CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR OF CATEGORY DENOTING PLANTS IN VIETNAMESE IN COMPARISON WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Tran Thi Phuong Ly
College of Education, Hue University

Abstract. Cognitive linguistics is a new discipline of modern psychology with conducts linguistic studies on basis of human experience as well as their perception and conceptualization the object world. Among matters being researched dealing with cognitive linguistics, metaphor has been dramatically taken into consideration and regarded as a specific mental mapping that provide a foundation for human thought and conceptualization. Metaphor in cognitive linguistics is divided into two types: linguistic metaphor and conceptual metaphor. In this research article, we would like to utilize the application of the theoretical system of cognitive linguistics to the research into conceptual metaphors of category denoting plants in the Vietnamese language in comparison with English language. These achievements of this article will meaningfully contribute to the process of discovery metaphor in Vietnamese in comparison with English language as well as supply more knowledge of the close relation among language-culture-thought trio.

1. Being born in 1980, Cognitive linguistics has been a new discipline of modern psychology of which the aim is to seek investigating the underlying processes of human conceptualization and categorization and to help us know more about how languages are processed in the mind of human beings. Among matters being researched dealing with cognitive linguistics, metaphor has become a central concern in recent years. In contrast with centuries of widespread belief that metaphor is a special linguistic, rhetorical device, much research in cognitive linguistics over the past thirty years has demonstrated that metaphor is not merely a surface ornamentation of language, but is a specific mental mapping that provides a foundation for thought and conceptualization (e.g. Johnson, 1987 & 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Sweetser, 1990). Cognitive linguistics has shifted the focus of attention from metaphor in language to metaphor in the mind by significant claiming that metaphor is something through which we perceive the world, understanding the meaning both in language and thought. Besides, a bit of empirical evidence from both cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology has revealed that the availability of metaphor in linguistic expressions reflects and constitutes not only the movements of individual spiritual structures but also those of different cultural models. Metaphor and its relation
to thought as cognitive webs that extend beyond in individual minds and are spread out into the cultural world, thus we can find both considerable similarities and diversities of thought and culture in metaphorical expressions of different languages. Thus, metaphor is regularly addressed and studied in several different levels.

An historical overview over the Aristotle’s viewpoint to the twentieth-century theories proves that the outlooks of metaphor have been changed for centuries. During a very long time, metaphor was merely studied in the form of language. It is considered as a florid decorative means for the language or a mode of developing new meanings. Until the 20th century, together with the establishment and development of cognitive science, a new discipline of modern psychology with conducts linguistic studies on basis of human experience as well as their perception and conceptualization the object world, a new conscious conception has arisen, which transfers the focal attention from metaphor in language into mental ones. Cognitive linguists showed that metaphor exists everywhere in our life and in daily speech as a solid cognitive tool to conceptualize abstract categories. Hence, metaphor is not only a figure of speech in language as thought by traditional theories for a long time, but also a key for the knowledge of mentality’s bases, an activity of the mental symbol consciousness process via homogeneous, contrastive, specific and transformative movements to re-create a picture of the world and to conceptualize the realistic world.

From considering “metaphor is a figure of speech” to confirming “metaphor is a property of thought”, cognitive linguists believe that metaphor is a cognitive rather than a language phenomenon and metaphor expressions found in the language is the reflection of metaphors that exists in conceptual levels. From that, they divided metaphor into two categories: conceptual metaphor and linguistic metaphor, in which, conceptual metaphor indicates the conceptual mapping and linguistic metaphor is a terminology to express mapping language. The conceptual metaphor will be expressed into speech by different linguistic ones.

More specifically, the conceptual metaphor is one of the conceptualizing forms, a cognitive process which functions the manifestation and establishment of new concepts. It is a cognitive mechanism by which these continuous and similar perceptions having undergone the process of categorization are re-evaluated in the contexts of new concepts.

