

# Teaching with Conceptual Metaphors: A Cognitive linguistic approach to Japanese Idioms Teaching

Li Wu

School of Foreign Languages, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, China  
Email: 1041448212@qq.com

Received: 30 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 08 Mar 2024; Accepted: 15 Mar 2024  
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## Abstract

*In recent studies, the importance of developing metaphorical competence for L2 learners has been highlighted by many cognition linguists. Applying metaphor instruction in language education is increasingly considered as an effective way of improving language teaching. This paper discusses the underlying metaphorical structures and semantic construction of Japanese idiomatic expressions centered on idioms of human body. Based on that, this paper attempts to explore some strategies for Japanese idioms teaching to Chinese JFL learners from the basic perspectives of conceptual metaphors.*

**Keywords**— *Japanese idioms, conceptual metaphor theory, semantic construction, Japanese language teaching.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cognitive science has shown that the mapping of metaphors is not arbitrary but is based on people's embodied experience, and that “the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:23). In recent years, research in cognitive linguistics has shown that metaphor is not only a linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon existed in literature, but also a cognitive device, which can cultivate people's abstract and visualization thinking. Metaphors are pervasive in people's daily lives not just in language but throughout the process of thought and action, which construct people's conceptual system (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Traditionally, the semantic motivation of idiomatic expressions has always been regarded as an arbitrary linguistic phenomenon, which leads to some problematic issues in the foreign language classroom for both teachers and students. However, the theory of conceptual metaphors provides a new way of solving this problem. In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson enumerated three fundamental types of metaphors of human conceptual system (structural metaphor, orientational metaphor, and ontological metaphor), which illustrated how conceptual metaphors help people organize metaphorical expressions in a systematic way and influenced foreign language teaching. Idioms as a “special

type of figurative language” (Marcus Callies, 2017:63) rooted to people's life experiences also emerge the feature of metaphors and are conceptually motivated by conceptual metaphors.

Moreover, experimental studies have proved that metaphor is highly relevant to second language learning and teaching (Littlemore, & Low, 2006; Lantolf & Bobrova, 2014; Andreou & Galantomos, 2008, Beréndi, Csábi, & Kövecses, 2008). Since body is the foundation for human understanding and perception of the world, many idioms are generated from physical experiences of humans and reflect the way of humans' thinking. Japanese idiomatic expressions also take the feature of embodiment since idioms about human body account for a quarter of the total number (Zheng Yuchao, 2012). In this papers, the idiomatic expressions or idioms will be taken as the study objects. Based on the fundamental opinions and cognitive mode of conceptual metaphor, this article discusses the underlying metaphorical structures and semantic construction of Japanese idioms, and attempts to explore some approaches to guide the teaching.

## II. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY AND SEMANTIC CONSTRUCTION OF JAPANESE IDIOMS

According to cognitive semantics, idioms are systematic in nature and the meaning of idioms is “motivated rather than

arbitrary in the sense” but the “cognitive mechanisms, such as metaphors, metonymy and conventional knowledge (Kovecses, Zoltan, and Peter Szabco, 1996:351).” Lakoff and Johnson (1980), liberate metaphor from the traditional rhetorical categories and see it as a cognitive device and way of thinking that leads people to make sense of one experience in terms of another. The theory of CM (conceptual metaphors) shed light on the idioms teaching and learning for it clearly explain the nature of metaphors in our language and the pervasiveness of metaphors, which enables us to comprehend the structure and semantic motivations of conceptual metaphors in a systematic way.

Many scholars have discussed the definition and classification of Japanese idioms. Miyaji (1982), classified Japanese idioms into two types: “*rengoteki kanyougo* (idioms in form of set phrase)” and “*hiyuteki kanyougo* (figurative idioms)”. “*rengoteki kanyougo*” are highly similar in form to a “free phrase”, but the connection between each constituent is closer than the free phrase, such as “*te o someru*”. “*Hiyuteki kanyougo*” includes metaphorical idioms and idioms with simile, which has a very high degree of closeness between the constituent elements and have obvious metaphorical meaning, such as “*atama ni kuru*”. Momiyama distinguished idiomatic expressions into “idioms with settled meaning (idioms whose constituents do not contribute meaning to the expression)” and “idioms have both literal meaning and meanings that are indirectly motivated through the relationship based on metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche (Momiyama, 1992:36).” As we mentioned earlier, previous studies have paid much attention to the relationship between the literal meaning and the constituent when exploring the semantic motivation of Japanese idioms, but the classification mentioned above is mainly based on the correlation between the literal meaning of the constituent and the idiomatic meaning of the idioms, which gives little consideration to the impact of the metaphorical structures and the semantic extension of the constituent on the meaning of the idioms.

