

WHAT'S THE PLACE OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IDIOMS IN KENYAN CLASSROOMS?

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Cognitive linguistics posits that metaphor is a ubiquitous feature of English idioms and a powerful educational tool for both second language teachers and learners. This paper, therefore, analyses 20 purposively sampled English idioms to illustrate how cognitive linguistics can be used to comprehend English idioms. To achieve this objective, the principles of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the dominant paradigm in Cognitive Linguistics, were employed. The study also adopted a survey research design because the focus was on analysing sampled English idioms. The data for this study were collected from the Macmillan English Dictionary (2007 edition), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010 edition) and the Internet. Content analysis, which is within the qualitative research paradigm, guided the analysis of the idioms. The study found that cognitive linguistics offers insightful ways on the teaching and learning of English idioms. This study recommends that for successful application of the CMT to idiom teaching and learning, teachers' metaphorical competence needs to be enhanced since they are the implementers of the curriculum. In addition, the study recommends that the study of English idioms move from theory to practice by sensitizing learners on the pervasiveness of metaphor in language and by encouraging them to extrapolate the conceptual metaphors underlying the English idioms in any given text. The study concludes that cognitive linguistics not only provides a framework within which idioms can be described but also facilitates the comprehension and retention of English idioms in the learning process.

Key Words: Cognitive linguistics, Metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, English Idiom

Introduction

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) is an approach to the study of language that looks at the nature of language, the mind and their relationship with socio-physical (embodied) experience (Evans, 2013)¹. As a dynamic and attractive framework within theoretical and descriptive linguistics (Geeraerts, 2006), CL is one of the most reliable areas of research within the interdisciplinary project of cognitive science. Its reliability stems from the fact that CL aims at an integrated model of language and thought that reflects the human construal of external reality, taking into account the way in which human beings experience reality, both from cultural and psychological perspectives (Geeraerts, 2006). In CL, metaphor is regarded as one of the several kinds of *idealised cognitive model* (or ICM)². As a process, metaphor involves combining language and thought to develop new non-literal meaning that enhances our reality

¹CL emerged in the 1970's as a reaction against the dominant generative paradigms, and specifically the Generative Grammar and Montague Grammar, which were then dominant in the disciplines of linguistics and philosophy (Ruiz de Mendoza, 1997).

²According to Lakoff (1987, p. 68), ICMs are the way in which "human beings organize knowledge". Therefore, ICMs may be postulated as cognitive structures whose purpose is to represent reality from a certain perspective.

(Grant & Oswick, 1996)³. Since many idioms are motivated by metaphor, interpreting their actual meaning sometimes becomes difficult for learners⁴.

Cognitive linguistics postulates that the meaning of idioms is motivated by conceptual mechanisms like metaphors, which implies that researchers should always bear in mind the relations between the conceptual system and the linguistic system (Csábi, 2002, pp.249-54)⁵. Metaphor, as a widespread feature of everyday thought and language (Goatly, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), represents a central issue for both instructors and learners of English as a second language (Sacristán, 2004). This is particularly so in the teaching of English idioms. Strakšiene (2009), for example, notes this of idioms:

Idioms are considered to be one of the hardest and most interesting parts of the English vocabulary. On the one hand, they are considered one of the most peculiar parts of the language; on the other hand, they are difficult because of their unpredictable meaning and grammar (p.13).

