

Understanding the Cognitive Mechanisms Responsible for Interpretation of Idioms in Hindi-Urdu

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Abstract

The traditional view of idiom indicates that idiom/ idiomatic expressions consist of two or more words and the overall meaning of the idioms are unpredictable from its constituent words (Fraser, 1970; Katz, 1973). Idioms are assumed to be taken as an item of the lexicon that is independent of any conceptual system. This paper takes an insight from cognitive semantics, which states that most of the idioms are conceptually motivated (Lakoff, 1987; Kovecses and Szabao, 1996).

The present paper tries to apply the concepts of conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and conventional knowledge, which are treated as cognitive mechanisms in the cognitive semantics theory. This cognitive semantics view plays an important role in the comprehension and emergence of idioms and figurative languages. The paper takes an account of Hindi-Urdu idioms, and tries to look into those idioms which seem to be motivated by conceptual metaphor and metonymy. The concepts of conceptual metaphor and metonymy proposed in the study so far are applied on Hindi-Urdu idioms. The paper also tries to establish an analogy between idiomatic comprehension mechanism in Hindi-Urdu, and English in terms of concepts. The paper strengthens the idea that idioms are conceptual, and this view can actually be useful in teaching and learning of idioms for the second language learners.

Keywords: Idioms, Cognitive Mechanisms, Conceptual Metaphor, Conceptual Metonymy, Conventional knowledge.

Introduction

Metaphors are the reflection of human cognition. They facilitate understanding of concepts in terms of other concepts. There are two traditional approaches on the role of metaphors in language:

- a) The classical view
- b) The romantic view

The Classical View

The classical view uses metaphors as decorative devices to gain some especial effects. This view treats metaphor outside the normal or regular language, and seems to believe that metaphorical interpretation requires a special mode of comprehension.

The Romantic View

The romantic view states that there is no distinction between literal and figurative language. Cognitive linguistics treats metaphors and metonymy as fundamental factors for cognitive behaviour and socio-cultural practice. Cognitive linguistics also looks at universalities and culture specific metaphors.

Idioms

The interpretation of idioms meaning is considered to be one of the most difficult areas for the second language learners. Idioms can be based on metaphors, metonymy, sayings, similes etc. In the traditional view idioms are considered to be multiword expressions which are independent of any conceptual system. Many idioms are based on conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymies; and there exists a systematic motivation, which arises from sets of 'conceptual mappings or correspondences' between a source and a target domain (Lakoff, 1987; Kovecses and Szabao, 1996).

Therefore, idioms are not just string of words whose meaning is special, distinct from the constituent words of an idiomatic expression. The meanings of many idioms arise from our general knowledge of the world, which is embodied in our cultural context, and conceptual structure (Kovecses and Szabao, 1996). We make sense of an idiomatic expression based on our conceptual knowledge, and therefore idioms do not consist of arbitrary set of words, which generate a special meaning, but are actually conceptually motivated (Gibbs and O'Brien 1990; Gibbs, 1994). The particular words in an idiom are the result of the motivation primed by the cognitive mechanism (metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge) which links different domains of knowledge. The conceptual mapping between two or different domains of knowledge is responsible for the emergence of the idiomatic meaning.

A Diagrammatic Representation of Idiomatic Interpretation (Kovecses And Szabao, 1996).

Traditional View

Special idiomatic meaning

meaning of the linguistic forms
linguistic forms and their syntactic properties

Example:

Die

kick the bucket
kick the bucket (no passive, etc.)

Cognitive Semantics View

Idiomatic meaning

the overall special meaning of an idiom

Cognitive mechanisms

metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge (= domains(s) of knowledge)

Conceptual domain(s)

one or more domain of knowledge

Linguistic forms and their meanings

the words that comprise an idiom their syntactic properties together with their meanings

Example: to spit fire

Idiomatic meaning: be very angry

Cognitive mechanism (Conceptual Metaphor): ANGER IS FIRE

Conceptual domain(s): FIRE and ANGER

Linguistic forms: spit; fire

Meanings of forms: 'spit' and 'fire'

This paper deals with the Hindi–Urdu idioms, particularly those consisting of words associated with body parts. We have tried to study the semantics of idioms and have implemented the cognitive semantics theory which plays an important role in to understanding the idiomatic meaning. Human body is a universal source domain for metaphorical mappings from bodily experience into more abstract domains. Human beings, despite their racial or ethnical peculiarities, show same body structure and common bodily experience. Therefore, body part idioms naturally qualify as a theme for linguistic research. The idioms related to the concept of fire are focussed to deal with how metaphor contributes to the understanding of idioms. Idioms related to hand and face is taken to show how metonymy and conventional knowledge helps in the interpretation of idioms. In this paper, we will also refer to English examples to draw comparison and understand language, culture body, and cognition.

