of categorization by schema and the process of categorization by prototype.

Thus, according to the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics, in the human brain, the complex cognitive activities take place at the same time. The formation of human knowledge is a process of generating multiple successive periods as entrenchment, connection, comparison, abstraction and projection. Through these processes, data from the surroundings are transformed into human knowledge.

3.   Structure of conceptual metaphor

Since ancient times, metaphor has been seen as a rhetorical measure and has only been studied in the field of learning style or rhetoric. During ancient Greek times, metaphor was defined by the formula "A is B" in such classics as "Achilles is a lion". In this sense, the metaphor is formed on implicit comparison. This is the main point to distinguish metaphor from simile. In simile, the compared object is expressed directly as "Achilles is brave as a lion". Unlike traditional point of views which considered metaphor as a matter of pure literary language, the cognitive linguists, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for example, believed that metaphor is a regular activity of thinking and metaphors appear a lot in our everyday language. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) described the relationship between the two lovers as follows: "Our relationship has hit a dead-end street". In this case, love is understood by the idea of a journey. The implications of the question on the relationship between two people came to a dead end. Two people need to go back or terminate the relationship. This is not a rare case. In English, we still encounter many different expressions showing love in the idea of a journey expressed through the following idioms:

- It's been *a long, bumpy road.*
- We can't *turn back* now.
- We *are at a crossroads*
- We may have to *go our separate ways*.
- The relationship *isn't going anywhere*.
- We are *spinning on our wheels*.
- Our relationship *is off the track.*
- The marriage *is on the rocks*.
- We may have to *bail out of* this relationship.

All above expressions are quite popular in the spoken English language. These are not direct quotes from literary works or figurative sayings. Expressions like "Look how far we have come" can be understood as the expression of love. As linguists and cognitivists, Lakoff and Turner (1989) have set themselves the following two questions:

- Is there any specific rule governing the use of the expressions of the journey as above when talking about love or not?

- Is there any principle for our reasoning about the journeys to reason about love or not?

4.   Mappings in conceptual metaphor

The answer to both questions posed by Lakoff and Turner was yes but this principle is neither in the English grammar system nor in the vocabulary system. Cognitive linguists have shown that this principle is the conceptual system lying deep under the system of language. It is this principle which helps us understand the conceptual domain of love from the conceptual domain of journey. For more specific expression, the principle by Lakoff (1993) is interpreted as follows: "The couple is together for a journey. Goals in the lives of the two people are considered as the destination of the journey. The relationship between two people is the media. It helps that both can work together to pursue common goals. This journey is not easy. During the journey there are obstacles and is also the place where two people have to decide whether to go forward in any direction. They even have to decide whether to continue the trip or not"

The above metaphor requires us to understand the conceptual domain of love in a completely different conceptual domain which is the journey. Specific as Lakoff and Johnson's explanation (1980), the metaphor denotes the mapping from a source domain to the target domain. Source domain in this case is the journey and the target domain is love. The mapping process is structured coherently. This means that all the components of conceptual domain of love like the couple, their common goals, the difficulties they encounter etc. link to the corresponding elements in the journey like the travelers, the destination of the journey, the obstacles along the way and so on.

To facilitate the identification and to remember the mapping in the conceptual system, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed two ways to call the mapping briefly as follows:

- TARGET-DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN

- TARGET-DOMAIN AS SOURCE-DOMAIN

In such above mentioned case, the mapping is named as "LOVE IS A JOURNEY". As the saying "LOVE IS A JOURNEY", we understand that is the way to denote the relationship between the corresponding elements between the two concepts in one mapping. In the case of the above example, some corresponding relationships can be interpreted as follows:

- The couple corresponds to the travelers.

- The relationship corresponds to the transportation.

- Shared goals of the two people in their life.

- The obstacles in the relationship between two people with the obstacles on the way.

In the analysis of conceptual metaphor by determining the mappings between the two conceptual domains as above, Lakoff (1993) also noted that we must not confuse the name of mapping - "LOVE IS A JOURNEY"- with mapping. Mapping here is understood as a set of relationships between the two corresponding conceptual domains. So when we say, "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" we are talking about a set of corresponding relationships between the two conceptual domains. In addition to the confusion between the name of mapping and the mapping, there is another important point: Name of mapping is usually placed in the form of clause but mapping itself is not the clause.

Without clear distinction between mapping and name of mapping, we may believe that metaphor is clause. This is absolutely not true. Metaphor here should be understood as a set of relationships between the two corresponding conceptual domains.

Thus, mapping "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" is a set of relationships established by contacting our understanding of the journey with our understanding of love. Such relationships allow us to reason about love in a way we reason about the trip. To better understand this problem, let's take another example: When the boy told the girl about their relationship: "We are facing obstacles" then how the girl understands that the boy is talking about the relationship between two people? Obviously we say "facing obstacles" when making a journey and this also reminds listeners of the image of a trip. Interpretations and images on this trip can vary a little from people to people but generally the way we understand about the trip can be expressed according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980): "Two people are in a car, moving together to a common destination. The car encounters an obstacle and cannot move anymore. If two people do nothing, they will not be able to reach their destination." So both have a number of options as follows:

- The couple will try to repair the car or remove obstacles to go forward.

- The couple will sit in the broken car and give up reaching the common destination.

- The couple left the car behind

These relationships forming the metaphor "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" in this case had contact, or mapping from conceptual domain of journey to the conceptual domain of love. When creating this relation, the interpretation of the trip will be mapped to the understanding of love. From the interpretation of journey as analyzed above, we can understand about love, respectively as follows:

The couple is in love with each other during the period, together to pursue common goals in life. The relationship between the two people gets stuck and does not continue anymore. If two people do nothing, they will not be able to achieve goals in life. So both have some options:

- The couple will try to retain the relationship or remove difficulties to continue the relationship.

- The couple just let the relationship deteriorate and give up pursuing common goals in life.

- The couple gives up their love.

Through the above analyzed examples, we can see that there are very specific relations established between the conceptual domain of love and conceptual domain of journey. Thanks for these relations that we can apply knowledge for journey to knowledge of love. Metaphor "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" is formed from these relations, not from the vocabulary units. Lakoff confirmed that metaphor is not just a matter of language but also of reasoning and thinking. Language is only the cover. Mapping is the main player because mapping prescribes the language used in the source conceptual domain and rules method to think in the target domain. This view of Lakoff is completely different from the traditional view which originally believes that metaphor is pure expression of language. Lakoff argues that if we consider metaphor is pure expression of language, with different expressions of languages we have different metaphors. Then, when saying "Our relationship has hit a dead-end street", we have a metaphor. When saying "She and I are at the crossroads", we have a different metaphor. By saying "The relationship of two people constantly encounters obstacles" we have a completely different metaphor from the other two. Subsequently, we will have dozens of examples but it is clear that hereby we do not find dozens of metaphors. In all the examples mentioned above, we have only a single metaphor: "LOVE IS A JOURNEY", in which love is conceptualized as a journey. Metaphor or more precisely mapping "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" helps us understand how the love is conceptualized into a journey. This conceptualization is expressed through many different language expressions.

5. Summary

From the analysis of a model conceptual metaphor, it can be concluded that idiom meanings are motivated by the mappings of source knowledge domains to target knowledge domain. If the underlying conceptual structures that motivate idioms' meaning are explained, it is more likely that language learners can infer the meaning and retain it longer. This point has strong implication in the current practice of teaching English idioms. Rather than asking students to learn by heart the composite meaning of idioms, teachers should encourage them to predict and it is best to arm students with basic understanding of the conceptual metaphor theory.

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