Although the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot directly be predicted from the meaning of single constituent, this does not mean that the semantic motivation of idioms is completely arbitrary and the meaning of idiomatic expressions is unrelated to their constituents. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) illustrated three fundamental types of metaphors of human conceptual system, which assumes that the semantic motivation and structure of metaphors can be deduced. Since the process of understanding the meaning of idioms is a process of semantic construction (Wu Hong, 2012). In the following sections, the underlying metaphorical structures and the semantic construction of Japanese

idioms related to human body will be discussed as to how they are related to the semantic motivation of idioms and how the semantic extension of constituents of idioms contribute to the semantic construction.

Let’s take a look at some idioms about “hara (belly). In Japanese physical idiomatic expressions, “chest” and “belly” are mainly used to express the inner feelings and mental state of human and they also share the semantic functions of “heart” and “brain”, which always take the feature of container metaphors, such as “*hara o waru* (to be honest)”, “*hara o kukuru* (be determined)”, “*jibara o kiru* (pay out of one’s own pocket)”. We can look at a more specific example “*hara ga tatsu* (get angry)” to discuss this kind of ontological metaphor. Although we cannot deduce the idiomatic meaning from its constituents “hara (belly)” or “tatsu (stand)” directly, the meaning of this idiom is motivated by the ontological metaphor “BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTION” and more specifically, “ANGER IS IN THE HARA”. We can regard “hara (belly)” as a container and humans’ emotions such as anger can be considered as a entity “HOT FLUID / HOT GAS”. When people get angry, the fluid in the “hara (belly)” will well up inside them or even blow up, which is similar to the physical reaction (the blood pressure rises) when people get angry. Although, the mapping between the literal meaning and the idiomatic meaning of “hara ga tatsu” is quite poor, we can still infer the idiomatic meaning from the semantic extension of each constituent.

(1) The literal meaning of “hara ga tatsu” means “the belly is bloating”.

(2) “Hara (belly)” as a part of human body can be take as a container for emotions or even a machine that produce emotions.

The metaphorical meaning of “hara” can be regarded as angry emotion.

The basic meaning of “tatsu” can be extended as “*kemuri ga tatsu* (smoke)” or “*yuge ga tatu* (steam up)” .

The combination of “hara” and “tatsu” can be inferred as “the emotion is steam up”.

Considering the similarity between the physiological phenomenon (Blood collects towards the heart and brain and the blood pressure will rise) and the idiomatic meaning of “get angry”, the semantic extension of “hara” and “tatsu” will map from the source domain of human body to the target domain “angry” and can be comprehended as “someone is getting angry since his emotion is like a hot fluid and is going to well up”. At the same time, (1) and (5) constitute a conceptual system of convergence, from which we can find that the constituents contribute meaning to the expression.

As the example mentioned above, the semantic extension of body idioms are based on physical condition, mental status and emotional state. The idiomatic meaning comes from the overall meaning of the combination of the constituents. In a word, by means of metaphors, the extension of the behaviour expressed in the literal sense to the idiomatic sense is achieved, in which the figurative image of the literal sense and the idiomatic sense echo each other.

In addition to the container metaphors about “hara (belly)”, some idioms are motivated by the spatial orientation up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, which helps people to organize a system of interrelated concepts. In Japanese, “ni” and “kara” are often used to indicate the direction of movement of an object, the state and place where an action takes place, the purpose and object of the action, as well as the time and place. For instance, “te ni iru (be skilled)” is motivated by the orientational metaphor “IN IS GOOD/BENEFICIAL”, which is related to people’s physical and cultural experiences. The entity of skills and techniques exist outside the human body, but when a person gains a skill from outside to himself, he gains a way of making his living, which is good for his personal well-being. The culture experiences of “in is good” also influence the idiom “ki ni iru (be pleased with)”, “atama ni ireru (remember sth.)”. Additionally, the literal meaning of each constituent in “te ni iru” do not contribute to the idiomatic meaning directly since the literal meaning is more common than the idiomatic sense, and the specific idiomatic meaning must be combined with the concrete context or situation. For example, the literal meaning of “te ni iru” is “gaining sth. In one’s hand” which always refers to gain some specific substances, but in the context “te ni itta gijyutsu o shutoku suru”(learn proficient techniques), the source domain of “te ni iru” is projected to the abstract concept “the state of a human”, the movement of “gain” is highlighted by the target domain “be skilled”.