Metaphor Based Idioms

Concepts denoting personal relationships and emotions are also subject to metaphorical understanding. Conceptual metaphors bring correspondence between two domains of knowledge. One is the familiar physical domain, and the other is an abstract domain. The first is the source domain and the second is the target domain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; 2003). The source domain is typically applied to provide the understanding about the target domain. The primary function is to help in understanding one concept in terms of another, by means of correspondences between the elements of the two domains. The target domain being less delineated concept is understood in terms of the source domain. The source domain is more concrete entity which relies on to more abstract, the target domain for interpretation. This correspondence between the source domain and target domain is called conceptual metaphor. Therefore we can say that conceptual metaphor is a set of mappings or correspondences between two domains- the source and the target.

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The Domain of “Fire”

Taking into the account of Hindi – Urdu idioms it’s found that the domain of fire helps to understand the domain of anger, which is also the case in English. Some expressions like ‘spit fire’, ‘burn somebody up’, etc. denote the domain of anger, which is an abstract term understood by the concept of fire. In Hindi-Urdu too, anger is often associated with the concept of fire.

Example of Hindi-Urdu idiom:

aag babulaa honaa

Literal meaning: to be bubble fire

Figurative meaning: to be extremely angry

Therefore anger is comprehended through the concept of fire. So, following the cognitive semantics convention we can say ANGER IS FIRE is the conceptual metaphor (capital letters denote the concepts not the word). Hence, conceptual metaphors function like the connecting element between an abstract domain (anger) and more physical domain (fire). Domain of fire also constitutes of words like “burn”, “heat”, “boil”, “spark”, “flame” etc. So these domains will conceptually motivate such words used in the idioms.

Let us take few more examples of the domain of fire to understand the concept of anger following the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS FIRE.

ANGER IS FIRE

(a) garam dīmaag

Literal meaning: hot headed

Figurative meaning: short tempered

(b) k^huun k^haulnaa

Literal meaning: boiling of blood

Figurative meaning: very angry.

(c) aag mein g^hee d^aalnaa

Literal meaning: to add clarified butter in fire

Figurative meaning: to increase the anger of someone

(d) angaare ugalnaa

Literal meaning: to vomit hot charcoal

Figurative meaning: to say harsh words in anger

The Domain of “Face”

Face is the most distinctive part of the body. Face is the part that captures all the emotions and is the focus of interaction. Consciously or unconsciously our emotions and feelings are conveyed by our face physically. We will discuss how the lexical item denoting face helps us in understanding the abstract domain of dignity and prestige. In almost all societies, success is determined by the prestige and dignity gained by an individual in his or her lifetime. The relational power hierarchy of an individual in a society is often measured by appraising the amount of prestige one has gained. Let

us understand this concept with some examples which will indicate how dignity and prestige are metaphorically projected in the language and how language and culture are the two faces of the same coin.

It is interesting to observe that, in English ‘FACE’ is metaphorically mapped to the abstract state of honour whereas in Hindi-Urdu ‘HEAD’ is mapped to the abstract state of honour. In English the conceptual metaphor PRESTIGE IS FACE whereas in Hindi-Urdu PRESTIGE IS NOSE.

Example:

| # | Hindi-Urdu | English equivalent |
|---|--|--------------------|
| 1 | sir unchaa karnaa Literal meaning: to raise head Figurative meaning: to gain prestige | To gain face |
| 2 | naak rak ^h naa Literal meaning: to keep nose Figurative meaning: to keep prestige | To save face |

EYE IS A CONTAINER

Hindi – Urdu

(a) aank^h b^har aanaa

Literal meaning: eyes filled with water.

Figurative meaning: expression for joy/ sadness.

Metonymy and Conventional Knowledge

Metonymy is distinguished from metaphor as it involves one conceptual domain, rather than two distinct ones. Metonymy involves “stands for” conceptual relationship between two entities while metaphor involves “is” or “is understood as” relationship between two conceptual domains. As pointed out earlier, face is the external part which is most suggestive or expressive. Face is the most recognizable part of a human body. It includes major sense organ like eyes for vision, ear for hearing, nose for smell and mouth for taste. In this section we use idioms related to face, to understand the metonymic extension. The specific cognitive mechanisms that have been collected related to face includes the following.

- The metonymy FACE STANDS FOR FEELINGS
- The metonymy FACE STANDS FOR OUTWARD APPEARANCE
- The metonymy HAND STANDS FOR ACTIVITY
- The metonymy HAND STANDS FOR PERSON
- The metonymy HAND STANDS TO IDENTIFY ONSELF

Face Stands for Feelings

The reactions to emotions and feelings is all shown on our face, these common bodily experiences are expressed as a common metonymy FACE STANDS FOR FEELINGS. The same

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conceptual metonymy is used in comprehension of idiomatic expression in English. In Hindi – Urdu the idiomatic expression “chehraa lal honaa” (literal meaning: the turning of face into red”, figurative meaning: feeling ashamed/angry). The facial expression changes when one undergoes such situation. In fact, the change in colour to red is quite evident when one gets extremely angry.

