MAPPING LANGUAGE LEARNERS' BELIEF SYSTEMS: METAPHOR ELICITATION

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Abstract– Drawing on the Cognitive Metaphor Theory, this article presents metaphor elicitation as a practitioner-friendly means of investigating the implicit beliefs of learners and shares insights gained from the metaphors of 101 Japanese university students. Linguistic metaphors were collected from members of freshman university English classes, which were grouped in terms of their underlying conceptual metaphors. Nine distinct conceptual metaphors for the language learner were identified (striver, container, explorer, baby, work of art, embryo, automaton, acquirer of tools and defective organism). These were interpreted revealing insights into beliefs about the language teacher and language learning. The metaphors were analyzed in terms of whether from a theoretical perspective they were likely to expedite or hamper language acquisition. It was found that metaphor elicitation was effective in providing insights into the learners' expectations of their teacher, attitudes towards learner autonomy and the nature and degree of motivation of the learners.

Index Terms— Learner Autonomy, Language Learner Beliefs, Motivation, Metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

The power of metaphor has been recognized since times immemorial. Aristotle wrote of the literary genius required to create metaphor. Metaphor could be considered to be the backbone of poetry. Politicians have long known the rhetorical power of metaphor. However, in the last few decades metaphor has ceased to be seen as a purely linguistic phenomenon and the preserve of literary genius. It is now recognized as pervasive in daily discourse and fundamentally cognitive in nature. Metaphor helps us to orientate ourselves in the abstract world and is, as such, highly influential over the way we live our lives (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, a language learner who sees him/herself as a sponge is likely to behave differently to one who sees him/herself as a treasure hunter. These metaphoric constructions are likely to influence the expectations they have of the teacher, the learner strategies they use and the degree of responsibility for their own learning they are likely to accept.

II. METAPHOR AS A TOOL FOR INVESTIGATING BELIEFS

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Cognitive Metaphor Theory signified a paradigm shift from metaphor being seen as decorative linguistic device to being fundamental to our cognition were. At the center of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory is the conceptual metaphor, which is seen as the cognitive source of the linguistic metaphor, seen as ubiquitous in daily discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Linguistic metaphors such as, "I don't think this relationship is going anywhere", "Our marriage is on the rocks" and "We'll just have to go our separate ways" are argued to be the linguistic realization of the conceptual metaphor: "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" (Kovesces, 2002: 7) (bold italics represent the metaphorical elements of linguistic metaphors, in accordance with the conventions of Cognitive Metaphor Theory. UPPERCASE represents conceptual metaphors).

A conceptual metaphor is the conflation of two conceptual domains, the source domain and the target domain. In the above conceptual metaphor, JOURNEY is the source domain, i.e. the domain from which we draw in order to understand the target domain, LOVE in the example above. As in this example, the source domains are generally draw on consist of relatively concrete concepts, based on our physical experience of the world, whereas the target domains are tend to be more abstract concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kovesces, 2002).

Another important component of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory, which will be utilized in this study, is metaphoric entailments. These are the aspects of the source domain that we transfer to the target domain (Kovesces, 2002). Using the previous example of LOVE IS A JOURNEY, our knowledge of a journey, such as the notion of moving towards a destination or that obstacles are often encountered, are transferred to the idea of love. The result is that we perceive relationships as progressing towards an undefined goal and difficulties in the relationship as obstacles to be overcome.

Of particular pertinence to the present study, is the way in which metaphor, not only facilitates the comprehension of abstract concepts, but also constrains our understanding of them. By their very nature, metaphors highlight certain aspects of a phenomenon and obscure others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). An example of how this can impact on language learners' success, if a learner metaphorically represents him or herself as a sponge, this entails that he or she may conceive language learning as passively absorbing information. Considering one's behavior is likely to be influenced by way metaphorical constructions held (Wertsch, 1995; Thornbury, 1991, Tobin, 1990), this metaphor is likely to result in

learner behaviors which, from a theoretical perspective, will hinder their progress in language acquisition, due to an emphasis on passive absorption of knowledge and the resulting neglect of the productive and interactional aspects of language learning considered necessary in acquiring a language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Besides the implications to the learning strategies adopted by the learners it is also likely that the way learners' construct themselves metaphorically is likely to reveal their expectations of the teacher and the degree to which they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study sought to address the following questions:
1) What metaphors do learners use to conceptualize themselves as learners?
2) What are the entailments of the metaphors regarding the teacher and language learning?
3) Are these metaphorical stances likely to enable or hinder language acquisition, from the perspective of second language acquisition (SLA) theory?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The sample consisted of 101 freshman students (M52/49F) at a university in Japan. All students were of an intermediate level, according to the A.C.E placement test, used for placement purposes by the university.