Not only does conceptual metaphor have a relation with isolated and separate entities but it also posits a relation with complicated thinking spaces (experience areas of feeling and society nature). Conceptual metaphor structures are analyzed as systematic and firm relations between two conceptual domains with correlative mappings written in small capitals. Correlative mapping indicates a projection of A structure over B one. This mapping result in the organization of our outlooks on appropriate categories in the
**B target domain**, in the forms of **A source domain**. Commonly, categories in the source domain are more specific. Meanwhile, those in the target domain are more abstract. This means that we base on our experiences about human beings, things and specific daily events to conceptualize abstract categories. Obviously, this will be a premise theory foundation for us to make this article.

From Lakoff and Johnson’s first study *Metaphors We Live by* (1980) until now, exactly in the quite short span of 31 years, and according to the wrap-up of Gibbs, several metaphor studies in the world were successfully carried out from a score of domains. However, in Vietnam there have been still few studies on metaphors in such new way, mainly focusing just on theoretical introduction. Accordingly, in this study, we would like to utilize the application of the theoretical system of modern linguistics to the research into conceptual metaphors of category denoting plants in the Vietnamese language in comparison with English language.

2. From the scope of domain about the world vitalized in the picture of human language, plants is thought of not merely as an important category of semantics, culture and mind but a vivid reflection upon national peculiarities contained in parts of naïve “models” in the world. People are named after the diverse naming system of plants not just for their naming but also conceptualization, moving objects of awareness toward more abstract fields exactly referring to human beings, space – time and abstract ones of life, etc. creating a various number of extremely tactful and unique metaphors.

As mentioned above, some of metaphor structures include the significant constituents such as category of source, target of target and mapping relationship between these two domains. Hence, to establish conceptual metaphors of plants on the basis of the lingual expressions, we have carried out an investigation of lexical classes concerning categories of vegetation, chiefly focusing on the main source of data of *Vietnamese Dictionary* (by Danang Publishing House, 2007), in which a number of linguistic data derived from folk-singing, proverbs, expressions of Vietnamese language as well as the results of findings from our specific observation via people’s daily styles of speech and behaviors, from which the fundamental steps are built up as follows:

Step 1: Based on the system of meanings from surveyed datum, discovering typical attributes being selected to build the source domain.

Step 2: Re-establishing the source domain with typical attributes being selected in correlation with characteristics in the target domain (it means that the formation of conceptual categories starts from plant conceptions in the Vietnamese consciousness).

Step 3: Restoring metaphor mappings in the aforesaid source and target domains to explore conceptual metaphor structures under the layer of expression speech.

Step 4: Finding out experiences bases to generate conceptual metaphor
Combining Step 1 and Step 2, through surveys basing on meanings of words denoting plants mentioned in dictionaries, together with linguistic data taken from daily language, we realize that phrases denoting flora in Vietnamese language are shown in 8 target domains as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source domain</th>
<th>Target domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLANTS</td>
<td>1. Human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biological human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental and sentimental human beings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Space (physical and psychological space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Time (physical and psychological time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Abstract concepts of mental and social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Decorative nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Outline of plant metaphor domain*

Referring to the chart above, the focus in a connection of source domain and target domain is the use of the category of flora referring human beings to typical words of plant parts such as *stems, flowers (hoa)* and especially the ones of species of vegetation such as *duckweed (béo), pine-trees (thông), fir-trees (tùng)*, etc. In the meantime, the most typical is the transmission into the field of space – time an abstract concept of spiritual and social life, that of things is normally the words of leaf (foliage), root, fruit, and those of biological activities of plants, etc. Hence, each of such words, phrases on plants is preeminently associated with the concept of transmission.

From such transmission models, we continue the specific consideration of metaphoric language expressions in the Vietnamese daily speech and behaviors. From that, we re-build a series of mappings from plant source domain upon target one, such as:

- CONSIDERED AS AN OBJECT OF TARGET DOMAIN WHICH BECOMES LARGER IN SCALE IS A PLANT WHICH IS GROWING BIGGER (SOURCE DOMAIN).
- TO BEGIN OR TO CREATE AN OBJECT OF TARGET DOMAIN IS
CULTIVATING A PLANT
- THE INITIAL STAGES OF THE GROWTH OF TARGET-DOMAIN OBJECT IS A DEBUT OF THE GROWTH IN A PLANT
- TO MAINTAIN OR TO NURSE AN OBJECT OF TARGET DOMAIN IS THE CULTIVATION OF A PLANT.