English has an equivalent idiomatic expression for “feeling low” same as Hindi – Urdu. The idiomatic expression in English is “to have a long face” and Hindi-Urdu has an equivalent “munh lat’kaanaa” (literal meaning: the hanging of face, figurative meaning: feeling low). The image of a person who is low or angry will be physically evident through the facial gestures. The point which could be made here is that the motivation for the idiomatic meaning comes from the expression on face.

Face Stands for Outward Appearance

The “face” can metonymically stand for physical appearance of a person. It can further metaphorically refer to one’s outward appearance. In Hindi – Urdu, the idiomatic expression “chehraa baḍalnaa” is another example of conceptual metonymy (literal meaning: to change the face, figurative meaning: to bring change). In this case, conceptual metonymy is based on a conceptual metaphor, and it is a case of “metaphorical metonymy”.

In the section below, we will take some examples of idioms related to hand, to understand the metonymic extension and conventional knowledge.

Hand Stands for Activity

There are many idioms related to “hand” in Hindi – Urdu, and English languages. This shows that metonymy and conventional knowledge play a role in the interpretation of idiomatic meaning. The conventional knowledge as a cognitive mechanism simply means that people of a given culture share common understanding of a conceptual domain. The shared understanding in case of hand will be shape, size, and function of the human hand. This conventional knowledge is called an “idealized cognitive model” (Lakoff, 1987), “schema” (Langacker, 1987), “cultural model” or “folk theory” (Holland and Quinn 1987), or “frame” or “scene” (Fillmore, 1982).

Let us start with a general conventional knowledge. The idiom “handful” in English means “a small number”, whereas in Hindi – Urdu “fist” is used for a similar expression “mut t’ḥii b’har” (literal meaning: fist-full, Figurative meaning: small in number). In one culture “fist”, while in the other culture “hand”, is used for the same idiomatic meaning. It is interesting to see that the expression “mutthi bhar” means “a small number”, because “full” has a sense of more, or complete. In this case, small number of objects or no objects can be held if the object is bigger in size than a person’s fist. Therefore, a fist can’t support a large number.

A special case of general conventional knowledge is involved when human hand relates to certain conventionalized gestures. In Anglo-American culture, handshaking is a conventionalized gesture for greeting someone, whereas in Indian culture joining palms of both hands (Hinduism) or

raising one's hand till forehead (Islam) is practiced to greet someone. From the above example, we can say that HAND STANDS FOR ACTIVITY. There are other examples for this metonymy in both Hindi – Urdu and English.

For example:

- a) In Hindi – Urdu: “haath^h aazmaanaa”
Literal meaning: to try hand
Figurative meaning: to get into work.
- b) In Hindi – Urdu: “haath^h milaanaa”
Literal meaning: to join hands with somebody,
Figurative meaning: to co-operate.
- c) In English: “Join hands”
Figurative meaning: to cooperate

Hand Stands for Person

- a) In Hindi-Urdu: “haanth^hon haath^h”
Literal meaning: from hand to hand
Figurative meaning: directly from one person to another

Hand Stands to Identify Oneself

- a) In Hindi-Urdu: “haath^h k^har.e karna”
Literal meaning: to raise hand
Figurative meaning: to surrender

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to see idioms from a cognitive linguistics point of view, especially from the cognitive semantics view. There are papers on the Chinese language which has also dealt with similar concepts. The motivation behind this paper was to investigate and understand whether Indo Aryan languages also indicate the same metaphorical mapping when it comes to figurative language competence. The data presented in this paper seems to align with the cognitive semantics view proposed by cognitive linguists.

The examples in the paper indicate that the meaning of idioms is understood by using the cognitive mechanisms / tools. Idioms representing the concepts of “fire”, “hand,” and “face,” shows that idioms are conceptual in nature. We can also say that the meaning of idioms depends on the source-target relationship. For the idioms related to “hand,” it could be said that a single idiomatic expression may be simultaneously motivated by several cognitive devices, including metaphors, metonymies, and conventional knowledge.

Further, in this paper, we established that motivation is used for semantic transparency, and therefore it is assumed that this motivation of idioms which arises from cognitive mechanism would provide better results in teaching and learning of idioms. The paper is in progress, and

psycholinguistics experiments are yet to be conducted for the result of the mental images for the idioms in online comprehension.

The examples from Hindi-Urdu show that when different language users share a similar cultural context, they make similar interpretations of the idiom, as they are likely to share the same conceptual metaphors and metonymy. The examples from English and Hindi-Urdu show that metaphor and metonymy are grounded in common bodily experience.

We have not focussed on ‘structural metaphors,’ ‘orientational metaphors’, and ‘ontological metaphors’ in this paper. The words used with all capital letters in this paper are the concepts. The idioms which are discussed in this paper show that metaphorical mapping is mostly grounded in the body.

The data in this paper is an indication that conceptual motivation for many idioms can be represented as (in agreement with; Kovecses and Szabao, 1996):

Idiomatic meaning: *the overall figurative meaning of an idiom*

Cognitive mechanisms: *metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge*

Conceptual domain(s): *one or more domains of knowledge*

Linguistic form and their meaning: *the words that comprise the idiomatic expression and their syntactic properties.*

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