From the quotation above, idioms, thus, require special attention in language teaching as they have been identified to be a challenge to both teachers and learners of English (Boers, 2000a; Baker, 1992; Cooper, 1998). Cooper (1998), for example, notes that the difficulties connected with teaching idioms can be avoided if suitable methods that make the learners more aware of potential problems in using idiomatic language are used. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine place of cognitive linguistics in the teaching of English idioms in Kenyan classrooms. This is because experimental evidence (Kövecses & Szabó, 1996; Boers, 2000a, 2000b) and theoretical contributions (cf. Boers, 1999; Boers & Demecheleer, 2004) have noted that cognitive linguistics can assist second language learners in comprehension and achievement of long-term retention in memory. How then can Kenyan language teachers make use of cognitive linguistics to aid the comprehension and retention of English idioms? In order to discuss this, this paper looks at English idioms and their organization into respective underlying conceptual metaphors.⁶

Theoretical Framework

The cognitive linguistics approach adopted in this paper is based on the insightfulness of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). As proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the CMT suggests that human thought processes are largely metaphorical, and human conceptual system is structured and defined in a metaphorical way⁷. In other words, the CMT takes the basic assumptions of the Lakoffian School on "experiential realism", which hypothesizes

³An important thesis in Cognitive Linguistics is that metaphor is not just an aspect of language, but constitutes a primary part of human cognition (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sweetser, 1990).

⁴Different definitions of idioms abound in literature. Simpson and Mendis (2003), for example, define an idiom as "a group of words that occur in a more or less fixed phrase whose overall meaning cannot be predicted by analyzing the meaning of its constituent parts" (p.423). Other definitions of idioms are propounded by Kövecses and Szabó (1996), Cooper (1998), Simpson and Mendis (2003, p.423) among other theorists in idioms studies.

⁶Researchers such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Kövecses and Szabó (1996) and Kövecses (1995) have systematized idioms based on their common concepts. Kövecses (1995), for example, found that the metaphorical understandings of anger "are in part based on shared ideas about the human body and certain physiological processes that are associated with anger" (p.191).

⁷The metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way, thus they would be used in a systematic way since the metaphorical concepts are structured systematically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

that there is an intermediate level "cognition" between language and the world (Lakoff, 1987). In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is realised as the cross-domain mapping from the source domain ("vehicle") to the target domain ("tenor")⁸. According to Gibbs (1994), metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but an important mental facility and cognitive instrument. Further, metaphors provide meaning to everyday experiences and are epistemological since they provide a frame from which we can view the world (Morgan, 2006). First, the relevance of the CMT (Conceptual Metaphor Theory) is that it enables people uncover the systematicity in many concepts that were believed to be unstructured (Soriano, 2003). Second, if the conceptual metaphor pervades the way we think, speak or act (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), then, this study considers that it should also have some influence on the way we learn. This is because the CMT assumes that many motivated idioms are based on conceptual metaphors (Li, 2010). Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that idioms are not arbitrary and accidental strings of words, but are totally rooted in human thought⁹. Thus, the CMT becomes a relevant framework of analysing English idioms as discussed below:

Methodology of the Study

This study adopted the qualitative methodological approach with a bias on the survey research design. Survey design was adopted because the focus was on analysing sampled English idioms. The data for this study were gathered manually from the Macmillan English Dictionary (2007 edition), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010 edition) and the Internet. The 20 idioms included in the study were purposively selected to meet the objective of the study. The English idioms collected are interpreted and explained to make sense of the data. Content analysis, which is within the qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 2008), guided the analysis of the idioms. This is because English idioms that could be extrapolated into conceptual metaphors were selected. The conceptual metaphors are tabulated and their meanings discussed (cf. Table 1).

Findings and Discussion

From the analysis of the English idioms in our study, various conceptual metaphors were extrapolated based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Table 1 highlights the English idioms, their meanings, sentential examples and their underlying conceptual metaphors:

Table 1: English Idioms and their Underlying Conceptual Metaphors¹⁰

No	Idiom	Meaning	Sentential example	Conceptual Metaphor
1	Hot under the collar	To be angry or embarrassed;	He got very <i>hot under the collar</i> when I asked him where he had been all day.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
2	Fan the flames (of something)	To make a feeling such as anger, hatred, etc. worse.	His writings <i>fanned the flames</i> of racism.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
3	Explode (into/with something)	(Of a person or situation) to suddenly become very angry or dangerous.	Suddenly Charles <i>exploded with rage</i> .	ANGER IS FIRE/ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER

⁸Richards (1936, p.100) sees metaphor as the product of the interaction between the "tenor" and "vehicle". He posits: "The co-presence of the vehicle and tenor results in a meaning (to be clearly distinguished from the tenor) which is not attainable without their interaction" (p. 100). This approach into the nature of metaphors, which went beyond the Aristotelian perspective, revealed the cognitive aspects of metaphor and laid the foundation for later cognitive perspective of metaphors and conceptual metaphor theories.

