RESEARCH ARTICLE

Metaphor And Metonymy As Basic Models Of Semantic Transfer

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Abstract

Metaphor and metonymy are widely recognized as fundamental cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that shape the development of lexical meaning. Traditionally treated as rhetorical devices, they are now understood as basic models of semantic transfer that structure not only poetic language but also everyday communication and conceptualization. This paper explores metaphor and metonymy as core processes in the formation of transferred meanings of words. It examines their theoretical foundations, cognitive nature, structural patterns, and functional roles in language development. By comparing metaphor and metonymy, the paper highlights their similarities and differences, demonstrating how both mechanisms contribute to lexical expansion, polysemy, and semantic change. The study argues that metaphor and metonymy are not marginal stylistic phenomena but central organizing principles of the lexicon.

KEYWORDS

Metaphor, metonymy, semantic transfer, lexical meaning, cognitive linguistics, polysemy, semantic change.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not a static system of fixed meanings; rather, it is a dynamic and evolving structure in which words constantly acquire new senses. One of the most important mechanisms of semantic development is the transfer of meaning from one conceptual domain to another. Among the various processes responsible for semantic transfer, metaphor and metonymy occupy a central position.

For centuries, metaphor and metonymy were primarily studied within rhetoric and stylistics as figures of speech used to embellish discourse. However, modern linguistic and cognitive research has demonstrated that they function as basic cognitive models underlying not only literary expression but also everyday language and thought. Words such as head (of a person, of a company, of a table), foot (of a person, of a mountain, of a page), or the White House (referring to the U.S. administration) illustrate how metaphorical and metonymic extensions shape the semantic structure of the lexicon.

This paper aims to analyze metaphor and metonymy as basic models of forming transferred meanings. It will discuss their theoretical foundations, cognitive mechanisms, structural characteristics, and role in lexical development. The comparative analysis will clarify how each mechanism operates and how they interact in language.

1. Theoretical Background: Semantic Transfer and Meaning Formation

Semantic transfer refers to the process by which a word acquires a new meaning based on its original sense. This process is closely connected with polysemy, where a single lexical unit develops multiple related meanings.

Traditional semantics distinguishes between direct (primary)

meaning and transferred (secondary) meaning. The transferred meaning arises when certain features of the primary referent are applied to a new referent. The two most productive and systematic mechanisms of such transfer are metaphor and metonymy.

In structural linguistics, semantic change was often explained through similarity (metaphor) and contiguity (metonymy). Cognitive linguistics later expanded this understanding by arguing that these mechanisms reflect fundamental patterns of human conceptualization. According to this view, semantic transfer is not accidental but motivated by human perception, bodily experience, and cultural knowledge.

Thus, metaphor and metonymy are not merely linguistic ornaments but cognitive tools that enable speakers to understand abstract or complex phenomena in terms of more concrete or familiar ones.

2. Metaphor as a Model of Semantic Transfer

2.1 Definition and Cognitive Basis

Metaphor is traditionally defined as a transfer of meaning based on similarity between two objects or concepts. In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is understood as a mapping between two conceptual domains: a source domain (more concrete or familiar) and a target domain (more abstract or less familiar).

For example:

- Time is money.

- She defended her argument.

- He attacked my position.

In these cases, abstract domains such as time or argument are conceptualized in terms of more concrete domains like money or war. The metaphorical mapping allows speakers to structure abstract experiences through embodied knowledge.

2.2 Types of Metaphor

Scholars distinguish several types of metaphor:

1. Structural metaphors, where one concept is structured in terms of another (e.g., ARGUMENT IS WAR).

2. Orientational metaphors, based on spatial orientation (e.g., HAPPY IS UP, SAD IS DOWN).

3. Ontological metaphors, where abstract entities are treated as objects or substances (e.g., inflation is eating our

savings).

These types illustrate that metaphor operates systematically across the lexicon, shaping large portions of vocabulary.

2.3 Metaphor and Polysemy

Metaphorical transfer often results in polysemy. For example, the word branch originally refers to a part of a tree. Through metaphor, it can mean:

- a division of an organization,

- a field of science,

- a subdivision of government.

