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Health Metaphor and Embodied Meaning in English Economic Discourse

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Abstract: In economic discourse, economists use conceptual metaphors to explain complex and abstract economic concepts or theories. Among them, health metaphors based on physical experience are widely used. Therefore, this article selects health metaphors with the highest frequency in the UK National Corpus as research object, and conducts analysis on its typical usage. Results show that the vast majority of health metaphors tend to map economy as a healthy organism. Moreover, the health metaphors that appear in economic discourse have significant embodied meanings.

Keywords: Health metaphor; Embodied meaning; English economic discourse

1. Introduction

Metaphors exist widely in daily life. The theoretical research on the mechanism of metaphor can be traced back to Aristotle, who believes that metaphor is the connection between two things and the creative act of understanding the two things. He argues that similarity is the core of the metaphorical mechanism, which is found in the perceptions of the cognitive subjects. Richards (1936) puts forward the view that the essence of metaphor is interaction. The study on metaphor witnesses a historically turning point in the 1980s when Lakoff and Johnson (1980) publish their masterpiece *Metaphors We Live By*, in which Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is proposed for the first time. They believe that metaphors are certain patterns of thinking, experience, and behavior. In addition, Lakoff and Johnson observe that embodiment is the most prominent feature of conceptual metaphor. Based on previous studies of metaphor, it is found that health metaphor derived from the human body is the most commonly used metaphor in English economic discourse. Health metaphor is also used to various degrees in many other texts and languages. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study the health metaphor and its embodied meaning in English economic discourse.

2. Methodology

This paper applies the Magazine section, All Newspaper section and All Academic section of BNC as researching domain. The British National Corpus is the largest corpus available on the Internet at present that is originally created by Oxford University press.

To identify the linguistic forms of metaphor from the corpus, the procedure developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) is applied. A word is marked as metaphorical when a contrast between its contextual meaning and its more basic meaning is established. In this paper, the meaning is characterized as basic when it is more concrete and related to a bodily reaction. When the contextual meaning is distinct from such a basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with the basic meaning, then the word is marked as metaphorical.

Since “conceptual mappings are not linked to particular linguistic forms”, as Stefanowitsch (2007) explains, the way that this paper applies to extract linguistic expressions that represent health metaphor from non-annotated corpora is to search for target domain vocabulary (Stefanowitsch, 2007).

The procedure of metaphor extraction is as follows:

Firstly, the selected sections of the corpus are searched for the term “ECONOMY”. Secondly, the selected sections of the corpus are examined for relevant phrases with the term “ECONOMY” preceded and the term followed. Also, these sections are examined for collocates of the term with elements or phrases embedded between them. Due to the limitation of the corpus itself, this paper performs searches that retrieve examples with up to nine intervening words.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1 Types and classification of health metaphor

The extracted data is concluded in Table 1, which lists 933 occurrences of the mostly used metaphorical collocates of the term “ECONOMY”.

Table 1 The categorizations of the mostly used metaphorical collocates in the three sections of BNC

Collocated Word \ Section	All Academic	All Newspaper	Magazine	Total
growth/grew/grows/growing/grow	342	122	109	573
recovery/recover/recovers/recovering	29	173	35	237
health/healthy	26	12	4	42
strong/stronger	4	17	16	37
weakness/weak	5	11	6	22
revive/revival	4	8	4	16
suffer/suffering	4	2		6

Table 1 shows that this study classifies 933 realizations of health metaphor in English economic discourse. Of these, 573 (61.4%) are “GROWING”, 237 (25.4%) are “RECOVERING”, 42 (4.5%) are “HEALTHY”, 37 (3.9%) are “STRONG”, 22 (2.3%) are “WEAK”, 16 (1.7%) are “REVIVING”, 6 (0.6%) are “SUFFERING”. The quantitative findings suggest that these health metaphors differ largely in frequency: “GROWING” and “RECOVERING” are relatively common in English economic discourse, whereas other metaphors are fairly rare.