Obviously, numerous examples in daily speech via the above-mentioned metaphors shows that most of the “false” characteristics of unusual concepts in the literal sense on the objects of target domain as mentioned above will inevitably have their similar copies in plant metaphors as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(source domain)</th>
<th>(target domain)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) preparation for the growth of a</td>
<td>preparedness for the growth of an object of target domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) to cultivate a plant</td>
<td>to create and begin an object of target domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) début of the growth of a plant</td>
<td>initial stages of the growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) the flowering of a plant</td>
<td>The optimum stage of the growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) the healthy growth of a plant</td>
<td>An appropriate growth of an object of target domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) the sickly growth of a plant</td>
<td>An inappropriate growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) to cultivate a plant</td>
<td>to nurse an object of target domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Fruits or crops</td>
<td>Benefits brought about by an object of target domain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, it is clear that METAPHORS OF PLANTS (SOURCE DOMAIN) ARE OBJECTS OF TARGET DOMAIN in which most of its selected potential characteristics are utilized as a typical model that has the ability of the reference arousing from the conceptual transmission to other abstract categories such as human beings, space, things, etc. In fact, Lakoff and Johnson show that the metaphor of knowledge and experiences of human beings in things or events will be transferred to other things or events, and even in unknown or more abstract things or events; for instances, knowledge of things of source domain that is considered as a germination, growth of plants will be moved referring to knowledge of target domain things that are considered to be the generating, developing of such social patterns as economy, culture, education, etc.

During the process of study and analysis, we also realize that in order for conceptual metaphors to be created from the category of plants, other than relying on
the similarity and analogy, we really need to put this chief fundamental as the reciprocal foundation of the degree of experience. According to Lakoff’s proposal (1980), conceptual metaphors are divided into many kinds including orientational metaphors (giving concepts of spatial orientation), that have bases in our physics and cultural experiences. For example: we can rely on physical bases to find that the unopened posture of flowers, leaves, and tree-trunk with the loss of water, vitality is symbolic of the negative emotional state or the end of a thing, an even or a stage belonging the abstract system (for example: Vietnamese people usually combine the word **ngày, đợi** (the correlative word in English **date, life**) with the word **tàn** (**fade**) to show the end of date or life; or to use the image **hoa rụa nhị tồn** (**faded flower**) to denote withered woman beauty); the position of rise or movement towards the sky (**đâm chồi** (**to bud**), **nảy mầm** (**to sprout...**)) expresses positive emotional state. In addition, as we know, the health, the growth of life is upside, sickness, death or the end is downside which correlate with the biological movement of plants (the image of **hoa rơi lá rụng** (**falling flowers and leaves**) is used to refer to a death, **ra hoa kết quả** (**to blossom and bear fruit**) are used to express the vitality of youth, reproduction, affluence. Therefore, the systematic nature of experience allows us to apprehend one aspect of cognition by the other aspect of cognition.

Apart from the above-mentioned issues, when investigating the picture of Vietnamese semantics based on botany categories and in comparison with English, we also realize that the specific characteristics of semantics and cognition of words naming plants formed by both Vietnamese and English people exist in the unique world picture reflecting the world outlook of two different culture-language communities besides the resemblance to some basic common things. For example, when we consider metaphors which stand out on the basis of the Collins Cobuild English Guides 7: Metaphor, a dictionary of English metaphors for learners of English as a foreign language, we also discover sentences that take similar conceptual metaphors to Vietnamese language. Those sentences are based on the Bank of English that is a huge corpus of everyday English. We can represent these metaphorical entailments as conceptual metaphors of **COMPLEX SYSTEM ARE PLANTS** as following examples:

**A COMPLEX SYSTEM BECOMING LARGER IS A PLANT GROWING BIGGER**
- Only now, 21 years since he established his distinctive women's range, is he branching out into men's clothing.

**REDUCING COMPLEX SYSTEMS IS MAKING PLANTS SMALLER** (PRUNING, CUTTING)
- Government and educational bureaucracies can and should be ruthlessly pruned.
PREPARING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMPLEX SYSTEM IS PREPARING THE GROWING OF A PLANT

- Now they have singed agreements that lay the ground for a huge growth in trade and co-operation.

