

“The way we corrupt”: an experimental approach to metaphorical framing

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Over the past decade, metaphorical framing effects have been one of the major focuses in the realm of cognitive science. Most notably, a series of studies undertaken by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011, 2013, 2015) reveals how metaphors affect the way people think and reason about complex social issues. Acknowledging the power of metaphorical framing effects, this study aims to investigate how different metaphors can lead people to have different viewpoints toward corruption which has long been a serious problem in Thailand. Prior to conducting experiments, we first employed the word sketch tool available via the online corpus tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) to examine collocates of the lemma CORRUPTION in the 15-billion-word English Web 2015 corpus and of the lemma คอรัปชั่น (meaning ‘corruption’) in the 82-million-word Thai Web corpus, so that we could see a broad picture of how people conceptualize corruption and determine appropriate metaphorical framing conditions. Overall, we found that corruption is usually conceptualized by means of either the Disease/Illness metaphor or the Thief metaphor.

In this regard, we divided our experiments into three sets. For each set, participants were asked to read one of the three versions of texts concerning corruption in a fictitious country. Those three versions of texts include one non-metaphorical condition and two metaphorical framing conditions, namely the corruption-as-disease condition and the corruption-as-thief condition. Having read the text, participants were asked to suggest their preferred solutions to reduce corruption in the country. Participants’ solutions were coded into categories in line with the entailments of the two metaphors: (a) ‘social reform’ for the Disease metaphor, (b) ‘law enforcement’ for the Thief metaphor, and (c) ‘miscellaneous’ in case the participants propose any other variations of the solutions.

We found that the topic corruption by itself leads people to be more reform-oriented than enforcement-oriented. In addition, a number of solutions proposed by the participants in the non-metaphorical group tend to be unsystematic and miscellaneous as the participants were likely to say that “more information is required”, “the country is unknown”, etc. However, once the metaphors were presented, the majority of answers tended to conform with the entailment of each metaphorical condition. More importantly, we also observed that, although the topic corruption is more reform-oriented in nature, the reform-oriented solutions proposed by the participants who received the corruption-as-disease text were more systematically elaborated than those proposed by the participants in the non-metaphorical group. Thus, we hypothesized that metaphors not only have an influence on the way we reason about social issues, but also affect the quality of the proposed solutions in terms of systematicity and elaboration.

References

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