

On the Motivations of Conceptual Metaphors: Comparing Arabic and English

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Abstract

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later elaborated by others (e.g. Grady et al 1996; Lakoff & Kövecses 1987) provides a useful framework for describing metaphor in human language and cognition. Employing this framework, this article analyzes the emergence motivations for a number of conceptual metaphors in Arabic and English. Then, when they emerge, why do they seem to be crosslinguistically similar at times and different at others. According to some sources (e.g. Kövecses 2002) metaphors are either motivated physically (including biologically and physiologically), perceptually, culturally, or from image-schematic metaphors. The sources also maintain that metaphors are motivated by three major categories: correlations in experience, perceived resemblance, and the GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC metaphor (Lakoff & Turner 1989; Grady 1999). In this article an attempt is made to distinguish and classify these different types of motivations, with the former category termed as “emergence motivations” and the latter category as “relational motivations”. Further, the article aims to give a sense of the universality as well as the specificity of metaphors crosslinguistically based on these different types of experiential motivations, taking English and Arabic as a case in point.

Keywords: cognitive linguistic; conceptual metaphor; crosslinguistic; experiential motivation; image-schema

I. Introduction

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later elaborated by others (e.g. Grady et al 1996; Lakoff & Kövecses 1987) provides a useful framework for describing metaphor in human language and cognition. Employing this framework, this article analyzes the emergence motivations for a number of conceptual metaphors in Arabic and English. Then, when they emerge, why do they seem to be crosslinguistically similar at times and different at others?

According to some sources (e.g., Kövecses 2002) metaphors are either motivated physically (including biologically and physiologically), perceptually, culturally, or from image-schematic metaphors. The sources also maintain that metaphors are motivated by three major categories: correlations in experience, perceived resemblance, and the GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC metaphor (Lakoff & Turner 1989; Grady 1999). In this article an attempt is made to distinguish and classify these different types of motivations, with the former category termed as “emergence motivations” and the latter category as “relational motivations”. Further, the article aims to give a sense of the universality as well as the specificity of metaphors crosslinguistically based on these different types of experiential motivations, taking English and Arabic as a case in point.

II. Background

One core claim of CMT is that metaphor is in essence experientially motivated. According to the cognitive-linguistic view of metaphor, all metaphors are motivated experientially, or they have experiential bases.

Metaphors may either be conventional or unconventional. Conceptual Metaphor theory rejects the notion of metaphor as being just a linguistic ornament and a poetic device that is the sole property of literary and rhetorical discourse. Metaphor is so pervasive in our lives and a considerable amount of our daily everyday discourse is actually metaphorical, whether we know it or not. Metaphors in this view are said to be conventional because they are so conventionalized in our daily discourse that people almost never think of them as being metaphors. Examples would be utterances like *give me a hand*, *he passed the exams*, and *his answer is close to my answer*.

Surprisingly, even most poetic metaphors are conventional because they make use of the same source and target cognitive domains which are employed in conventional language but they extend them, elaborate on them, or phrase them in novel ways, novel in the sense that they might employ some flowery linguistic devices while retaining the basic conceptual metaphors that are readily available in conventional language (Lakoff 1993; Lakoff & Turner 1989; Turner 1987).

That is not to say that unconventional conceptual metaphors do not exist, but that they exist in extremely limited ways, and when they do exist, they need more cognitive processing effort because they would not dovetail nicely with the conventional conceptual metaphors available in the conceptual systems of speakers of a given language. These unconventional metaphors are usually one-shot image metaphors.

Based on their cognitive functions, metaphors are of three types (Kövecses 2002): structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Structural metaphors provide elaborate mappings between the source and target domains; they are rich in knowledge.

The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, for instance, maps a great deal of knowledge between the concept of journey and that of life. Such conceptual correspondences consist in that both concepts have destinations, both have beginnings, both have obstacles in the way, both involve investment of time, and so on.

The detailed mapped knowledge that exists in structural metaphors above is not present in ontological metaphors. Ontological metaphors merely help human beings talk about their experiences in a concrete way; they help them identify, refer to, and quantify nonphysical aspects of their experiences, as in *friendship is based on trust*, and *this would give you courage*.

Oriental metaphors on their part are just coherence metaphors which help us make sense of concepts in a coherent way based on our image-schematic knowledge of the world, like MORE IS UP, HAPPY IS UP, PAST IS BEHIND, FUTURE IS FRONT, and so on. That is, we evaluate our concepts using the image-schematic knowledge that we acquire from our interactive experiences in the world. These evaluations are based on primary orientational concepts of UP and DOWN, FRONT and BEHIND, CENTRAL and PERIPHERAL, IN and OUT, and the like.

Perhaps the most explicit pronouncements on the assumptions of CMT, especially with regard to the nature of metaphor, are those found in Steen (2002b: 389-390):

- Meaning is grounded in experiential knowledge.
- Literal meaning is direct, concrete meaning; metaphorical meaning is indirect abstract meaning.
- Metaphor is primarily a matter of conceptual structure, and derivatively a matter of language.
- Metaphor is a set of correspondences between two concepts in two different knowledge domains.
- Metaphor may be conventional, systematic, and familiar, or may not be.
- Metaphor, whether conventional or not, may be deliberate or "emergent".
- Metaphor may be signaled as such, or not.
- Metaphor may be expressed at various levels of linguistic organization and in various rhetorical forms.