From the above analysis, we can see that the underlying structures of Japanese idiomatic expressions are not random and many Japanese idioms of human body are motivated by the typical type of metaphor, such as orientational metaphor, and ontological metaphor. The semantic extension of constituents of some ontological idioms contribute to the semantic construction positively, but the literal meaning of some orientational metaphors are quite common and even deceptive, since the idiomatic meaning is limited by concrete context and cultural convention.

### III. APPLYING CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS TO IDIOM TEACHING

Experimental studies have found that adapting conceptual metaphors in idiom teaching and learning is more effective than the traditional method (Beréndi, Csábi, & Kövecses, 2008; Aburam Upadhaya, N. P. Sudharshana, 2021). Although, conceptual metaphors have influenced the language teaching significantly, teachers should also notice that idiomatic expressions are not automatically accessed during idiom comprehension (Glucksberg, Brown & McGlone, 1993), which means teachers should consider relevant factors which will influence the mapping of metaphors and adjust their teaching method when the idiom is not motivated semantically. Therefore, there are some strategies for Japanese idioms teaching to Chinese JFL learners.

#### 3.1 Complementing relevant history and culture background contexts

Cognition linguists suggest that metaphors are based on interconnections in our experience, that the mapping of metaphors is not arbitrary but is based on people's embodied experience, and that the most fundamental values of a culture are consistent with the most basic metaphorical structures of that culture. Metaphors are systematic and coherent with cultural perceptions. In the mapping model of metaphor, the mapping scope serves as a constraint, and the image schema (i.e., the most basic cognitive structure of human beings), the basic correlations (which help us think logically), and the culture-dependent evaluations (the perception of things and individuals in a certain culture) are important constraints on the breadth of the mapping scope. Cultural experience is an indispensable condition for metaphorical mapping. Japanese idiomatic expressions are rooted to the culture and people’s embodied experience, which reflect the Japanese people’s unique way of thinking. Therefore, adopting relevant history and culture background contexts to the teaching process will help with the comprehension and production of idiomatic expressions.

Moreover, Influenced by ancient Chinese culture, a considerable proportion of idiomatic expressions in Japanese are related to Chinese cultural allusions, which allows the two countries to share common culture-dependent evaluations. For example, the Japanese idioms “haisui no jin” (conduct a desperate struggle), and “i no naka no kawazu” (be like a frog at the bottom of a well) came from The Historical Records by Sima Qia and the article "Autumn Water" by the Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi during the Period of Warring States (476-221 B.C).

In addition to cultural exchange, a social group's conventional perception also affects the cognitive outcomes of conceptual metaphors. When it comes to tigers, it shares the same image to both Chinese and Japanese people and mostly represents a powerful, fierce and terrifying creature or even refers to a cruel, ferocious, and powerful person. In Japanese, there is an idiom "tora no i o karu kitsune" (relying on powerful people to bully or frighten others), and in Chinese, there is also an idiom "hu jia hu wei" (borrowing someone's power to bully or frighten others). In Chinese culture, the fox is usually considered as a cunning and seductive character appearing in literature. In Japan, there is an idiomatic expression "kitsune to tanuki no bakashiai" (each trying to cheat or outwit the other), which is almost close to the Chinese idiom "er yu wo zha" (to deceive one another). From the idioms related to animals, we can see that people are accustomed to conceptualize "nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:28) by personification, which as extensions of ontological metaphors are highly relevant to specific culture background and social cognition.

Aside from cultural similarities, it is important to be aware of cultural differences, as culture differences will make for different conceptual metaphors. Culture values, world view, geographic environment, religious beliefs and cultural traditions etc, will impact on the cultural aspect of metaphors. Let's take a look at a few examples about this issue. Regarding the culture cognition of the crow, in China nowadays, the crow is regarded as an ominous bird, a inauspicious symbol, representing fear and bad luck. However, Japanese people consider the crow as a divine bird from the mythological legend who can lead the pathway to success and bless a good harvest for people. Furthermore, the image of "filial birds" also reflects on the idiomatic expression "karasu ni hanpo no kou ari". In this example, the meaning of "a crow will feed its parents after growing up" is metaphorically projected into the target domain, which is been highlighted as "filial piety" and we can discover that the mapping of metaphor in this case is restricted by cultural conventions. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to explain the relevant culture background to students during the teaching process, so as to avoid misunderstanding and misuse.

