

# Perspectives of Metaphor Research in Business Speech Communication

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## Abstract

This paper explores metaphor research, especially that of business speeches. By reviewing the research background of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory, the characteristics of business speeches—as the metaphor research target—are explained. The ‘mental distance’ concept between a source domain and a target domain is examined, and, with some illustrations, this paper explains that metaphorical expressions in business speeches should be analyzed not as a single and individual discourse, but as the continuous flow of the metaphorical expressions through the speech. Finally, two experimental models for metaphor analysis are introduced to highlight the future development of metaphor research in business speeches.

Keywords: Metaphor, Blending, Mental Space, Business, Speech Communication

## I. Introduction

Speech is an instantaneous verbal act, which is audible but not visible. Therefore, “the message must be grasped at the moment it is uttered, or the listener fails to get the point” (Tarver, 1987: p. 53). This explains our esteem for effective ways of verbal expressions in public speaking. Just like speeches in other situations, business speeches should be understood by the audience, in the way that the speaker intends. As for business speeches, however, whether in an informative or persuasive way, every speech should have a specific commercial purpose. When we consider business speeches as public relations acts of companies, “perceptions are vitally important” (Smith, 1989: p. 19). Smith, a former chairman of General Motors Corporation, suggests that these perceptions, formulated through commercial public relations, can even create reality. Successful business communicators understand how audiences ‘listen between the lines’ and perceive the meanings.

Besides, human perception of language is a major field of interest in interdisciplinary studies. In the field of cognitive linguistics, it has been nearly three decades since Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). They stated that “our ordinary conceptual system ... is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. ... Our concepts structure what we perceive, ... Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” (p. 3). It is interesting to compare these two arguments: (a) our concepts structuring what we perceive ‘define’ everyday realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and (b) customers’ perceptions about a company can even ‘create’ reality (Smith, 1989). Here is a key to manipulating the audience’s perception and understanding, through the application of metaphorical expressions in business speeches, in the way that the speakers intend to have the audience

capture the meaning.

Subsequent interdisciplinary studies on metaphor, including the Blending Theory (BT) proposed by Turner & Fauconnier (1995, 2000), Fauconnier & Turner (2002), and Grady et al. (1997), were expected to contribute to our understanding of speech communication, especially in business occasions. However, Koller (2004) explains, in *Metaphor and Gender in Business Media Discourse*, that “metaphor has not been much of an issue in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) so far, nor have many researchers in cognitive metaphor drawn on the framework of CDA in their work” (Koller, 2004: p. 8). This ironically contradicts the fact that during those same periods, we have already seen references published for business people, such as VanOosting (1985), Tarver (1987), Wells (1988), Clancy (1989) and McKerrow et al. (2000), which all introduce the importance of metaphor application in business communication.

This paper, therefore, will outline the background of metaphor research in business communication, and explore its perspectives. In conclusion, the experimental ‘elevation model’ and ‘spiral model’ of metaphor analysis are presented.

## II. Conceptual Metaphor Theory & Blending Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). This is considered a ‘conceptual metaphor,’ in which we describe that “CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B)”<sup>1)</sup> (Kövecses, 2002: p. 4). In other words, the locus of metaphor is not in language itself, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another (Lakoff, 1993: p. 203; Lakoff & Johnson 2003: pp. 244–245). Under the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), linguistic metaphorical expressions are rooted in these conceptual metaphors, and structured by the ‘cross-domain mapping’ across two individual conceptual domains. According to Lakoff (1993), mapping, which is a set of correspondences, is primary, and the language is secondary (pp. 208–209).

Although Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* seems to be a “pioneering book” (Steen & Gibbs, 1997: p. 5) of CMT, Jäkel (1997) points out the preceding contributions to CMT research with quotations from Kant (1790), Blumenberg (1960) and Weinrich (1958) as follows: “... the transfer of reflection on some object of intuition to a completely different concept, may be one to which no intuition can ever correspond directly” (Kant, 1790: § 59), “Just comparing metaphors ... will disclose parts of the ground structure of cognition” (Blumenberg, 1960: p. 64), and “... this metaphor is not isolated. From the moment of its birth it is rooted in a firm image field” (Weinrich, 1958: p. 282). Jäkel’s findings remind us of the universality and ubiquity of metaphor. These quotations, which had been originally published long before, serve to outline the classical CMT framework to be proposed later by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980. Lakoff (1993) explains, too, that “the classical [metaphor] theory was taken so much for granted over the centuries that many people didn’t realize that it was just a theory” (p. 202).