⁹One of the central tenets of cognitive semantics is that a large proportion of figurative language is 'motivated' rather than arbitrary (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 2002).

¹⁰From now on, this study will refer to the conceptual metaphor underlying the English idiom in capitalized terms to distinguish it from other word meanings.

4	Lose your cool	To become angry or excited	I try to be patient with her but she was so irritating in that meeting. I just lost my cool.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
5	Add fuel to something	To make people argue angrily	That remark added fuel to the fire.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
6	Blow a fuse/gasket	To become very angry	When he told her how much it cost, she blew a fuse /gasket.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
7	Breathe fire over something	To be very angry	He was breathing fire.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE
8	Spit fire	To express one's anger or annoyance	He was spitting fire when he was told that his daughter was pregnant.	ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE BODY AS A CONTAINER
9	Make somebody's blood boil	To make somebody extremely angry.	Whenever I think of what he did to me, it makes my blood boil.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
10	Flip your lid	To become very angry and lose control of what you are saying or doing.	She flipped her lid.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
11	Let (blow) off steam	To get rid of your energy, anger or strong emotions by doing something active or noisy	Joan's shouting did not mean she was angry with you; she was just blowing off steam.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
12	Be/get (all) steamed up (about / over something)	To become very angry or excited about something that other people do not think is important.	She got (all) steamed up because he arrived over an hour late.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
13	Hit the ceiling/roof	To suddenly become very angry	I am m afraid he will hit the roof when he finds out that our cheque has been canceled.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
14	Blow your lid/top/stack	To get very angry	My father will blow his top when he sees what happened to the car.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
15	Simmer down	To become calm after being excited or angry	Eventually, I could not simmer down.	ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
16	Foam at the mouth	Someone who foams at the mouth is extremely angry about something.	The director was foaming at the mouth when he saw a picture of his children in the newspaper.	ANGER AS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER
17	Spit venom/blood	To show that you are very angry/to speak in angry way.	I thought he was going to spit venom/blood when he saw what had happened.	ANGER AS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER BODY IS A CONTAINER
18	Spill the beans	To tell somebody something that should be kept secret or private.	I spilled the beans and told Jackie I loved her.	MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL ENTITIES
19	Caught/stuck between a rock and a hard place	In a situation where you have to choose between two things, both of which are unpleasant.	I am stuck between a rock and a hard place; I do not know what to do.	DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION
20	Come to fruition	The successful result of a plan, a process or an activity.	After months of hard work, our ideas have come to fruition.	IDEAS ARE PLANTS

Discussion of English Idioms into their Underlying Conceptual Metaphors

As noted in Table 1 above, various conceptual metaphors are identified. ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE, for example, is one of the conceptual metaphors underlying the English idioms below:

1. Hot under the collar.
2. Fan the flames (of something).
3. Explode (into / with something).
4. Lose your cool.
5. Add fuel to something.
6. Blow a fuse / gasket.
7. Breathe fire over something.

