

The Schematic Function of Conceptual Metaphor for Discourse Comprehension in Chinese and English Contexts

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Keywords: metaphorical schema, conceptual metaphor, discourse comprehension, Chinese context, English context

Since Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) was put forward, it has attracted a lot of attention and also aroused many queries. Evidence for the functions of conceptual metaphor and the psychological reality for conceptual metaphor system from cross-linguistic perspective is the key to the establishment of the validity of the theory. One of the important functions of conceptual metaphor is assumed to be the creation of schemas for discourse comprehension, but there are few cross-linguistic studies on the validity of the function. The present research explored the schematic function of Conceptual Metaphor from cross-language approach and intended to test whether and how metaphorical schema of Conceptual Metaphor work for Chinese and English discourse comprehension.

Two online experiments were conducted and the typical semantic priming method was used. The first experiment explored the effects of metaphorical schema on Chinese-English bilinguals' text comprehension in L1 and L2. A 2×2 within-subjects design was employed with the prime type and language arrangement between the prime and the text as the independent variables. The dependent variable was subject's comprehension time of texts primed by conceptual metaphor. The second experiment was the modified version of Allbritton's recognition paradigm (1995) and aimed to investigate whether the associations mediated by metaphorical schemas would facilitate sentence recognition for Chinese-English bilinguals. Schema-matching text and non-matching text were designed and language arrangement in L1 and L2 between the prime and the text was employed.

The findings from the two experiments show that English metaphorical schema play a facilitative role in the comprehension of English text while the priming effect is not obvious on the comprehension of Chinese texts, although the comprehension time of Chinese target sentences is significantly shorter than English target sentences; English text based on coherent metaphorical schema can significantly promote subjects' recognition of English target sentences while Chinese metaphorical schema fails to demonstrate a significant positive effect. We first explain and discuss the different priming results from the perspective of language discourse structure differences and we assume that the different priming effect may be due to highly linear structure feature in English and non-linear structure in Chinese. Based on this, we conclude that metaphorical schema may perform positive effect in English condition, but not that obvious priming effects in Chinese condition, which challenges the universality of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. We also explain and discuss the findings from second language acquisition perspective and we assume that the high degree of conventionality and accessibility of Chinese as mother tongue may not need conceptual metaphor as mediation mechanism for the comprehension and recognition of Chinese target sentences, while English as a second language needs the mediation of conceptual metaphor and thus shows priming effect. This may provide supporting evidence for the Career of Metaphor Hypothesis (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005).

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