One distinctive contribution in CMT research is, as Lakoff (2008: p. 26) as well as Johnson

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1) In this article, in order to distinguish the conceptual metaphor and its linguistic metaphorical expression, metaphoric concepts are represented graphically by SMALL CAPITALS.

(2008: p. 46) point out, the role of ‘primary metaphors’ proposed by Grady (1997a). According to Grady’s primary metaphor hypothesis, there are two kinds of metaphors; primary metaphor and compound metaphor. The former is very much foundational, which mainly consists of what we directly experienced or perceived. The latter is therefore constructed by these primary metaphors. Considering a primary metaphor, AFFECTION IS WARMTH, Johnson (2008) explains, “Grady hypothesizes that this metaphor is based, not on similarities between warmth and affection, but rather on our experience, from infancy, of being held affectionately and feeling warmth” (p. 46). In the same way, Lakoff (2008) also explains that “just living an everyday life gives you the experience and suitable brain activations to give rise to a huge system of the same primary metaphorical mappings that are learned around the world without awareness” (p. 26). Grady (1997b) argues experiential correlations as a motivation for primary metaphors, and insists that “target concepts of primary metaphors refer to basic cognitive processes, and are typically no more sophisticated or distant from our direct experience than corresponding source concepts” (p. 86).

CMT is considered to be a mapping scheme between a source domain and a target domain. We can visualize CMT with two separate circles (A) and (B), as the symbols of (A) source and (B) target domains, which correspond. (See fig. 2-1.)

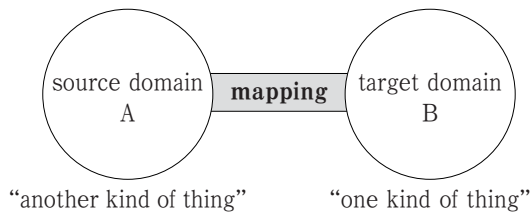


Fig. 2-1: two-domain mapping - illustrating the Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) essence of metaphor; “understanding ... one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5).

Müller (2008), illustrates this scheme in the triadic structure as follows:

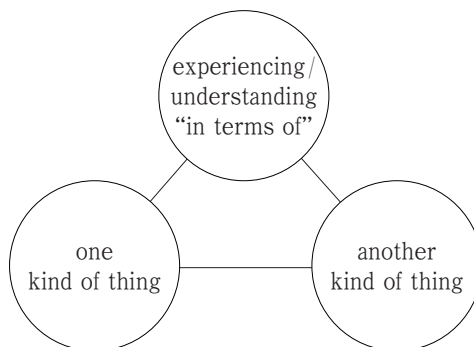


Fig. 2-2: triadic structure of CMT (Müller, 2008: p. 28)

Comparing these two figures, 2-1 and 2-2, classical CMT seems to be conducted not only with these original two domains, since there is one more ‘space’ that indicates the perception

of correlation between the original two domains; source and target. As Müller (2008) explains, “we need to distinguish between the systems perspective and the use perspective. On the level of the system, the third element is a verbal item; on the level of use, the third element is the cognitive process” (p. 30). It is assumed that the third element plays the part of organizer in the fundamental cognitive process.

While a simple mapping process is used to make sense of metaphors in CMT with two source and target domains, Blending Theory (BT) describes an instance of one or more neural bindings (Lakoff, 2008: p. 30). BT’s remarkable structural deviation from CMT can be characterized by looking at the four ‘mental spaces,’ which consist of: Input Space 1, Input Space 2, Generic Space, and Blend Space. (See fig. 2-3.)

