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Metaphoric and metonymic thinking in college english reading instruction

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Abstract

The traditional model of college English reading instruction emphasizes exam-oriented reading comprehension skills and the deconstruction of complex sentence structures, while relatively neglecting the cognitive rationale behind the formation of vocabulary outlined in the syllabus and the appreciation of rhetorical expressions in texts. Using the first four units of *New Horizon College English* (3rd Edition, Volume 1) as examples, this study attempts to analyze words, sentences, and texts to demonstrate that metonymic and metaphoric thinking constitute common cognitive rationales for English vocabulary meaning. Additionally, metonymy and metaphor as rhetorical devices exist to enhance the expressive effect of language.

Keywords: Metaphor; Metonymy; College English; Reading Instruction

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the accelerated process of globalization and the deepening of international exchanges, college English, as a critical avenue for cultivating students' intercultural communication competence, has garnered significant attention for its instructional quality. However, the traditional model of college English reading instruction predominantly emphasizes exam-oriented approaches, focusing on students' mastery of grammatical rules and exam techniques, while neglecting the deeper cultural connotations and cognitive mechanisms underlying the language. Although this teaching model can improve students' test performance in the short term, it fails to effectively enhance their comprehensive language application skills. This is particularly evident in higher-order competencies such as reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and discourse analysis.

In response to these shortcomings, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of integrating cognitive linguistics theories into college English instruction, particularly the roles of metaphoric and metonymic thinking in language learning. Metaphor and metonymy are not merely rhetorical devices; they are essential tools for human cognition and meaning construction. In teaching practice, guiding students to deeply understand the cognitive rationales of metaphor and metonymy can not only improve vocabulary learning efficiency but also enhance their close reading skills. This approach helps students progress from understanding vocabulary to comprehending the overall meaning of discourse. Through such instructional methods, students can subtly perceive the imagery and cultural connotations of language, achieving a comprehensive improvement from exam skills to language proficiency (Wang, 2023). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the specific applications of metaphor and metonymy in college English reading instruction, based on these theoretical foundations. By analyzing vocabulary, sentences, and texts, this study seeks to provide a reference for teaching reforms in this area.

The key to improving scores in the CET-4 and CET-6 writing and translation exams lies in the concise, precise, and effective use of language. For example:

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- **Example 1:** Original sentence: The bicycle is important for us. Revised sentence: The bicycle is like the air, water and sunshine and cannot be parted with a moment in our life.. This transformation uses a simple simile combined with hyperbolic rhetoric.
- **Example 2:** A great misfortune **crept over** the whole village. The verb "crept", which typically describes stealthy movements by humans or animals, conveys a sense of personification, vividly illustrating how misfortune enveloped the village.

In translation instruction, it is often emphasized that English is a dynamic and pictorial language. Consider the following examples:

- **Example 3:** Dubai feels the financial pain. (Personification)
- **Example 4:** To fuel economic growth. (Grammatical metonymy: noun-to-verb transformation)
- **Example 5:** And we need to up our economic gain. (Grammatical metonymy: preposition-to-verb transformation)
- **Example 6:** To fine someone for speeding. (Scalar metonymy in referential metonymy for concise expression)

These examples demonstrate that the essence of English's livelier and more concise expressions lies in the flexible use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating the accumulation of such expressions by intentionally interpreting and guiding students in university English classes.

Pan and Sun (2017) argue that metaphor and metonymy function as mechanisms for generating linguistic meaning, evident across lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. Cultivating students' ability to identify and deliberately imitate metaphoric and metonymic expressions in teaching can help second-language learners gain a deeper understanding and produce authentic target language.

2. Definitions and Common Classifications of Metaphor and Metonymy

The primary function of metaphor is to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. Metaphor leverages the associations triggered by tangible objects in human cognition, using familiar and concrete concepts to express relatively unfamiliar and abstract ones. In daily life, people often comprehend, think about, and address unfamiliar, intangible, or hard-to-define concepts by referring to the tangible, concrete, and well-known ones (Lakoff, 1987, p. 77).