8. Spit fire.

The English idioms (1-8) above are all based on the basic physiological effect of anger, which is increased body heat (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 1986). Since human physiology is assumed to be universal (Wu, 2007), Lakoff and Kövecses (1987) posit that the metonymy PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ANGER STAND FOR THE EMOTION OF ANGER implying a universal form of physiological embodiment for anger, which would be the basis for the universality of the conceptual metaphor underlined by the above English idioms¹¹. The existence of the English idioms (3) and (8), for example, is based on the fact that when a speaker expresses his/her anger, he/she unconsciously treats his/her body as a container full of anger ready to explode. English idiom (3) may also be said to activate the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Given such an interpretation, the above idioms are taken to be conceptual and secondarily a property of language (Kövecses, 2002). From a cognitive linguistics perspective, the fire / heat related idioms above can be used to describe the emotion “anger” correspondingly: Source concept: FIRE, Target concept: ANGER; the fire is anger; the thing burning is the angry person; the intensity of fire is the intensity of the anger; the duration of fire is the duration of being angry (Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Kövecses, 1990, 2000). In that perspective, the idioms are considered to be motivated rather than arbitrary.

The English idioms below underlie the ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER¹² metaphor:

1. Make somebody's blood boil.
2. Flip your lid.
3. Let (blow) off steam.
4. Be/get (all) steamed up (about/over something).
5. Hit the ceiling / roof.
6. Blow your lid / top / stack
7. Simmer down.
8. Foam at the mouth.
9. Spit venom / blood.

The English idioms above, just like the ANGER IS HEAT/FIRE metaphors, are based on physiological experience (Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 1990).¹³ That is, the concept of ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER is buttressed by a physiological explanation in terms of body heat and increasing internal pressure, based on shared ideas about the human body (Chen, 2010). The ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER.¹⁴ According to Chen (2010), the metaphorical structure is not due to our conceptualization of ANGER as a hot fluid (as it is often assumed). Chen argues that the metaphorical pressure on the container walls, the potential swelling and the final explosion are motivated by a metaphorical increase in the amount of anger-fluid, not by the temperature of that fluid. Psycholinguistic research has shown that people's tacit knowledge of conceptual metaphors, such as ANGER IS

¹¹A detailed definition and explanation of “embodiment” and “embodied mind” in Cognitive Linguistics is found in Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999).

¹²Since the HEAT aspect seems to be optional, we have preferred to use ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER, instead of ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, or ANGER IS A HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER, as it had been called before. This is an idea borrowed from (Chen, 2010).

¹³ANGER IS HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER is one of the very productive conceptual metaphors in different languages (Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 1990; Gibbs et al., 1997).

¹⁴According to Yu (1998), for the metaphor theme ANGER IS HEAT, English selects FIRE and FLUID metaphors. Yu notes that English describes the emotion of anger by referring to “its related physiological effects” (p. 59).

HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER, partly motivates how they make sense of idiomatic (Kövecses, 1990). In (17), for example, the English idiom below invokes the conceptual metaphor BODY IS A CONTAINER. Kövecses (1987, p.14) introduces the conceptual metaphor BODY IS A CONTAINER¹⁵. The justification for the BODY IS A CONTAINER metaphor is, first, the body is a container with a clear boundary that keeps it separates from other objects and people. Second, the body is situated in space and moves in it while maintaining varying distances to objects and people (Kövecses, 1987). ANGER IS A (HOT) FLUID IN A CONTAINER metaphor is responsible for our understanding of the anger experience as a process with different degrees of intensity. This helps us make sense of the expression of anger as a potentially dangerous and uncontrollable phenomenon (Kövecses, 1990, 2000).

In (a) below, the English idiom activates two conceptual metaphors at the same time, namely: MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL ENTITIES MIND: (a) Spill the beans.

The two conceptual metaphors are caused by mental images corresponding to the idiom above. Idiom (a) evokes the image of an accidental or non-intentional action. According to Rosch (1978), the explanatory power of metaphorical models increases if the corresponding source domains are oriented towards the basic level of categorisation rather than formulated in abstract terms like CONTAINER or PHYSICAL ENTITIES. This does not contradict Lakoff's (1993) postulation that mappings from a source domain to a target domain "are at the superordinate level rather than the basic level" (p.212).