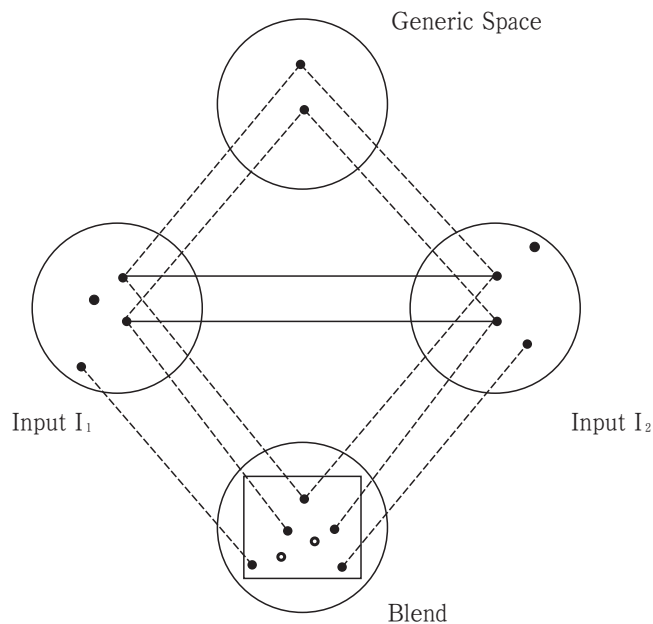


Fig. 2-3: “The Basic Diagram” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: p. 46)

Input Space 1 and Input Space 2 are often compared to the source and target domains in CMT. “The structure that inputs seem to share is captured in a generic space, which, in turn, maps onto each of the inputs” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: p. 47). Consequently, the structures in Input Space 1 and 2 will be projected to the blended space. This process, structured through these four mental spaces, “contrasts with the simple, unidirectional projection posited by CMT” (Grady et al., 1997: p. 103). Blending, therefore, is a “compression tool par excellence. Selective projection from different related spaces and integration in the blend provides an exceptionally strong process of compression” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: p. 114). Similarly, Grady et al. (1997) also describe the central differences between CMT & BT as follows:

Whereas CMT has been primarily concerned with identifying regular, conventional

patterns of metaphorical conceptualization, BT has often explicitly addressed itself to novel and unique examples which do not arise from entrenched cross-domain relationships. (p. 106)

This structural difference between CMT and BT may account for the different characteristics. While mapping processes are applied only to metaphor and metonymy, blending processes are applied widely to metaphor, metonymy, counterfactuals, irony, grammar, etc (Koller, 2004: p. 14).

### III. Business Speech and Metaphor Research

In the classical CMT era, “the late 1980s did not seem to have much to offer to the linguist in search of an understanding of the role of language in corporations. ... Researchers interested in business discourse in the 1990s were faced with the task of defining the field” (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007: p. 5). As for the metaphor research in business discourse, metaphor has not been much of an issue in Critical Discourse Analysis (Koller, 2004: p. 8), despite our assumption that metaphors can consciously be used to construct scientific reality (Goatly, 1997: p. 155). There has been a great deal of literature on metaphor research, and there have also been a considerable number of books on business communication research, such as Koller (2004), Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2007), and Putnam & Krone (2006). However, we have not seen many references published about business speeches. It seems, therefore, amenable to ‘define the field’ and attempt practical research of metaphor in business speeches.

Zelko & Dance (1965) long ago defined business as “any kind of gainful pursuit by any person or group of persons, regardless of size and numbers, for profit” (p. 25). This definition is universal, and still seems appropriate to any business today. Therefore, the term ‘business speech’ is naturally defined as public speaking in business. As business speech is a part of business acts for profit, we had better first consider these two aspects as the characteristics of business speeches; (1) its legal and social scheme, and (2) its rhetorical scheme.

First, let us consider the legal and social scheme of business speeches. Business speech has a legal aspect as a corporate speech that is, ideally, to be legitimate, under the freedom of ‘business’ speech. Since business is a social act which pursues profit in society, business speech can not stand alone without a legitimate relationship with society and especially with the applicable laws. Shiner (2003) analyzes the complexity of the legal definition of ‘commercial speech,’ explaining the jurisprudential characteristics of its definition and categorization (p. 6), but one thing is clearly understood. Under certain severe economic and/or political conditions, such as an energy crisis or economic inflation, business speeches have needed to be very sensitive to their messages to maintain the legitimacy of the corporations. For example, Mobil Oil has made an effort to consider symbolic meaning in a systematic manner (Kerr, 2005: p. 148); manipulating their language in order to consciously emphasize a certain aspect of the company’s image to meet the social requirement of the time. If a company fails to legitimize itself legally or morally in a society, it will never be supported commercially by the people in the same society. In business speech research, it should be considered that the literal and/or metaphoric language in business speeches is carefully constructed.