In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff categorizes metaphors into three main types: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Ontological metaphors, in particular, can be further subdivided into entity and substance metaphors, container metaphors, and personification.

Metonymy, on the other hand, is a means of expressing one concept through another related concept. Metonymy operates across linguistic levels, including words, sentences, and texts (Shu, 2024). According to Radden and Kövecses (1999, p. 21), metonymy involves cognitive processes and thinking patterns where easily perceived, recognizable, understandable, and memorable parts or features of an entity are used to activate cognition of the entire entity or other parts of it.

Dong (2004) identified 13 categories of metonymy:

- Synecdoche: A part representing the whole.
- Scalar Metonymy: A scale is composed of scalar units. The scale as a whole can represent its upper limit, and the upper limit can represent the entire scale.
- Constitution Metonymy: The whole object is composed of material. The object can represent the material, and the material can represent the object.
- Event Metonymy: An event occurring over a period is generally composed of simultaneous or sequential sub-events. Sub-events can represent the entire event.
- Metonymy Between Categories and Their Members: Mutual reference between a category and its members.
- Metonymy Between Categories and Their Features: Mutual reference between a category and its characteristics.
- Instrument Metonymy: Tools representing tool users.
- Causal Metonymy: Causes often represent effects, and effects can also represent the entities or objects producing them.
- Production Metonymy: Producers standing for their products.

- Control Metonymy: Controllers and controlled entities mutually representing each other.
- Possession Metonymy: A relationship between a possessor and a possessee, where either can represent the other.
- Containment Metonymy: The relationship between a container and its contents, where either can represent the other.
- Location Metonymy: Locations standing for associated people, events, or institutions.

This general cognitive process of metonymy is reflected in grammar as grammatical metonymy (Shen, 1999, p. 4). It primarily manifests in the use of nouns as verbs or verbs as nouns, such as *to author a book* or *He hammered the nail into the wall*. Ruiz de Mendoza and Pena (2008) define grammatical metonymy as: *a form of generic or high-level metonymy that has consequences in terms of morphological and/or syntactic structure*.

3. Application of Metonymic and Metaphoric Cognitive Rationales in Teaching High-Frequency CET-4 Vocabulary

Compared to arbitrary knowledge, knowledge with cognitive rationale is easier to memorize (Lakoff, 1987, p. 346). In daily classroom instruction, analyzing the metonymic and metaphoric cognitive rationales behind certain target words enables students to better understand and memorize them, aiding in the accurate and effective use of vocabulary in writing. For instance, consider the explanation of new vocabulary words such as *tender*, *amazing*, *laptop*, and *compensate* in the textbook.

- **Example 7:** In the word choice exercise for Unit 4: He spoke tender words of sympathy until medical people arrived.

The word *tender* is a high-frequency choice in CET-4. To facilitate learning, begin by referencing the familiar word *tent* and its root *tend* = stretch. For example, when instructing students to focus in class, one might say, *pay attention to*. The external action of stretching the neck metaphorically indicates a highly focused mental state, a metonymic association (Gao, 2013, p. 24). Following the principle of consonant interchange, *tend* = *tend*. By adding the noun suffix *-er*, *tender* originally referred to something stretched, such as the slender shoots of a plant, which are characterized by their extension.

Subsequently, the tactile sensation of a tender shoot is mapped to auditory sensation, describing soft and gentle words. Wang and Xu (2002) categorize this term as belonging to synesthetic metaphors based on metonymy, where concepts from one sensory domain (touch) express those of another (sound).

Simplified Cognitive Rationale: Root *tend* = *tent* = stretch → *tender* (metonymy) → soft words (synesthesia).

- **Example 8:** From the last paragraph of Unit 3, Text A: The anywhere-anytime access has already yielded amazing benefits in education.