III. Motivations

Motivations for conceptual metaphors may be divided into two main categories: emergence motivations and relational motivations.

1. Emergence motivations

Emergence motivations depict how conceptual metaphors emerge from the human experience at large, and they are (Kövecses 2002):

a) *Bodily (physiological and biological) Motivation*

These metaphors are motivated by human physiological and biological processes associated with particular states, such as anger and happiness. For example, anger is sometimes conceived of as a pressurized liquid in a container. Consider the following:

1. *He is just blowing off some steam* (Lakoff 1980).
2. *You make my blood boil* (Lakoff 1980).
3. *Fawwar-t damm-i* (Maalej 2004).
Boiled-you blood-my

You made me extremely angry.

The above examples are linguistic manifestations of the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Lakoff 2003 [1980]). Here, the human body is compared to a container and the heat inside the human body associated with the state of anger is compared to the pressurized liquid in the container. These examples are instances of metaphors that are motivated by correlations in experience. Prototypically, when someone is angry their body heat increases. These two concepts are distinct and are by no means similar but they go hand in hand in the experience of anger.

Although correlations in experience account for a great deal of conceptual metaphors, it is not always the case that two languages will have the same metaphors just by virtue of having the same experiential bases. The anger metaphors above present a case in which Arabic and English converge in this respect. However, the two languages do have different preferences as to which experiential correlations each language will employ to conceive of less concrete or more abstract concepts. The conceptual target domain of IDLE TALK is a case in point. In the two languages there are many expressions that are used to refer to this domain, for example:

4. *They sat for a long time **chewing the fat**.*
5. *ǧalas tʷuul al-laail yetʷegg hanak.*
Sat (he) long the-night (he) hit “tap” palate

He sat all night long hitting “tapping” the palate.

He sat all night long talking idly.

We can see above that there are two conceptualizations of IDLE TALK. In the first example we have IDLE TALK IS CHEWING FAT, whereas in the second example which comes from my own Najdi dialect in Saudi Arabia, it is IDLE TALK IS TAPPING PALATE. In each conceptual metaphor we have two distinct concepts that are correlated in experience. In (4) chewing the fat usually correlates with idle talk; when two people chew the fat they do not just do that silently but they engage in aimless talk in the meanwhile. There are many theories as to the origin of this English idiom that are irrelevant to our discussion here; what concerns us here is that the distinct concept of chewing the fat experientially accompanies the distinct concept of idle talk. As for the

Arabic example, no talk can occur without the palate being tapped by the tongue. So these are naturally correlated events in the experience of talking as described here. The question is why the source domain of PALATE-TAPPING is utilized to understand the target domain of IDLE TALK when we know that tapping the palate also occurs in purposeful talk. I think that in purposeful talk there are other important things that overshadow the mere palate-tapping, such as the communication of ideas, the attempt to reach a fruitful end-result of a discussion, and so on. In idle talk, however, nothing of importance can be thought of as accompanying this kind of talk other than palate-tapping for which reason it is utilized to highlight this aspect of talk, the idleness.

b) Perceptual Motivation

Many metaphors are motivated by the human perceptual senses when human beings perceive objects around them. The metaphor MORE IS UP is motivated by the perceptual correlations in the experience of piling up something and its increase in quantity; whenever something is piled up it must increase. Thus, QUANTITY is generally correlated with VERTICALITY (Lakoff 1993). Consider:

6. Prices soared.

Figure 1 below illustrates how the correlation metaphor QUANTITY IS VERTICALITY works, with the arrow representing the relationship between the two concepts:

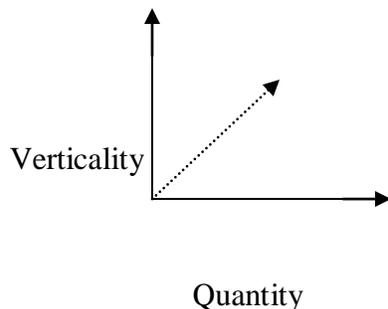


Figure 1. Correlation of quantity vs. verticality

Human beings have the same perceptual senses; yet, environmental settings, terrain, or particular type of weather that they experience might motivate the emergence of particular conceptual metaphors. Consider:

7. In a *flurry* of public comments in the past month, Russian officials have acknowledged that Russia is delaying the delivery of fuel to the reactor in the port city of Bushehr (Sciolino 2007).