Second, let us examine the rhetorical scheme for business speeches. Tarver (1989) points out that business speech may perform three functions: maintenance, announcement, and manipulation (pp. 209-210). He explains that ‘manipulation’ means trying to get people to feel or think or act the way a speaker wants them to (p. 209). This implies an act of persuasion. This also indicates a role of metaphor application in business speeches. A year before the *Metaphors We Live By* was published, an article, “The hidden messages managers send,” was published in the *Harvard Business Review*. The author of the article, McCaskey (1979), suggested, “taken in context, words in metaphor can be clues to how another is feeling, to what he or she views as important” (p. 136). When we consider McCaskey’s idea together with the manipulation function in business speeches, we may understand that the mapping demonstrates the way in which something is understood in the CMT framework. This can be illustrated in the following three steps, with the assumption that metaphors indicate the intended way of perception and understanding by the speaker:

(1) People understand a certain thing (in a target domain) in terms of the expressions a speaker uses (in a source domain). (See Fig. 3-1)

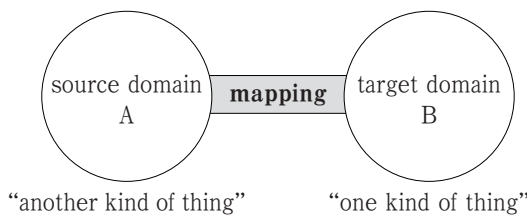


Fig. 3-1: Classical CMT framework of two-domain mapping

(2) The mapping, a static correspondence between two domains found in (1) above, becomes a parallel guide for the path that the audience will follow to capture the meaning in a passage. (See Fig. 3-2)

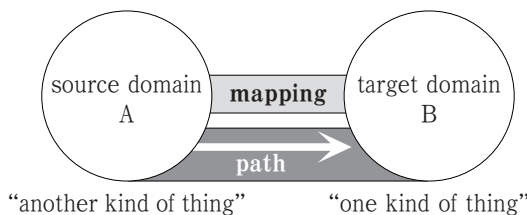


Fig. 3-2: Parallel path for audience to follow

(3) Conversely, in order to have a certain idea understood in a target domain, the speaker should discover and ‘create’ the appropriate metaphorical expressions in the source domain. This process yields the intended meaning in the target domain, while promoting audience’s understanding in the way that the speaker wants. Consequently, the meaning is perceived through the path, and this process repeats during the speech. This is a creative function of a source domain. (See Fig. 3-3)

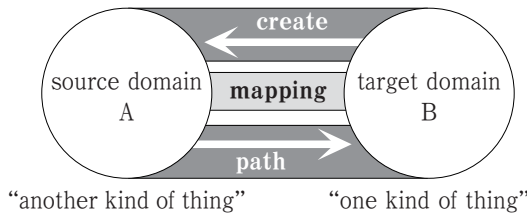


Fig. 3-3: Creative function of a source domain (Repeating process)

There is another aspect, which should be accounted for in business speech metaphor research. It is that, in most cases, a business speech is not a simple short discourse. It is composed of consecutive layers of metaphorical expressions. The current trend of corpus-based metaphor research, such as Charteris-Black (2004) and Stefanowitsch & Gries (2006), and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach for business discourse, such as Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris (1997) and Koller (2004), are truly important and inspiring resources for metaphor research in business discourse. However, if we take a closer look at the continuance of metaphorical expressions in a single business speech, it would seem that the variation and transformation of those metaphorical expressions within a speech should be emphasized. Also, the variation of the mental and cognitive ‘distance,’ between a source domain and a target domain through a certain speech, should be investigated as well.

#### IV. Experimental Elevation Model and Spiral Model Structure

In order to emphasize the continuous layers of metaphorical expressions applied in business speeches, here presented are two different types of experimental model structures—the elevation model and the spiral model—to be used for analyzing the metaphors.