Both *amazing* and *astounding* express surprise, but it is essential to help students grasp their opposing emotional connotations for accurate application in writing. The root of *amaze* is derived from *Muse* (the goddesses of the arts, music, and literature), as seen in the familiar word *music*. Through vowel interchange, *muse* → *maze*, conveying astonishment mixed with admiration and delight. In contrast, the root of *astonish* lies in *stone*, originating from the myth of *Medusa*, the snake-haired Gorgon. In the myth, any man who looked into her eyes was instantly turned to stone. Therefore, *astonish* specifically describes the state of being stunned by an incredible and unexpected event.

These two words exemplify etymological metonymy derived from classical myths (Shu, 2008, p. 187).

- **Example 9:** From the first paragraph of Unit 3, Text A: The word laptop refers to a portable computer. The instructor can raise their right leg slightly and pat the front of their right thigh twice to indicate the lap area, explaining that people often place laptops on their laps. The word formation of *laptop* is thus a location-based metonymy.
- **Example 10:** From Unit 3, Text A, paragraphs 6 and 8: They are becoming indispensable. To compensate, it spent tens of thousands of dollars to give a free Apple iPad.

In ancient Rome, monetary transactions involved weighing gold or silver, with the action of hanging items for weighing denoted by pend or pens (to hang, to weigh). This typical action came to represent the event of payment, a form of event-based metonymy. For instance:

- *Depend on*: signifies reliance on monetary support from others.
- *Expensive*: implies money being paid out.
- *Indispensable*: indicates an inability to distribute money freely.
- *Compensate*: refers to paying reparations.
- *Pension*: denotes retirement payments.

4. Rhetorical Effects of Metaphor and Metonymy

The themes of the first four units in *New Horizon College English* (3rd Edition, Volume 1) are diverse and representative of different genres. Unit 1 features a president's welcome speech, exemplifying the speech genre. Unit 2 narrates a mother's emotional journey from anger to understanding her 18-year-old daughter's rebellion as she ventures into independence. Unit 3 presents a news report on the digitalization of college campuses, while Unit 4 explores the definition of a hero, serving as a classic argumentative essay.

4.1. Metaphoric Rhetoric

Metaphoric projection often maps from the concrete to the abstract, enabling people to understand complex phenomena through intuitive and tangible perspectives (Gao, 2013, p. 8).

- **Example 11:** From Unit 1, Text A, paragraph 6: *You may be an early bird while your roommate is a night owl!* Here, humans and birds belong to different categories. The behavioral traits of birds are metaphorically used to describe human habits. This expression is more vivid and engaging than a direct statement like, *You wake up early, but your roommate sleeps late.*
- **Example 12:** From Unit 1, Text B, paragraph 6: *College is the time when you have the first taste of independence.* Independence during college is metaphorically compared to food that can be tasted, an example of ontological metaphor.
- **Example 13:** From Unit 2, Text B, paragraph 23: *Some days, time flies with joy all around. Other days, time rots like old fish.* In this sentence, *time flies* serves as an ontological metaphor, while *time rots like old fish* is a simile. The contrast vividly captures the fleeting nature of joyful moments and the stagnancy of unpleasant times.
- **Example 14:** From Unit 3, Text A, paragraph 1: *The college campus transformed into a new age of electronics by a fleet of laptops, smartphones and connectivity 24 hours a day.* The word *fleet*, typically referring to a group of ships or vehicles, metaphorically describes the combination of laptops, smartphones, and constant connectivity. This metaphor adds vibrancy and conveys a sense of grandeur, praising the technological transformation of college campuses.
- **Example 15:** From Unit 3, Text A, paragraph 10: *Other colleges are straining to stand out from their peers.* The predicate verb *straining* metaphorically likens the intense competition among colleges to a taut band, vividly illustrating their effort to outshine one another.
- **Example 16:** From Unit 3, Text B, paragraph 2: *Internet access has given rise to a new kind of social epidemic, Internet addiction.* Here, *Internet addiction* is metaphorically compared to a *social epidemic*, conveying the widespread and uncontrollable nature of the problem. In paragraph 7: *-endorphins do nothing but keep people hooked to their computers.* The verb *hooked*, originally referring to a fish being caught by a hook, is used metaphorically to describe individuals ensnared by Internet addiction.
- **Example 17:** From Unit 4, Text A, paragraph 5: *The rain had swelled the river into a raging monster.* The river is metaphorically compared to a *raging monster*, vividly describing the uncontrollable and destructive power of the floodwaters.
- **Example 18:** From Unit 1, Text A, paragraph 7: *We have confidence that your journey toward self-discovery will yield more than personal advancement.* From paragraph 8 (final paragraph): *We take great pleasure in opening the door to this great step in your journey.* Both sentences embody the structural metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*, where the structural aspects of the source domain (journey) systematically map onto the target domain (life). In the first sentence, students' entry into college is metaphorically described as a stage of self-discovery in their life journey. The second sentence compares university professors' teaching roles to opening the doors to this grand academic journey. Additionally, the phrase conveys the structural metaphor *UNIVERSITY IS A PALACE*, likening the university to a grand hall of learning.