### 3.2 Teachers can guide students to explore the semantic construction mechanisms of idiomatic expressions

Conceptual metaphors suggest that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:9). Metaphors are systematically mapped from the source domain to the abstract target conceptual domain. In other words, The general law of metaphorical cognition is to

comprehend abstract things that are similar to concrete things that people are more familiar with. The semantic motivation of idioms also follows the law of metaphorical cognition, mapping from the human body to abstract spirits and emotions. In Japanese idioms, there are large numbers of orientational metaphors and ontological metaphors and according to these two types of metaphors, we can try to analyse the semantic extension mechanisms of the Japanese idiomatic expressions.

a) The semantic construction mode based on orientational metaphors (mainly centered on physical expressions)

Conceptual metaphors assume that orientational metaphors are not arbitrary, but instead they organize a system of interrelated concepts through the "spatial orientation with reference to up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:16) and so on". Moreover, metaphors are based on natural and cultural experiences, and "the physical and cultural experience provides many possible bases for spatialization metaphors" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:17). For instance, the idiomatic expression "kare ni atama o sagetakunai" (I don't want to submit to him), which motivates by the metaphor "HAVING CONTROL IS UP, BEING SUBJECT TO CONTROL OR FORCE IS DOWN" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:17). Lakoff and Johnson claimed that "the physical basis: physical size typically correlates with physical strength, and victor in a fight is typically on top" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:17). "atama o sageru" means "to lower one's head and submit to someone", from which we can feel that with the movement of lowering one's head, the power is transferred from top to bottom, from oneself to others. Furthermore, there are many idiomatic expressions related to the spatial cognition "GOOD IS UP", such as "atama ga takai (being conceited)", "atama o ageru (expand one's power)", "ue ni ha ue ga aru (there is always someone who is better than another)". From the examples mentioned above, we can find that semantic expansion of emotional and mental domains link to physical movement of human organs and that the culture convention "GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN" also play a significant role during the process of metaphorical comprehension since it always relates to personal well-being.

b) The semantic construction mode based on ontological metaphors (semantic extension from physiological functions to abstract concepts)

Ontological metaphors are metaphorical ways of thinking in which humans identify abstract concepts such as events, behaviours, emotions, and thoughts as entities based on their own experiences and physiological entities. By this means, people can refer, categorize, group and quantify both mental and material substance (Lakoff & Johnson,



1980:23). People understand events, behaviours, activities and states with the help of ontological metaphors, and typical ontological metaphors include personified metaphors and container metaphors. For example: *utsukushi niwa o misetemoratte me no shogatsu ni natta* (It's a feast for my eyes to see such a beautiful courtyard). "Me no Shogatsu" means "to feast one's eyes, to open one's horizons". "Shogatsu" refers to the first month of the lunar year and Japanese people will celebrate the coming of the new year during this moment. By personification, in this idiom, the "eye" becomes a "person" who can eat cuisine and even get the feeling of "satisfied and happy". Another example is *kore oerabi ni naru towa me ga takai*. "Me ga takai" means "have good taste". In addition, the literal meaning of "me ga takai" is "eyes are high", which doesn't make any sense in this situation. Instead, the meaning of "have good taste" is highlighted since "me(eye)" as a visual organ in the source domain is mapped to the target domain "taste, discernment". From this perspective, the semantic expansion of "eye" to "judgement, discernment" can take the action "seeing" as a reference.

Let's take a look at another typical metaphor "BODY IS A CONTAINER". The ancient Japanese believed that the heart was the source of thought, and they assumed that the "mune (chest)" and "hara/ fuku (abdomen)" were the place of the heart, the source of wisdom and spirit. Therefore, there are many idiomatic expressions about the chest and abdomen in Japanese language, which are often used to express emotions in addition to figurative archetypes. The human body can be regarded as a container with "a bounding surface and an in-out orientation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:26)", so that we can understand events, states and activities. In the case above, the way of semantic extension is reflected in both outward and inward orientation centred on the abdomen. For example, on the aspect of inward expansion, the word "mune(chest)" often refers to organs within the chest cavity, such as "mune ga yakeru" (heartburn, a bad feeling in the stomach) and "mune no byou (pulmonary disease)". As for the outward expansion, it refers to the part outside the chest such as the chest, breasts, etc. "Mune o haru (puff one's chest out)" means full of confidence, which is motivated by the metaphor HAPPY IS UP. The action "puff one's chest out" shows that people will raise up their head highly when they are in a positive and confident state.