B. Data Collection

Once it had been established that all participants were of a sufficient level of metaphoric competence, they were asked to complete the sentence stem, "A language learner is ...". This metaphor elicitation was completed as homework,

A. Data Analysis

The metaphor analysis followed the guidelines provided by Cortazzi and Jin (1999), in which linguistic metaphors are collected and are grouped according to what was deemed to be their underlying conceptual metaphor. This process consisted of five stages. The first was to enter all of the linguistic metaphors into a spreadsheet. Then a first attempt was made to group the metaphors semantically. For example the metaphors source domains, 'runner', 'athlete' and 'marathon runner' formed one group. Then broader semantic relationships were identified between some of the groups and the overarching conceptual metaphor was established. For example, the group above was combined with a group consisting of 'mountaineer' and 'climber' and the conceptual metaphor, 'LANGUAGE LEARNER AS STRIVER' was established. This process was then repeated to improve the groupings and the naming of conceptual metaphors. To improve validity, this categorization was cross-checked with two colleagues. Following this consultation, a revision of the original groupings was conducted. This process resulted in nine conceptual metaphors.

After the conceptual metaphors were established, the entailments for the language teacher and language learning were identified. For example, the 'LEARNER AS STRIVER' conceptual metaphor entailed that the language teacher is a coach or an assistant in reaching a goal and language learning is working towards a goal or training oneself. An important point made by Cameron and Deignan (2006) is that the linguistic variation within each category represents subtle differences at the conceptual level, therefore variation in the linguistic metaphors within each category were analyzed. This was followed by a critical evaluation of each conceptual metaphor, from the perspective SLA theory, to discern whether it is likely to expedite or hamper language acquisition.

V. RESULTS

The results are presented in table 1. Analysis yielded 9 conceptual metaphors. Each is discussed below with regards to what they reveal about what the learners implicitly believe about language learning and the role of the teacher. These perspectives are discussed in reference to SLA theory, in terms of whether they are likely to help or hinder language learning.

B. Learner as Striver

We can infer that the learners who subscribe to this conceptual metaphor are likely to be goal oriented and recognize the importance of effort and perseverance in reaching these goals. Little is revealed about the way tthey perceive the role of the teacher, but they may view the teacher as an assistant in achieving their goals.

In terms of the likelihood that such a view of language learning will lead to successful language learning, perseverance is certainly an asset in achieving this. While it can't be assumed that learners in this category possess the necessary perseverance, it appears that they value it. This could be considered to be the first step in fostering it and, therefore, constitutes a valuable asset in learning a language.

C. Learner as Container

The conceptual metaphor could be construed in two ways, and, perhaps, the variation in linguistic metaphors within this category represents these two perspectives. On the one hand, it could demonstrate a passive approach to language learning, in which they passively absorb information from the teacher (perhaps the sponge, vacuum, notebook and blank disc represent this approach). On the other hand, it could demonstrate an emphasis on

Table I. Learners Metaphors

Conceptual Metaphor	n	Exemplar Metaphors	Entailments	
			A language teacher is...	Language learning is...
STRIVER	27	climber (4), runner (5), sportsman (1), mountaineer (4), athlete (2), challenger (2).	A coach; an assistant in reaching a goal	working towards a goal, training oneself,
CONTAINER	18	sponge (12), vacuum (1), notebook (3), blank disc (1), money saver (1)	a provider of knowledge	receiving knowledge
EXPLORER	17	treasure hunter (2), explorer (4), traveler (5), adventurer (3),	a cooperative leader	exploring
BABY	14	baby (6), chick (3), child learning to stand (1), a one year old child (1)	a parent	learning life skills
WORK OF ART	8	diamond (3), tower (1), handicraft (1), wine (1), rough stone (1), a canvas (1)	an artist	being moulded
EMBRYO	6	seed (3), egg (1), uncooked popcorn (1), bud (1)	a nurturer	growing and developing
AUTOMATON	4	parrot (2), robot (1), computer (1)	a controller	following orders and repeating
ACQUIRER OF TOOLS	4	someone who gets honyaku konyaku (a magic translation tool from Japanese animation, Doraemon(1), man who gets a step stool (1), someone with a link to the world (2)	a provider of tools	acquiring a tool
DEFECTIVE ORGANISM	3	bird which cannot fly (1), patient (1), a lost person (1)	a helper	fixing problems

input (the money saver metaphor could represent this perspective).

One important aspect of language acquisition is language input (through listening and reading) (Krashen, 1982), and this metaphor appears to signify a strong emphasis on this. However, there is a weakness. It is widely accepted that learner autonomy (Benson, 2011), output (Swain, 1995) and interaction (Richards & Schmidt 2002) are fundamental to language acquisition. The passive approach to language learning implied in this metaphor is antithetical to all three, meaning that this metaphor is not indicative of a successful language learner.

D. Learner as Explorer

This metaphor signifies a proactive and principled approach to language learning. One could expect these learners to have a high degree of strategic competence (an important characteristic of being a successful language learner (Oxford, 2011)). Also apparent is a high degree of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Flaste, 1995) (i.e. they are motivated by the learning process itself rather than seeing it more as a means to an end). As with previous categories, there is some variation amongst the associated linguistic metaphors. The treasure hunter metaphor appears to suggest a more goal-orientated approach than the others, as finding the treasure is a tangible goal. This metaphor appears to represent a positive approach to language learning, however, one thing that is not clear from these metaphors is what is being explored. It is the language or the learning process? The answer is not clear from the data alone. Nevertheless, both possibilities would be beneficial in the language learning process.