- **Example 19:** From Unit 1, Text B, paragraph 4: When advising against a purely utilitarian approach to selecting courses, a father says: *---when you are in college, your passion will create many dots, and later in your life you will connect them. Enjoy picking your “dots”. One day, you will find your own meaningful career, and you will connect a beautiful curve through those dots.* Here, *dots* metonymically represent the courses students select. This is an instance of metonymy grounded in metaphor, as the father compares each course to a dot, which, when connected later in life, forms a meaningful *career curve*. This metaphor beautifully illustrates how seemingly isolated decisions contribute to a cohesive life path.

4.2. Metonymic Rhetoric

Metonymic projection also involves mapping concrete imagery onto abstract emotions. The cognitive mechanism of metonymy operates by using central and highly salient entities as cognitive reference points to evoke less prominent ones. The conceptual reference point is "salient", while the related concept it evokes is "hidden". Metonymic language thus possesses an implicit quality (Gao, 2013, p. 9).

- **Example 20:** From Unit 1, Text A, paragraph 3: *--- and your parents may have cried tears of joy to be finally finished with doing your laundry!* The task of doing laundry for their children is one of the most typical traits of parental dependency before adulthood. Here, the act of parents doing laundry metonymically refers to the stage of life where students depended heavily on their parents before college. The underlying message from the college president is that as students enter university, their parents will step back, and they must learn to think independently and make responsible choices for their futures.
- **Example 21:** Similarly, in Unit 2, Text A, paragraph 11: *Once she starts feeding coins into laundry machines, she'll appreciate the years of clean clothes I've provided for free.* In the U.S., using communal washing machines and dryers in apartments typically costs \$2 per use for each. The act of inserting coins into laundry machines metonymically represents the challenges of independent living, where everything, even laundry, comes with a financial cost.
- **Example 22:** From Unit 3, Text B: In paragraph 2: *I try to help him up*, and in paragraph 12: *hours up the slope*. Here, the preposition *up* takes on the role of a verb, demonstrating grammatical metonymy where a preposition shifts into a verb's grammatical function.
- **Example 23:** From Unit 3, Text A, paragraph 3: *Colleges began embracing Internet access in the mid-1990s.* The external action *embrace* metonymically refers to the internal acceptance or welcome of Internet access, vividly illustrating colleges' enthusiastic adoption of digitalization.

4.3. Interaction Between Metaphor and Metonymy

Metaphor and metonymy sometimes coexist within the same linguistic expression, much like two sides of the same coin (Zhang & Lu, 2010, p. 46).

- **Example 24:** From Unit 1, Text A, first sentence: *You are about to participate in the next leg of your journey through life.* This sentence exhibits a metaphor containing metonymy, encapsulating the structural metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*. The phrase *leg*, a salient feature of traveling, metonymically represents a segment of the journey.
- **Example 25:** From Unit 4, Text A, paragraph 3: *He immediately fell on top of his wife to shield her from the hail of bullets.* The noun *shield* is used as a verb in a grammatical metonymy, vividly evoking the act of protection. Additionally, the phrase *hail of bullets* draws a metaphorical comparison between the density of bullets and hail. Here, *hail* serves as a metonymy to represent a barrage of bullets, demonstrating a metaphor grounded in metonymy.