### **3.3 Improve students' metaphorical awareness and competence**

In the previous studies, research in cognitive linguistics has highlighted the importance of using metaphors in second language study. Littlemore defined metaphorical competence as "include both knowledge of, and ability to

use, metaphor, as well as Low's (1988) 'skills needed to work effectively with metaphor' (Littlemore and Low, 2006:269)." The ability to use and recognize metaphorical meanings, and the fluency of metaphorical interpretation are highly related to the metaphorical competence. Liu, Shuyuan, and Chen-Yu C. have found that "higher language levels may allow for more elaborate interpretations of L2 metaphorical expressions but do not guarantee their accuracy and appropriateness." and they suggest that "learners across different language levels are equally in need of systemic and scientific instructions" (Liu, Shuyuan, and Chen-Yu C., 2020:500). Conceptual metaphors believe that metaphors are ubiquitous in daily life, both in language and in thought and action. The conceptual system on which our thoughts and actions are based is constructed on the nature of metaphors, which means teachers can improve their work from the mental and physical aspects to guide the teaching practice.

Firstly, teachers can cultivate students' cognitive imagination by appropriate materials. Comparing to conventional studying, linking "imagination instructions" with appropriate teaching design may be an effective instructional technique (Leahy, Wayne, and John Sweller, 2004:873). In Japanese, there is an idiomatic expression "saru mo ki kara ochiru (monkeys will also accidentally fall off trees)". Apes and monkeys are good at climbing up trees, but they may also fall to the ground by accident, which suggests that even those who are good at or specialize in a certain area may fail at times. The mapping of conceptual metaphors are based on the similarity from one thing to another. In the case mentioned above, we can see that imaginable materials and similar experiences are conducive to metaphorical imagination.

Secondly, teachers can instruct students to keep good habits of reading and thinking, so as to improve their sensitivity and comprehension to metaphors, since a lot of classic idiomatic expressions are recorded in the literature and poetry. China and Japan have had close cultural exchanges since ancient times, and many Japanese expressions are closely related to Chinese culture, which makes it easier for Chinese students to understand. For example, the Chinese poem "yi ye luo zhi tian xia qiu (a leaf falls to know the autumn of the world)", and there is the same expression in Japanese "ichiyō ochite tenka no aki o shiru". The Chinese saying "bai wen bu ru yi jian (A hundred hearings are better than a single sight)" are highly consistent with the Japanese idiomatic expression "hyakubun ha ikken ni shikazu". Moreover, metaphorical competence as a core ability for the second language learners plays an important role in all areas of communicative competence (Littlemore and Low, 2006). Using metaphors in writing and communication can also enhance the production and

comprehension of metaphorical idioms. Teachers can encourage students to create metaphors after reading poems and other literary works, and share their opinions in class, which can not only cultivate students' metaphorical competence but also increase the interest of the class.

Finally, encouraging students to collect metaphorical expressions and pay attention to phenomena and surroundings around them is also favorable to the acquisition of metaphorical idioms. By integrating the use of metaphors into daily life, students can unconsciously establish associations with the relevant expressions and remember them subconsciously. For example, the expression "aona ni shio" means "salt the greens-be listless", which describe a phenomenon that fresh greens have become dehydrated and wilted after being salted and the state of greens shares the same feature of a human who become depressed and demoralized without vitality. The expression "salted greens" can instantly remind us of the state of being depressed and dispirited, which shows the importance of embodied experience during the cognitive process as well.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed metaphorical structures and semantic construction of Japanese idiomatic expressions from the basic viewpoint of conceptual metaphor. Based on that, this paper explored some Japanese idioms teaching strategies for Chinese JFL learners from the theoretical aspect of conceptual metaphors. The rich mapping of body idioms also reflect that metaphors are highly related to human's embodied experiences and culture conventions. Although some theoretical approaches was put forward in this paper, due to the fact that there are a large number of types of Japanese idioms, and that the meanings of some idioms are not motivated by conceptual metaphors, more empirical studies and pedagogical experiments are needed to improve the teaching method for specific teaching practice in real classrooms.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm sincerely grateful to the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments on this article.

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