E. Learner as Baby

This metaphoric category suggests that the learner is somewhat dependent on the teacher for guidance and support in learning, i.e. not autonomous. After all, babies (at least the ones used as linguistic metaphors here) are dependent on their parents to develop. On the other hand, babies are highly active in their development of their life skills. In this, the teachers job could be said to scaffold the learning process (i.e. provide support which is removed when it is no longer needed). The variation within the category represents varying levels of dependence, the baby being the most dependent and the one-year old child being the least. Perhaps this variation can be transferred to the degree to which the respective learners are dependent on the teacher for support and guidance, reflecting their level of learner autonomy.

F. Learner as Work of Art

This category signifies a passive approach to learning, attributing little agency to the learner. All of the linguistic metaphors in this category draw on inanimate objects, either created by the teacher (as in the tower, handicraft, diamond and the wine metaphors), or waiting to be transformed by the teacher (as in the, rough stone and canvas metaphors). The apparent lack of agency in learners who subscribe to this category could constitute a serious obstacle to language acquisition.

G. Learner as Automaton

This metaphor entails a view of the teacher as someone who controls the learner and learning as following orders and repeating. This clearly suggests a view of learning which is highly dependent on the authority of the teacher. It correspondingly indicates a lack of motivation and perhaps a lack awareness of the purpose of the class activities. They are just going through the motions.

H. Learner as an Acquirer of Tools

In this category, the teacher could be assumed to be the provider of tools and learning acquiring tools. This metaphor suggests an instrumental view of language learning, in which English will be used for some future purpose. This suggests a level of motivation that would assist in successful language acquisition.

I. Learner as Defective Organism

The most salient feature of this metaphor is a lack of confidence. The result of this is a dependence on the teacher to fix them. This is unlikely to lead to effective language acquisition.

VI. DISCUSSION

The procedure was especially effective in eliciting the participants' attitudes towards teacher-student relationships and the degree and manner to which they are dependent on the teacher. For example, at one end of the spectrum, the EXPLORER metaphor represents a relatively autonomous approach to learning. Somewhere in the middle, the BABY metaphor demonstrates a high degree of dependence on the teacher, while at the same time, recognizing the importance of their own active participation in the learning process. While at the other end of the spectrum, the CONTAINER, WORK OF ART and AUTOMATON metaphors seem to suggest a high degree of dependence on the teacher and a lack of agency in their own learning.

Clues to the degree and nature of the motivation of the participants were also revealed by the metaphors. For instance, the STRIVER and ACQUIRER OF TOOLS metaphors suggest an extrinsic motivation in which they are working towards a goal. On the other hand, the EXPLORER metaphor represents a high degree of intrinsic motivation. In contrast, the AUTOMATON metaphor seems to show a low level of motivation to learn English and that the learners are only in class because it is mandatory.

Metaphor elicitation, as outlined in this study, constitutes a valuable pedagogical tool. It could be used as a primer for a two part reflective essay. Learners could be asked to produce metaphors for themselves as learners and perhaps other aspects of learning such as the teacher, learning itself (as in Sykes, 2011), the textbook (Macgrath, 2006) or other aspects which the teacher feels are pertinent to their context. Following this they could elaborate and explain the meaning of their metaphors and how it applies to their language learning. This could be facilitated through a question such as "What characteristics of the source domain do you think are similar to language learning?". This constitutes part one of the essay, this should be shared among the learners, either through presentation, or peer-review. Then for part two, provide questions that help them to critically evaluate and develop their metaphors, such as "Are there any characteristics which are not included in your metaphor which are important for good language learners to possess? What are they?" and then "Can you think of a new metaphor which includes these characteristics?"

Through this procedure it is possible to enable learners to become aware of their attitudes to language learning, critically evaluate and develop them. In this way they are able to overcome the highlighting and hiding nature of metaphor and develop metacognitively, which may ultimately lead to improved learning practices.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the aim of this study was to provide data on the metaphoric constructions of language learners to provide an example of how metaphor elicitation can be used to create a picture of the attitudes and beliefs of learners in a group. The study yielded nine conceptual metaphors - LEARNER AS A STRIVER, LEARNER AS A CONTAINER, LEARNER AS AN EXPLORER, LEARNER AS A BABY, LEARNER AS A WORK OF ART, LEARNER AS AN EMBRYO, LEARNER AS AN AUTOMATON and LEARNER AS A DEFECTIVE ORGANISM – which were analyzed for their entailments of the teacher and language learning. Analysis of these metaphors provided clues to the learners' attitudes towards learner autonomy, the degree and nature of their motivation and in some cases their level of confidence. These attitudes were evaluated with regard to whether they are likely to help or hinder language acquisition. Finally, suggestions were made regarding how issues relating to these issues could be addressed by the teacher.

In conclusion, I believe that metaphor elicitation has proved to be a valuable tool to provide insight into the belief systems of any group of learners, empowering the teacher to address any related issues. Perhaps more importantly, of direct benefit to the learner, increased levels of self-awareness can be achieved, which opens up the potential for metacognitive development which could form the basis of improved language learning practices.

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