TO START OR CREATE A COMPLEX SYSTEM IS TO SOW A PLANT

- A seed of doubt may have been planted in my minds.

THE INITIAL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT ARE THE BEGINNING OF GROWTH

- Our budding romance was over.

Besides, based on the survey the corpus system drawn from Vietnamese Dictionary (2007) and Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2007), we can show that because of being determined by characters of type and view of objective reality world, the words for naming parts of a plant in English and Vietnamese only overlap in the fundamental components. With the tendency of specific, detailed denomination, English language names directly for each of concrete sections of each of plants. Meanwhile, Vietnamese is mostly based on the name of the tree to add these parts, so the similarities in the conceptualization metaphor on the group referring parts of a plant in English and Vietnamese only occur in same parts of plant, or relatively close to the referential domain and a range of certain metasemy. Rate of metaphorical transfer in Vietnamese is 80% (64 cases belong to moving metaphor on the total of 80 transfer meaning) and English is 61% (61/100). Regarding the group refers species of plants, the number of words naming plants in Vietnamese language are 657 words, 2.76 times as much as that of English (238 words), including the moving referential meaning according to the means of metaphor in Vietnamese is 32.4% (12/37) and in English is 37.8% (28/74). From the data provided by the actual language as above, we can exploit the similarity and difference in the transfer from the target domain to source domain of plants as well as find some interesting things about the specific characteristics of psychology, culture, ethnic group in two of Vietnamese and English native speaker communities. That is, in the vocabulary system, there are some similar cases of concept transfer in both English and Vietnamese, for example, both English and Vietnamese based on some characters of plants that have the relations to human life to choice plants making source domain, such as, use flower (hoa) to mention the healthy stage or period of the youth (in Vietnamese: “tuổi hoa niên”, in English: “to give the flower of one's age to the country”, “the flower of life”) because flower is the coloured part of a plant from which the seed or fruit develops, and has the typical character that usually exists only a short time, people use flower (hoa) to mention the healthy stage or period of the youth (in Vietnamese: “tuổi hoa niên”, in English: “to give the flower of one's age to the
country”, “the flower of life”) etc.; or fruit (quả) with transferred meaning to refer to abstract concept of the outcome of everything (in Vietnamese: “gieo nhân nào gặt quả ấy”, “trồng cây có ngày hái quả”, in English: “the fruits of labor”, “the fruit of self-denial”, “the fruit of intemperance”).

If examining the system of transferred meaning of the word ngành/nánh (branch of tree) in English and Vietnamese, we also see the unique similar remind, using plants to mention thing category, family or relative relationship, or science and social organization category. In addition, English and Vietnamese people have a very special way to refer to the development and prosperity of business activities by using the biological activity of bursting into branch of tree.

Based on comparing a pair of words thorn in English and gai in Vietnamese, we see that there is an interesting meeting point in reminding to both English and Vietnamese people. The word thorn in English has 3 meanings. Meanwhile, the correlative word gai in Vietnamese has 4 meanings. Obviously, thing expression category in the original meaning 1 and transferred meaning 3 of a pair of words thorn and gai is nearly same. The transfer of a pair of botany words are based on the specific characteristics that are sharpness, causing obstacle, pain, trouble, or difficulties. If English people using word phrases such as “to be on thorns” to express the worry, Vietnamese people have a phrase “đi trên chông trên gai” with the similar meaning.

The most interesting thing is that both British and Vietnamese people use thorn (gai) to address the person regarded as a barrier; the way British people use idiom “a thorn in one’s flesh” is same as Vietnamese people do to refer to a person who makes other people uncomfortable. Besides, gai in Vietnamese language can be translated by prickle in English. The meaning of prickle is similar to the fourth meaning of gai, they both express people’s feeling. The feeling of nổ gai ốc or thấy gai người in Vietnamese is used exactly in English by an idiom – get goose bump.