The first one is an ‘elevation model.’ The straight horizontal line, stretched from left to right, shows the timeline and the content of a speech. Another line, resembling a line in a graph, moving up and down along the horizontal line, symbolizes the variation and the flow of the metaphorical expressions in the speech. The level of alienation indicates the ‘mental distance’ between a source domain and a target domain at a certain point of metaphor. When the expressions are literal, the elevation remains at zero. When the expressions are metaphorical, the elevation increases, away from the base line. (See Fig. 4-1)

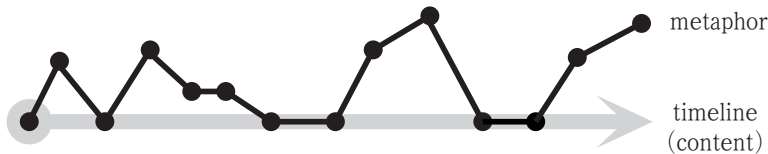


Fig. 4-1: Experimental ‘Elevation Model’

The concept shown here may not seem practical at this point, since there is no critical measure to scale the ‘mental distance’ between a source domain and a target domain. However, this elevation model can visualize the variation of the speaker’s viewpoint throughout a speech, and

it can also indicate a rough outline of the changes of the metaphorical expressions in the speech.

The other experimental model of metaphor analysis in business speeches is a ‘spiral model.’ In the spiral model, the illustration becomes three-dimensional. The core thread (content of a speech) pierces the model from top to bottom. Around the core thread, each metaphorical expression is mapped on a spiral line, from top to bottom. The distance between the core thread and the metaphor dot symbolizes the mental distance between a source domain and a target domain, as we have seen in the previous elevation model. Further, in the spiral model, horizontal location (right, left, forward, and backward) indicates the genre and the category of a certain metaphorical expression. Therefore, the spiral model structure can show the direction and depth of each metaphor, along the timeline of a speech. If the mental distance remains at the same level, it will resemble the following illustration. (See Fig. 4-2)

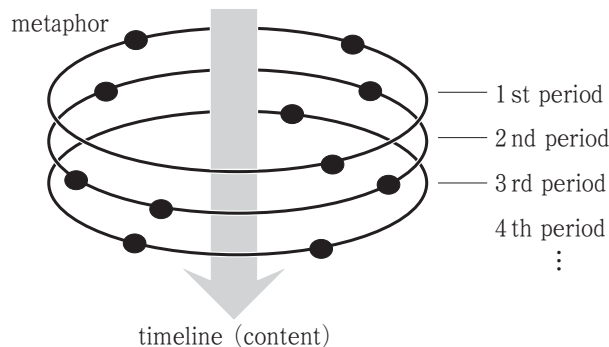


Fig. 4-2: Experimental ‘Spiral Model’

If the distance narrows toward the end of the speech, the line, which connects the dots, will resemble a V-shaped spinning top. If it widens toward the end, the shape will resemble an A-styled bell-bottom.

At this point, these two experimental models still require further development. Nevertheless, they can visually demonstrate the importance of analyzing metaphors in speeches, not as the independent discourse analysis, but as the continuous flow of metaphorical expressions, which together support a single core; the main content of a business speech.

## V. Conclusion

Business speeches are made to fulfill a company’s goals in a society. Metaphorical expressions are created, modified and controlled to manipulate the audience for the best desirable outcome. In analyzing those metaphorical expressions in business speeches, it should first be recognized that business speeches are not single, short, and independent discourse. Business speeches develop over a period of time, and therefore, the characteristics and tendency of metaphors in business speeches need to be analyzed in a way which describes the chronological change within a single speech.

In that regard, the classical Conceptual Metaphor Theory and a basic understanding of Blending Theory will help capture the flow of the metaphorical expressions in business



speeches. The two experimental models, proposed in chapter four, are starting points to help us do this. They can help visualize the changes of ‘mental distances’ between a source domain and a target domain, and between the metaphorical expressions and the literal meanings. Visualizing mental distance should relate to the “Best-Fit Systems” (Lakoff, 2008: pp. 23-24), and open a new perspective to business speech research henceforward.

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