The English idiom below invokes the conceptual metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION: (b) Caught/stuck between a rock and a hard place. The idiom is used to refer to somebody who is in a very difficult position or facing a hard decision. According to Spears (1997), however, the meaning is not sufficient because it neither involves the "images connected with the individual constituents nor the metaphor as a whole" (p.15). The metaphors "rock" and "hard place" evoke an image of something very solid, heavy, and immovable that hurts when one attempts to remove it. The underlying literal reading (that is, the source concept), on the other hand, is to be described as "lack of freedom of movement". Thus, according to Spears (1997), when this is mapped on the target concept "difficult position," idiom (b) appears as a realisation of the conceptual metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION.

In (c), the idiom invokes the IDEAS ARE PLANTS conceptual metaphor: (c) Ideas have come to fruition.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) introduced the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE PLANTS. The two authors note that it is natural for people to find similarities between plants and themselves. Thus, the logic behind the idiom above is because plants give rise to fruits. When applying the IDEAS ARE PLANTS conceptual metaphor, the features of plants and seeds are used to describe ideas and other abstract notions such as imagination and thoughts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 p. 47). That is, the subcategories or stages of the plant metaphor: *seed*, *sprouting*, *budding*, *flowering*, *fruition* and *withering* may also be mapped onto the target concept of idea.

Recommendations

This study proposes several recommendations. First, teachers of English in Kenya and beyond should make learners aware of the ubiquity and significance of metaphors in their daily life. Teachers can do so by letting the learners understand that the philosophical basis of

¹⁵ Pauwel & Simon-Vandenberg (1995) argue that there are more basic concepts on which these body metaphors are grounded, such as container, movement, and force.

cognitive study of metaphor is experientialism, which characterizes meaning in terms of embodiment. This is because research has shown that organised categorisation of phenomena promotes 'in-depth' cognitive processing, which enhances memory storage (Boers, 2001, p.36). In addition, teachers should encourage students to extrapolate the underlying conceptual metaphors from idiomatic expressions. This is because raising learners' awareness of the metaphoric nature of idioms has a beneficial effect on vocabulary retention (Boers, 2000a, 2000b).

Second, this paper recommends that if the Conceptual Metaphor Theory is to be applied to the teaching and learning of idioms in Kenya, teachers' metaphorical competence should be improved since they are the implementers of the curriculum. Their metaphorical competence will not only deepen the understanding of knowledge about English idioms, but will enhance their communicative competence. Therefore, the Kenyan government, language teacher educators and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should make every effort to provide opportunities for teachers to further their study of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This will help in laying a solid foundation for the cognitive linguistics framework in the teaching of idioms thereby bringing theory and practice closer together. This will provide a meaningful context for the acquisition of English idioms by Kenyan learners through focusing on conceptual metaphors as well as on the various metaphoric relations that exist between idioms.

Further, dictionary makers, linguists and other stakeholders in language education in Kenya should expose the cognitive function of idioms to the learners of English as a second language by providing definitions, meanings and examples that are practical and easy for learners to remember. This is because the cognitivist view postulates that the meaning of many idioms is not arbitrary, but it is motivated by metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge (Kövecses, 2002). Thus, the aforementioned should, through their awareness campaigns of the cognitive linguistics, help learners and ESL practitioners realize the importance of the CL framework in helping learners recognize the systematicity between concepts (Kömür & Çimen, 2009).

Conclusions

On the basis of the findings presented above, first, this paper concludes that cognitive linguistics not only provides a framework within which idioms can be described but can also serve pedagogical purposes in the teaching of English idioms in Kenyan schools. This is because cognitive linguistics increases students' motivation for studying idioms on the basis of the insights of the Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Second, this paper concludes that the CMT method is an effective complement in idiom teaching and learning since the idioms used for discussion in this paper are 'motivated' rather than 'arbitrary'. That is, the English idioms discussed in this paper, are motivated conceptually by general knowledge of the world, which is embodied in the conceptual system.

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