Education

Cognitive study of metaphorical cyber language

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the cognition in the forming and understanding of metaphorical cyber language. An approach of questioning and reasoning is adopted to explore the mechanism hidden in the formation of metaphors in cyber language. An approach of exemplifying and interpretation is employed to analyze the stereotypical relation existing in the literal form of metaphors in order to discover the implicit meanings. The findings show that in metaphorical cyber language, human cognition plays a crucial role, using the similarities between the source and target domains. Implicature Ontology is the key to induce the implicit meaning of such metaphors.

Keywords: cognitive, metaphor, cyber language, implicature ontology

1. Introduction

1.1 Cyber language

With the fast development of computer science and internet technology, increasingly more new things keep emerging online, among which is cyber language. Also with more attention given to cyber language, the laws, features and relative mechanisms of cyber language have been discussed and discovered by human beings, some of which have even been spread and applied to the creation of new cyber language. As for the basic definition of cyber language, different people have various ideas. But when taken into consideration the most influencing ones, it's not difficult to discover that cyber language generally includes expressions in three fields, namely, the terms about computers like mouse, hardware, and virus; the terms about internet like netizens, hacker; and the language expressions popularly used online like MM (beautiful girl), Lanshou (Feeling terrible), etc.

1.2 Metaphor

Metaphor is widely spreading in human society, especially in human language. It has attracted much attention ever since Aristotle. As for people's understanding about the essence of metaphor, it also has experienced several stages, from Substitution Theory to Interaction Theory, to cognitive theory. The emergence, flourishing and distinction of each understanding of essence of metaphor always carries striking characteristics of the times.

As for human study about metaphor, attention also was paid to different aspects in accordance with the times. Metaphor, long a heated topic of literature study as a way of language beautifying, has become the object of language research since Lakoff and Johnson [1] discovered its significance in human cognition and language. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor should be a mode of human thinking. It is a process of taking advantage of the known knowledge in one field to know a new, abstract field by way of Mapping in human cognition, consciously or unconsciously.
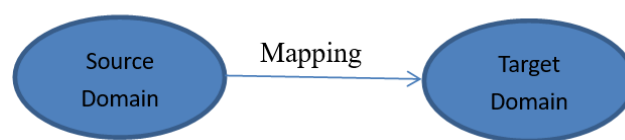

Fig 1: Process of metaphor in human cognition

Shu Dingfang [2] said that as a mental mapping, metaphor is mapping the knowledge of one thing onto other things in human mind. Such mental mapping may simply involve the outer and surficial connection between two things, or simply the inner and characteristic connection, or sometimes both connections. Shu Dingfang [3] also said that "Metaphor in language is both a result and a tool of human cognitive activities". "The understanding of metaphors is to remove the conflict between metaphorical meaning and context".

By mapping their known knowledge in one field onto a new field, human beings can know and explain the latter easily. In mapping process, human cognition will usually establish the similarities between the old thing and the new thing, which enable people to understand easily the latter through the former. Of course, the similarities between the two are not always very apparent (the so-called Similarity-based metaphor); sometimes they need to be discovered, even created (the so-called Similarity-creating metaphor). The inside features are among the similarities that need to be discovered. And some abstract characteristics, like the spirit carried by a concrete thing, need to be created.

2. Metaphors in cyber language

Just as mentioned above, metaphor exists ubiquitously in human language, even said to be the "omnipresent principle of human language" [4]. As a branch of human language, also known as a social dialect [5], metaphor must exist in cyber language. Therefore, cyber language consists of both metaphorical and non-metaphorical ones. At the same time, the

knowledge of human cognition made Lakoff and Johnson classify metaphors into three categories, orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor and structural metaphor, the last of which attracted most attention ever since its emergence. Accordingly, in cyber language, people still can find such different categories of metaphor.

2.1 Schools of metaphors in cyber language

In terms of the schools of metaphor in cyber language, generally two different schools are mentioned: one is the verbal form, the other being the non-verbal form. The former refers to those language utterances, including normal language utterances, homophonic language utterances, and so forth. The latter refers to the expressions that no language is included, like some pictures, abstract images, a concrete model, and so forth. Such various forms of metaphors in cyber language are mainly based on the similarities existing or created by users.

In the meantime, Xu Yanzhen[6] classified metaphors in cyber language into other two schools, the school of phonetic metaphors and the school of semantic metaphors. The standard for the former school is the phonetic similarities between voice and the object that the voice refers to, like 5555 meaning crying and 201314 meaning love you forever, etc. The standard for the latter school is the semantic similarities between the language forms and the objects they refer to, like the "high" in "I'm pretty high today" or the "low" in "He is a very low person". The "high" and "low" in these two sentences can express how a person feels or what one is like by using the similarities between the physical height and mood or mental image.

