Difficulty as Weight and Solidity in English and Chinese

Ning Yu / Jie Huang

The Pennsylvania State University / Huazhong University of Science and Technology

ningyu@psu.edu / huangjie@mail.hust.edu.cn

Keywords: primary metaphor, DIFFICULTY IS WEIGHT, DIFFICULTY IS SOLIDITY, linguistic manifestation, linguistic pattern

As a subclass of conceptual metaphors, primary metaphors are metaphorical patterns motivated by tight correlations between fundamental dimensions of human experience. Such experiential correlations recur frequently in specific scenarios in our everyday life, in which experiences associated with primary source and target concepts consistently co-occur in coherent and predictable ways (Grady 1997; see also Grady and Ascoli 2017; Winter and Matlock 2017). Primary metaphors are generic metaphor patterns that exist at a high level of schematicity within the hierarchical system of conceptual metaphors. Their source and target concepts are both very basic in nature, "defined as concepts that are grounded in universal (rather than culturally determined) aspects of human experience" (Grady and Ascoli 2017: 29). They give rise to metaphorical mappings between highly schematic frames that do not evoke rich visual or motor imagery. They have a pivotal role to play in constituting "the foundation of much of our complex cognition" (Grady 1997: 288).

This linguistic study focuses on two primary metaphors with the same target concept, DIFFICULTY IS WEIGHT and DIFFICULTY IS SOLIDITY, in English and Chinese. Both link two distinct dimensions of our recurring embodied experiences in specific situations: subjective experience and judgement of difficulty and sensorimotor experience of weight and solidity (i.e., degree of hardness and toughness). In both cases, the motivations lie in the experiential correlations between perceiving weight or solidity of physical objects and experiencing difficulty as we try to lift or manipulate them (Grady 1997). The study employs both lexical and corpus-based approaches in order to gain insights, through both qualitative and quantitative evaluations, into their manifestation in the two languages. The study lays out the linguistic patterns that reflect the underlying conceptual associations across the metaphorical domains and analyzes the differences as well as similarities between English and Chinese. While the findings do support the validity and applicability of the two primary metaphors in both languages, their linguistic manifestations, however, vary considerably within and across language boundaries.

One difference between the two languages is that the English weight and solidity adjectives have largely developed lexicalized "difficult" senses, but the same is not true of their Chinese counterparts. Another difference is that in English, DIFFICULTY IS SOLIDITY exhibits a much richer (types) and stronger (frequencies) linguistic pattern than DIFFICULTY IS WEIGHT, but in Chinese the reverse is true. Further, as observed in the cognitive linguistic literature, pairs of antonymous adjectives do not appear equally in the linguistic instantiations of conceptual metaphors. Thus, DIFFICULT IS HARD yields a linguistic pattern by far stronger than EASY IS SOFT in English. In Chinese, the former is manifested quite limitedly whereas the latter is not at all. Also, the Chinese "light" adjective has a stronger showing for EASY IS LIGHT than its opposite for DIFFICULT IS HEAVY. On the other hand, the reverse is true of their English counterparts.

The findings support the views that conceptual associations of primary metaphors may or may not lead to productive linguistic patterns in a language (Grady and Ascoli 2017; Svuland 2007), and that speakers' linguistic experience may play an important role in shaping their metaphorical conceptualizations, in conjunction and interaction with their bodily and cultural experience (e.g., Casasanto 2017). The study, therefore, sheds light on the mutuality between language and thought (Gibbs 2017).

References

Casasanto, Daniel. 2017. Relationships between language and cognition. In Barbara Dancygier (ed.), *Cambridge handbook of cognitive linguistics*, 19–37. Cambridge: CUP.

Gibbs, Raymond W. 2017. *Metaphor wars: Conceptual metaphor in human life*. Cambridge: CUP.

Grady, Joseph E. 1997. Theories are buildings revisited. *Cognitive Linguistics* 8(4). 267–290.

Grady, Joseph E. & Giorgio A. Ascoli. 2017. Sources and targets in primary metaphor theory: Looking back and thinking ahead. In Beate Hampe (ed.), 27–45.

Hampe, Beate (ed.), *Metaphor: Embodied cognition and discourse*. Cambridge: CUP.

Svanlund, Jan. 2007. Metaphor and convention. *Cognitive Linguistics* 18(1). 3–14.

Winter, Bodo & Teenie Matlock. 2017. Primary metaphors are both cultural and embodied. In Beate Hampe (ed.), 99–115. Cambridge: CUP.