It is noted that the classification is an open-ended process since there are no already established sets or classes and classification emerges from the process of analysis and varies across cultures. Therefore, according to the bodily experience, the collected data is grouped into two types: “ECONOMY IS A HEALTHY ORGANISM” and “ECONOMY IS AN ILL ORGANISM”. The distribution and frequency of the two types are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Types of extracted health metaphor in the three sections of BNC

Types	Words	Frequency	Total
ECONOMY IS A HEALTHY ORGANISM	growth/grew/grows/growing/grow	573	905
	recovery/recover/recovers/recovering	237	
	health/healthy	42	
	strong/stronger	37	
	revive/revival	16	
ECONOMY IS AN ILL ORGANISM	weakness/weak	22	28
	suffer/suffering	6	

As can be seen from Table 2, there are 905 realizations of health metaphor used to demonstrate the economy as a healthy organism while only 28 realizations of health metaphor demonstrate the economy as an ill organism. Thus, this paper concludes that the absolute majority (over 95 percent) of health metaphor tends to conceptualize economy in terms of a healthy organism, while only a tiny fraction (less than 5 percent) of health metaphor sees economy as an ill organism.

3.2 Embodied meaning of health metaphor

The general meaning of verb “grow” is to increase. The adjective “healthy” usually stands for the good conditioning of human’s bodies and minds and the adjective “strong” is typically applied to depict “the physical power that muscle or bodies have”. All the three conceptualizations create the positive state and well-functioning image of the organisms and bodies. While the verbs “recover” and “revive” depict the situation of becoming better off and perhaps returning to the normal state from a relatively bad condition, they leave a positive impression based on human’s experiential cognition, though on the premise that the current situation is not so satisfying. Therefore, the metaphorical expressions that are associated with words “grow”, “healthy”, “recover”, “strong”, “revive” and their different parts-of-speech are classified as “ECONOMY IS A HEALTHY ORGANISM”.

This categorization contains metaphorical expressions that are associated with words “suffer”, “weak” and their different parts-of-speech. Generally, the adjective “weak” is used to describe an organism or body “with little physical power”. The verb “suffer” usually means “to be badly affected by pains and diseases, or to experience injuries”. The metaphorical expressions that are associated with words “suffer”, “weak” and their different parts-of-speech often create the negative state and ill-functioning image of the organisms and bodies. Thus, these metaphorical expressions are grouped as “ECONOMY IS AN ILL ORGANISM”.

1 They thought that he would be committed to tough reform of the welfare laws, that he would set his face against the racial balkanisation of America, that he would support free trade and eschew the idea that great dollops of federal money would revive the economy. (The Economist. 3139 s-units)

2 *But the economy remained weak and Bush made a series of mistakes and miscalculations throughout the fall and winter. (Liverpool Echo & Daily Post. Liverpool: Liverpool Daily Post & Echo Ltd, 1993. 18715 s-units.)*

Example 1 is extracted from *The Economist*, which illustrates the verbal realization of the metaphor and states people thought that he would commit himself into a series of actions and measurements, including revolutions of the welfare laws, racial balkanisation of American, etc., to pull the economy out of the current bad situation. Example 2 is from the daily newspaper *Liverpool Echo & Daily Post* that depicts a very similar condition, stating that the American economy is in bad condition and not functioning well. Meanwhile, President Bush makes a series of wrong decisions based on miscalculations all through the second half of the year.

All these conceptualizations are regarded as reflections of embodiment, which demonstrate that embodiment plays an important role in English economic discourse. It is our familiarity with all these feelings and bodily experiences that produces these expressions cited above: as growing, recovering, healthy, strong, weak, reviving, and suffering are all universal human experiences. Unsurprisingly, these metaphors appear also in other languages and various fields.

4. Conclusion

The present paper applies certain sections of the British National Corpus as objective linguistic materials to analyze health metaphors and their embodied meaning in English economic discourse. By the comparison of the statistical data, the present paper finds that metaphors generally used to create the positive state and well-functioning condition of the organisms and bodies are much more inclined to be applied in English economic discourse than those metaphors expressing the negative state and ill-functioning condition of the organisms and bodies. Secondly, the foregoing analyses demonstrate that these conceptualizations are motivated by certain physical experiences that are familiarized by all human beings. It is identified that these embodiment-based conceptualizations and metaphors are frequently used and easily understood by the audiences. Therefore, this paper reckons that health metaphor and its embodied meaning play a significantly important role in English economic discourse, as well as in various other industries and areas at the same time.

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