5. Analysis of Emotional Shifts in Texts From the Perspective of Metaphor and Metonymy

Li Ke (2013) suggests that guiding students to identify, interpret, and evaluate metonymic phenomena in texts during reading can enhance their ability to understand texts on both micro and macro levels. Li Huichao (2019) highlights that rhetorical metonymy emphasizes the experiential and defamiliarizing effects of language expression, thereby increasing the complexity of linguistic forms and the difficulty of comprehension.

The structure of Unit 2, Text A is a blend of narration and argumentation. It delicately narrates a mother's emotional journey from rejection to understanding as her rebellious teenage daughter leaves home to explore independent living.

5.1. Title Analysis

A child's clutter awaits an adult's return. The title features subject-verb incongruity, creating a defamiliarizing effect. This requires inference based on the text's metaphorical and metonymic expressions to deconstruct its meaning.

5.2. Paragraph Analysis

- **Paragraph 1:** *I watch her back her new truck out of the driveway. The vehicle is too large, too expensive. ---She bought it to show me that she could.* The truck serves as a metonymic representation of independence. The daughter's action of backing out of the driveway further highlights her transition from reliance to independence.
- **Paragraph 2:** *"I'm 18," she'd told me so often that my teeth ached. "I am an adult!"* The daughter's repeated assertion of adulthood symbolizes her desire for autonomy. The phrase *my teeth ached* metaphorically reflects the mother's emotional strain and frustration as she processes her daughter's declarations.
- **Paragraph 3:** *"I thought, is that true? Just yesterday you watched some cartoons. What changed between yesterday and today?"* The first paragraph presents the mother's observations, while the second explains her frustration. Here, the mother's *teeth aching* metaphorically reflects her emotional irritation, while the cause of this irritation is her daughter's rebellious behavior and defiance. Watching cartoons, a stereotypical trait of childhood, is used metonymically to suggest immaturity. This juxtaposition highlights the mother's skepticism about her daughter's claim to adulthood. In just a few lines, the tension between mother and daughter is vividly portrayed, setting the stage for the emotional evolution of the story. As Lakoff noted, *"Metonymy is not merely a tool of reference; it can also aid comprehension."*
- **Paragraph 5:** *"I bring a box of big black garbage bags upstairs. --- all go into the trash. I dump drawers, sweep shelves clear and clean the sink. —It is as neat and impersonal as a hotel bathroom".* The mother's actions reflect her emotions, exemplifying metonymy (Gao, 2013, p. 24). The string of verbs—*dump, sweep, clean*—concretizes the thoroughness of her cleaning, symbolizing the lingering anger and feelings of rejection caused by her daughter leaving.
- **Paragraph 8:** *"I am a plague of locusts emptying the closet".* The metaphor compares the mother's actions to a swarm of locusts, vividly illustrating her resolve to clear out every trace of her daughter's presence. The metaphor encapsulates the mother's anger and determination to emotionally detach, as she perceives her daughter as having abandoned her. The imagery underscores the emotional depth of the conflict.
- **Paragraphs 13-14:** The turning point occurs when the mother finds a large envelope hidden under the bed, labeled *"do not throw away"*. Inside are mementos carefully collected by her daughter, such as family photos, letters, holiday cards, and clippings. These items symbolize the daughter's attachment to her family, even as she outwardly asserts her independence. The envelope reveals her awareness of her mother's temperament and her preemptive effort to preserve her treasured possessions.
- **Paragraph 15:** *"My kid—my clutter bug—knows me too well".* The term *bug*, meaning "little pest", is a metaphor used affectionately here to describe her daughter as a "little troublemaker". The phrase *clutter bug* metonymically refers to her daughter's habit of collecting mementos, linking back to the envelope. This shift in tone indicates that the mother is beginning to forgive her daughter. Her reflections—*"maybe the truck wasn't such a bad idea. Maybe it helps her to feel less small in a big world"*—signal her growing understanding and empathy.
- **Paragraphs 17-18:** *"My husband comes home and calls up the stairs. 'Just straightening up,' I tell him. 'Can you find some boxes for her stuff?'"* The mother's choice of *straighten up* rather than *clear up* reflects a softened attitude. The substitution of *boxes* for *garbage bags* symbolizes her acceptance that her daughter is only temporarily gone and will return. The mother's emotional shift is evident as she reconciles with her daughter's independence.