Beside the similarities in crossed reflection, between English and Vietnamese, there are metaphorical cases, expressing the holistic differences in each language. For instance, when considering the translated meaning of the two words fruit and quả, we find that:

According to the definition from two dictionaries (Vietnamese Dictionary (2007) and Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2007)), the translated meaning of fruit and quả belongs to a category relating to social issues, specifically, cause-effect issue. However, it is necessary to see that result in Vietnamese may signify both positive and negative meanings; meanwhile it only denotes positive meaning with the word – “good result”. Hence, the scope of expression in the translated meaning of quả is broader than that of fruit. Vietnamese people also use the image of hoa thom quả ngọt (scented flower and sweet fruit) to address the result of human’s great effort like a product made
by the biological effort of a plan or tree. In addition, Vietnamese people refer richly in imagery to a thing that has the shape like a fruit to give the meaning of the words like *quả bóng* (a ball), *quả tim* (a heart) or to address a thing made by wood which has the circle shape to contain the betrothal gifts. Perhaps the most interesting thing in the innocent intellection based both on the similarities of images and on the functions to bring life, Vietnamese people consider the planet that human beings are living as a huge fruit when calling it: *quả đất, trái đất*. Because a fruit usually contains many seeds, it is considered as a symbol of all origins and beginnings.

English and Vietnamese have some unique and distinct concepts which people cannot explain clearly these concepts. The reasons can be cultural and historical issues. For example, rose in English means “a piece of metal or plastic with small holes in it that is attached to the end of a pipe or watering can so that the water comes out in fine spray when you are watering plant”. The meaning of rose is similar to that of the word *vòi hoa sen* in terms of watering plants. If Vietnamese people imagine this tool as a lotus calyx, British people regard it as a rose with dewdrops. It is clear that natural conditions play a big role, even a decisive role, in thinking and forming language naturally. This allows us to think of the similarities among languages although peoples are different in their ways of thinking.

In addition, based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of “Linguistic Relativity”, which actually originated from the theory “Language is the soul of a nation” of W. Humboldt, and based on the experiment and verification of linguistic data of each vernacular community, we have a more general and comprehensive overview of national, psychological, and cultural characteristics reflected through languages. These characteristics form the original features of every people.

Within the limitation of this article, we just mention some primary features as well as some typical examples, as above, with the purpose of outlining a general overview of national characteristics reflected through the metaphor of botanical cognition. In conclusion, it is very difficult to reach the root of the relationship of unique cognitional phenomena between Vietnamese and English languages which bring about plenty of national colours. As a result, circumstances, ways of thinking, and lifestyles seem to be expressed all.

3. Metaphor is a constituent mode of human language formation and awareness toward the objective world. Metaphor is in the center of human abilities to perform abstract thoughts and poetize daily things by transferring an image that makes people surprising, smiling, touching and even admiring into the triviality of everything. Metaphor creates a means of transferring cognitive objects from this field to another and from concrete objects to abstract concepts and vice versa. This result in a multi-direction and diversification in human outlooks of the world, making our spirits
overcome obstacles imprisoned in a realistic area and simultaneously surmount the boundary between reality and imagination.

It may be declared that the deep flow of languages through branches of metaphorical expressions in our memory layers helps the discovery and expressing of significance and flavor of reality of lively inner feelings and profound spiritual world. These above mentioned values are deeply embedded in culture and as we may know, the most basic values of a culture will be consistent with metaphorical structures of the most ultimate concepts of that culture. Therefore, metaphorical phrases are made up based on experiences in terms of national psychology, culture and specific characteristics as well as feelings which help us understand such expressions. In other words, the availability of metaphor in linguistic expressions reflects not only the movements of individual spiritual structures but also those of different cultural models. Cultural model is a noteworthy concept which is used to describe and identify the concept system of human being. Hence, there is a close relation among language-culture-thought trio.

Nowadays, we temporarily agree with the thought that we are living in a metaphorical world and that there is also such a metaphorical world in our inner selves. Within the scope of daily cognitive linguistic system, as Lakoff confirmed, the nature of our thought and behaviour is a metaphor. According to a very famous historian, Guy Schoeller, our duty is to make every effort to explain metaphorical phrases not only to raise awareness and deepen communication but also to control a special kind of power silently operating in the forms of thoughts and behaviours, passion and hideousness, whose great strength has been recognized for the first time.

References