In each case, the meaning extension is motivated by perceived similarity in structure (a main body with subdivisions). Thus, metaphor provides a productive model for semantic expansion.

3. Metonymy as a Model of Semantic Transfer

3.1 Definition and Cognitive Basis

Metonymy is a transfer of meaning based on contiguity, association, or close relationship between entities within the same conceptual domain. Unlike metaphor, which involves similarity across domains, metonymy operates within a single domain.

Examples include:

- The White House announced a new policy (building → institution).

- She drank the whole bottle (container → content).

- All hands on deck (part → whole).

Metonymy reflects the cognitive tendency to use one salient element of a situation to refer to another element that is closely related to it.

3.2 Types of Metonymic Relations

Common metonymic patterns include:

1. Part for whole (synecdoche): wheels for car.

2. Whole for part: the law for a police officer.

3. Container for content: a glass for the drink.

4. Producer for product: Shakespeare for his works.

5. Place for institution: Hollywood for the film industry.

These patterns demonstrate that metonymy is highly

systematic and productive in language.

3.3 Metonymy and Lexical Development

Metonymic transfer frequently leads to lexicalization, where the new meaning becomes conventional and independent. For example, crown can mean both a physical object and royal authority. Over time, the metonymic meaning becomes a stable part of the word's semantic structure.

Metonymy also plays a crucial role in the development of abstract vocabulary and institutional terminology.

4. Comparison of Metaphor and Metonymy

Although metaphor and metonymy are both mechanisms of semantic transfer, they differ in several important ways.

Feature	Metaphor	Metonymy
Basis of transfer	Similarity	Contiguity/association
Domains involved	Two different domains	Same domain
Cognitive function	Conceptual mapping	Referential shift
Example	*Foot of the mountain*	*The White House decided*

Metaphor creates a new conceptual perspective by projecting structure from one domain onto another. Metonymy, in contrast, highlights a specific element within a conceptual frame to stand for another.

However, in practice, metaphor and metonymy often interact. For instance, metaphorical extensions may develop from earlier metonymic shifts, and vice versa. Some expressions are difficult to classify strictly as one or the other, demonstrating their close relationship.

5. Role in Semantic Change and Language Evolution

Metaphor and metonymy are among the most powerful forces driving semantic change. Historical linguistics shows that many abstract meanings originate from metaphorical or metonymic extensions.

For example:

- Grasp originally meant "to seize physically" but now also means "to understand" (metaphor).

- Bench came to mean "judges" through metonymy (object associated with institution).

Over time, transferred meanings may become primary meanings, while the original sense may weaken or disappear. Thus, metaphor and metonymy contribute to diachronic change and the restructuring of semantic systems.

Furthermore, these mechanisms reflect universal cognitive tendencies but may also be influenced by cultural factors. Different languages may employ similar metaphorical models, but specific lexical realizations vary.

6. Cognitive and Communicative Functions

Metaphor and metonymy serve important communicative functions:

1. Economy of expression – They allow speakers to convey complex ideas concisely.

2. Expressiveness – They enrich language and enhance imagery.

3. Conceptualization – They help structure abstract knowledge.

4. Pragmatic efficiency – Metonymy, in particular, facilitates reference in discourse.

Cognitive linguistics argues that human thinking itself is largely metaphorical. Abstract reasoning about time, emotion, morality, and politics often relies on metaphorical frameworks. Similarly, metonymy enables efficient categorization and reference in communication.

CONCLUSION

Metaphor and metonymy are fundamental mechanisms in the formation of transferred meanings of words. Far from being mere stylistic devices, they function as basic cognitive and linguistic models that structure the lexicon and guide semantic

development.

Metaphor operates through similarity and cross-domain mapping, enabling speakers to conceptualize abstract phenomena in terms of more concrete experiences. Metonymy functions through contiguity within a single domain, allowing one element to stand for another. Both mechanisms are systematic, productive, and deeply embedded in human cognition.

Their interaction contributes to polysemy, lexical expansion, and semantic change. Understanding metaphor and metonymy as basic models of semantic transfer provides valuable insight into how language evolves and how meaning is constructed.

In conclusion, metaphor and metonymy are not peripheral rhetorical ornaments but central principles organizing human language and thought.

science of meaning. Basil Blackwell.

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