

Metaphor and Metonymy, which is more fundamental?

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The fundamental status of metaphor or metonymy has witnessed several shifts in the field of linguistics in general in the past decades of years. Before the mid-20th century, metonymy was regarded as one part of metaphor. But with the uprise of cognitive linguistics, especially due to the study of Jakobson (1956), metaphor and metonymy began to be regarded as two distinct cognitive mechanisms, with the former deemed as being based on similarity and the latter on contiguity. Later on, scholars claimed that metaphor and metonymy should be better regarded as being located in a continuum, with each typical one situated at one of the opposite ends. (Dirven 2003; Radden 2003; Barcelona 2000) In the middle of this continuum, there is an area in which the distinction of them two is vague. Then a central issue arises, that is, if the two cognitive mechanisms are not equally important, which one is more basic or fundamental? Currently, the claim that “metonymy is more basic than metaphor” (Panther 2014:4) seems to have the loudest voice, though opposing views also exist and can be supported with some evidence (Jiang 2016:90).

To answer the question of which is more fundamental, this paper would first of all review the evidences and proofs that support both fundamental claims, and then summarize the causes for the disparate views as follows: (1) diverse perspectives, both macro and micro; (2) over-expansion of the research scope; (3) over-generalization based on specific studies, which is typical of the area of literature, gesture and multimodality studies. To answer the question of which is more basic between metaphor and metonymy, it is proposed that much more work should be done on specific layers of research, such as the linguistic expression layer, the layer in which metaphor and metonymy are taken as two distinct mechanisms, the mixed layer in which metaphor and metonymy are interweaved, or the cognitive layer where only the most general determining factors are assessed. The result reached at each layer applies to this layer only, and can not be extended to the interpretation of other layers. Only when the collective results derived from all layers support one single claim, either preferring metaphor or metonymy, can we be so sure that the one favored is more fundamental.

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