5.3. Title Analysis

The title *A child's clutter awaits an adult's return* features a subject-verb mismatch that creates a defamiliarizing effect, encouraging deeper interpretation. The metonymic implications of the title are multifaceted: *A child's clutter* refers to cherished mementos from the daughter's childhood, symbolizing the parents' love and care. Additionally, the *clutter* represents the family home, metonymically tied to the parents who maintain it as a warm and welcoming space. It also embodies the past—memories of the daughter's childhood—while *an adult's return* signifies the future, when the daughter, now grown, reconnects with her family. The verb *await* differs from *wait* by suggesting expectation and hope, reflecting the parents' patient love and faith that their daughter will return. As Xu (1989) notes, *await* functions as a predicate metaphor, capturing the parents' anticipation and unwavering support as their daughter transitions into adulthood.

6. Conclusion

Traditional college English teaching models are exam-focused, emphasizing training in text organization, deconstruction of complex sentence structures, and the explanation and memorization of common phrases. While this approach can enhance students' reading speed and test-taking skills in the short term, its limitations lie in the inadequate depth of students' understanding and mastery of language. This model neglects the integration of cultural context and the rhetorical and cognitive functions of language, leaving students with limited ability to explore deeper meanings of texts and insensitivity to rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy. Consequently, this exam-centric approach confines students' learning to surface-level knowledge, hindering their ability to uncover the rhetorical strategies and deeper intentions of authors, thereby impeding the comprehensive development of their language skills.

Metaphor and metonymy are vital tools for linguistic expression and cognition. Their core function is to facilitate understanding of abstract concepts through vivid and concrete associations. In vocabulary instruction, if teachers can employ the cognitive rationales of metaphor and metonymy to systematically explain the word formation logic and semantic origins of high-frequency CET-4 and CET-6 vocabulary, students can significantly improve their memory efficiency and use vocabulary more accurately in practice. This approach transcends the limitations of traditional vocabulary teaching methods, which rely on isolated memorization and mechanical exercises, by integrating vocabulary learning with linguistic cognition and cultural understanding. Such instruction enhances students' flexibility and depth in vocabulary usage, fostering a deeper comprehension of the cultural connotations and origins of words. It also equips students with the ability to use language effectively in diverse contexts.

At the sentence and discourse levels, the rhetorical effects of metaphor and metonymy are particularly prominent. Guiding students to identify metaphoric and metonymic expressions in texts and analyze their semantic implications and functional roles can significantly deepen their understanding of the text's emotional tone and logical structure. For example, using metaphor as an entry point can enhance students' sensitivity to literary language, helping them to discern the themes and main ideas of texts through rhetorical phenomena. Meanwhile, the concreteness and implicitness of metonymy strengthen textual coherence and add layers to emotional expression. This teaching approach fosters students' comprehensive understanding of language, from form to semantic depth, enabling them to think critically during reading and demonstrate stronger logical reasoning and expressiveness in discourse analysis and writing.

In summary, incorporating cognitive analysis of metaphor and metonymy into college English instruction addresses the shortcomings of traditional models that prioritize skills over substance. It offers students a more holistic and systematic path to language learning. Practice has shown that systematic instruction in metaphor and metonymy enables students to move beyond fragmented knowledge accumulation toward a comprehensive grasp of the inner logic and pragmatic functions of language. This teaching method not only significantly enhances students' reading comprehension and writing skills but also plays a critical role in developing their critical thinking and intercultural communication abilities. By mastering the connotations of language and flexibly employing rhetorical techniques, students are better equipped to meet future learning and professional challenges, laying a solid foundation for their career development and global engagement.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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