2.2 Formation of metaphors in cyber language

Metaphor was widely used in literary works as a method to beautify language mainly. Therefore, it has long been an object of literature studies. The fast development of internet technology and wide spreading of internet lead to the explosive increase of netizens population worldwide, which causes the dramatic use of cyber language, thus metaphors are gradually fast spreading and accepted among the netizens, which will of course make metaphorical cyber language increasingly popular among the non-netizens. Therefore, what is source of metaphors in cyber language, what forms do they have and how are they formed are attracting great attention among linguistic researchers.

2.2.1 Source of metaphors in cyber language

Needless to say, metaphors in cyber language absolutely exist in cyber language, which, considering the social and online reality, in turn, emerges both from the development and popularization of internet technology, and the development of online culture. Usually, some online catchwords come into being with the appearance of certain sort of events, like online collective kuso, hot news, or being inspired by some media, advertisement, or some celebrity's micro-blog, like the "small goal" saying of Wang Jianlin. In Wang's words, to earn 100,000,000 RMB can be set up as a small goal, which became a laugh stock among people when they want to tease each other.

2.2.2 Forms of metaphors in cyber language

In terms of the forms of metaphor in cyber language, it mainly refers to the expressions in which a metaphor is used or applied. Although metaphor functions and appears in all layers of language, including cyber language, the majority of current studies on metaphor in cyber language still mainly give their consent to the cyber vocabulary, including words and phrases, such as databank and information highway, etc.

Lu Xinyu[7] summed up four different categories of metaphor in cyber language, namely, body metaphors, animal metaphors, architectural metaphors and navigation metaphors. Not only can such classification make the understanding of cyber language easily, but also make the function of metaphor in cyber language production prominent.

2.2.3 Ways to form metaphors in cyber language

The ways to form metaphorical expressions vary in different languages due to their peculiar mode of thinking and culture. But still, similar ways are adopted to form new words, which work also in the formation of metaphorical expressions. And mainly two ways to form such metaphorical vocabulary are mentioned, one is semantic extension, the other being compound word formation. The former refers to the extension of word meaning centered its original meaning. For example, building owner means the owner of a building originally. But in cyber language, it is used to refer to the one who posts a post online. The latter refers to the formation of the metaphorical compound words. Such words usually include at least two parts, the modifier and the core. For example, in word homepage, "home" is the modifier and "page" is the core. Other examples are mouse potato, databank, etc.

Still there is a way to form metaphorical expressions, namely, lexical conversion. By this way, some words can be used very flexibly online, which means that netizens can use some words unusually. For instance, the word forward is an adverb originally, but it is often used as a verb in sentence like "I will forward the message to you". In Chinese, such phenomena also exist, such phenomena also exist, in phrase "严重支持"(support somebody seriously), "严重" is used as an adverb while it is an adjective originally.

2.3 Mechanisms of metaphors in cyber language

Liu Lu [8] thought that, as a mode of thinking, metaphor is widely used in the production of online expressions, especially when they are with new meanings. In doing so, the similarities between the original reference and the new object are used. Otherwise, readers will always fail to understand the newly created expressions. Therefore, certain features of the so-called source domain will be mapped onto the target domain. Such features include physical and mental ones. Mapping is the working mechanism in creating new metaphorical expressions in cyber language. It happens also in understanding them. The mapping consists of four different types, namely, the mapping of gap in source domain schema, mapping of relation, mapping of features and mapping of knowledge. Without mapping,

readers will find it difficult to get the actual meaning of them. Nor will they use them correctly.

3. Cognition in metaphorical cyber language

As mentioned above, mapping is the main way in the forming and understanding of metaphor. Then, what is the basis of mapping and how mapping happens in metaphorical cyber language are the central two fields deserving research.

3.1 Basis of mapping in metaphorical cyber language

As mentioned above, mapping is an important method when people need to know and understand a new or abstract object. In doing so, people usually map certain knowledge they have grasped about one thing onto the new thing. It happens more often than not that people can know the new thing well this way. It also happens in metaphorical cyber language. For example, in "Jane is a dinosaur", it's pretty hard to connect a girl to a dinosaur in the very beginning due to their great difference. However, when people think it through, they would bring the facial appearance of dinosaur, the ugly looking of a dinosaur, into their mind. Hence, they would probably get the implication of that sentence. The understanding of this sentence describes of the mapping process very explicitly, that is, to map their knowledge in the source domain (appearance of a dinosaur) onto the target domain (Jane), leading to the appropriate understanding of the sentence. Furthermore, people can even predict how cruel Jane might be, especially when the reader find that Jane is not as ugly as they have thought. In order to get better understanding about that sentence, they need to make further interpretation.

Based on the explanation of the above sentence, it's safe to find that mapping in metaphorical cyber language happens only when people find the similarity between any two compared objects. Similarity becomes the basis of both creating and understanding of metaphors. With similarity, even two absolutely unrelated things or two things physically thousands of miles away can become relative to some extent; without similarity, two things face to face become strangers. Despite the significance of similarity in connecting two things, the discovering of it usually depends on people's cognition, especially their cognition in observing and judgment. Once the similarity between two things is found, their connection will be built naturally. So does the creation and understanding of metaphorical cyber language. For example, in "020202" in Chinese circumstance, most people will fail to connect it with "miss you" because the two are quite different. But when you pronounce "0" in Chinese "Ling" instead of in English "Zero", you will find "Ling" is similar to "Lian (恋)" in pronunciation.

At the same time, "2" in Chinese is similar to "Er(尔)(meaning You)" in pronunciation. Therefore, the connection between the two is built easily.

3.2 Homophonic and pictographic metaphors—connected with human cognition

In metaphorical cyber language, homophonic and pictographic words account for a large proportion, even most of the most popular ones, because netizens frequently use such homophonic words, emoticons and even memes to communicate online. For example, in 2016, "Lanshou" and "Xianggu" became pretty popular online. One reason for them is because they are similar in pronunciation in Chinese to "Nanshou" (Feeling terrible) and "Xiangku" (Wanting to cry). And the emoticon "T_T" can remind people of "a face with tears". As for the memes, they become more easily to catch the implied meaning as netizens are quite familiar with them.

3.3 Being different but not diverse

People are likely to understand the meaning when it is transferred in standard and direct forms because being understandable is the precondition. But when the meaning is carried in nonstandard or indirect forms, even in roundabout forms, it will also be accepted by people happily. An example for the former is "Nanshou", pretty clear to the listeners. An example for the latter is "Lanshou", pretty humorous and interesting for the listeners. Either way is to hit the mark. The former is like making it directly, the so-called "Do a familiar work with ease(驾轻就熟)", while the latter is like making it indirectly, the so-called "Winding path leading to a quiet place(曲径通幽)". In hitting the mark, which way to take depends on the user, especially on the user's purpose and knowledge. Anyhow, both direct and indirect ways can at last carry the ideal meaning to the listener. Although it seems that the indirect way may be diverse from the direct one, the fact is that it seldom happens. The Implicature Ontology explains this well.

According to Implicature Ontology, implicature stands for a nature of utterance. Or a basic feature of utterance is its implicature. Without implicature, utterance can't survive. Therefore, implicature can be shouldered through any of the three elements of a word, sound, form, and meaning. The above mentioned "Utterance always carries implicature" means that the literal level of utterance shoulders some implied meaning which should be there but not be in word itself, leading to the terms of Implicit meaning and Explicit meaning. The former refers to the meaning hidden in the utterance, while the latter refers to the literal meaning of the utterance. Usually, the implicit meaning of an utterance is generally related to human optimized model of thinking. And most of all, the implicit meaning will be realized only when the reader get enough knowledge about that situation. In metaphorical cyber language, in order to stress efficiency, netizens always want to take advantage of some shortened utterances which usually get implicit meanings hidden. For example, "Chigua Qunzhong (Melon-eating people)" is very popular online in 2016. Its literal meaning, or the explicit meaning, refers to some people who are eating melon, while its hidden meaning, or the implicit meaning, refers to those who just surround and watch but not make any remarks just because what is happening has nothing to do with themselves. Such metaphorical cyber language can realize the economical goal with comparatively less words, which also stands for the optimization of human thoughts. Here comes another question, what is the mechanism for

people to get the hidden meaning of some metaphorical cyber language? We can still use the Implicature Ontology to explain it. According to Implicature Ontology, in order to explain or compensate what's missing between the explicit meaning and the implicit meaning, we need to use the stereotypical relation (henceforth SR). SR refers to the regular or stereotypical connection, which is a formula people use to understand the connection between any two things, also by way of mapping. For example, Chigua Qunzhong and Bystanders share the similar meaning, both referring to those who just want to seek fun instead of doing something to make difference. Such SR can be called the Common Core between the two parts. With SR, the missed information, or meaning, can be made up, leading to the perfect understanding of the implicit meaning.

4. Conclusion

As a language phenomenon, metaphor makes the expression of long or complicated things short or simple. As a way of thinking, metaphor makes the understanding of new or abstract things easier. In cyber language, metaphor functions the same. It does not only make netizens express some complicated affairs in a simple way, but also makes the understanding of some indirect expressions explicitly. In both expressing and understanding some complex or abstract or implicit affairs, metaphor is almost a must, as it not only involves the SR between any two related things, but most of all, human cognition goes together with it. Of course, there are many other aspects of human cognition that get deeply involved in metaphorical cyber language, which deserves more interpretation.

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