8. After a quiet spell, there was a sudden *flurry* of phone calls (LDCE).

9. *Reporters wanted to ferret out the details of the story.*

From examples (7, 8) we can derive the conceptual metaphor INTENSIVE ACTIVITIES ARE FLURRIES. Such a metaphor will not be a good candidate for emerging in the Arabian Peninsula since there is no experiential basis for it; the Arabic-speaking people in that region almost never experience snow flurries. By the same token, in (9) the ferret, which is an animal that does not exist in the Arabian terrains, it is inconceivable that such a metaphor would emerge directly from the physical environment of the Arabic-speaking people. On the other hand, the following metaphor would be least conceivable in an English-speaking environment:

10. *Laa ta-truk al-habl ʕala al-yaarib fa tandam.*
Don't you-leave the-rope "leash" on the-hump then (you) regret

Don't leave the rope on the hump then you regret.

Don't leave (things or people) run their own course without supervising otherwise you will regret.

This is a standard Arabic metaphor in which the source domain of the camel left on its own by putting the leash on its hump as a signal for it to go wherever it likes is mapped to the target domain of people or things left to their own whims or desires. This expression has a derogatory tone. This is a case of the GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC metaphor through which a specific source concept is mapped onto an indefinitely large number of parallel specific target concepts which all have the same generic-schematic structure as the specific source concept's. Idioms and proverbs are typical examples of this type of metaphor. Figure 2 below represents the relationship among concepts in this metaphor with the arrows indicating mapping from the source to the target:

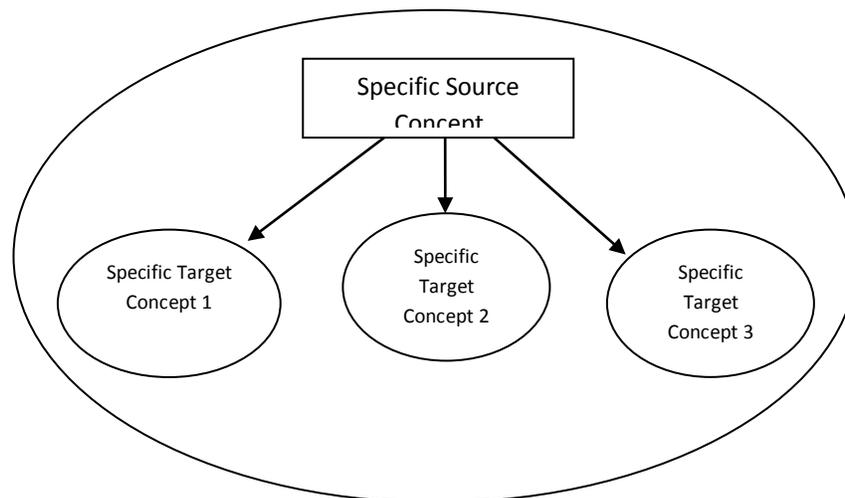


Figure 2. Mappings between specific source and target concepts

Such a metaphor is a least candidate for emerging in an English-speaking setting because such a setting would lack the experiential basis for it. Even if translated into English, it would require unconventional cognitive effort to process, and might even be processed incorrectly since the English-speaking people lack the image-schemata that evolve from experiencing camels and the ways by which they are handled.

c) *Cultural Motivation*

Metaphors of cultural motivation are primarily reflections of the unique culture of each speech community, culture understood broadly. For example, consider the American English metaphor *Monday morning quarter-backing* meaning giving advice in hindsight when it is too late; this is again an instance of the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor that is culturally motivated since it reflects the sports culture in the US. In Arabic there is a very productive conceptual metaphor that is culturally motivated, principally by the Quran. That is PREACHING IS REMINDING which is manifested in examples such as the following:

11. *Ath-thekraa tanfaʿu al-muʿmineen* (Quran 51:55).

Reminding benefit the-believers

Preaching is beneficial to the believers.

12. *Qaala ʿanna-hu yaḏjibu ʿan nu-thakker ʿan-naas bi-Allah.*
said (he) that-it must that we-remind the-people INST-God

He said that we must preach God to people.

The above illustrates how each language culture can induce its own cultural metaphors that are reflective of the experiences of its speech communities.

d) *Image-schema metaphor*

There is a great deal of conceptual metaphors that are not derived directly from experience but indirectly via image-schematic metaphors which have direct experiential bases reflecting the ways we human beings experience the world around us. These experiences constitute image-schemata in our conceptual systems. From such experiences we know what it is like to be *in* something and *outside* of it, *behind* it and *in front of* it, *central* and *peripheral* to it, and so on. Such conceptual metaphors are not usually rich in knowledge, that is, there is not much knowledge mapped from the source domain to the target domain because the source domain itself is schematic and lacks detailed knowledge. For example, there is the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE CONTAINERS through which states are conceived of as bounded containers. The source domain, THE CONTAINER, does not incorporate any knowledge other than the image-schema of containment. Note that both the source and target domains represent major categories or types rather than tokens. Either of these categorical slots or both are simply filled in by specific tokens or details. Consider the following in which the target domain of STATES is further specified:

13. *He spent all his life in misery.* (MISERY IS A CONTAINER)

14. *They lived in happiness ever after.* (HAPPINESS IS A CONTAINER)

15. *Extramarital sex*. (MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER)

16. *Borne out of wedlock* (LDCE). (MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER)

In the examples above, not much knowledge is transferred between domains other than the image-schema of containment either in or out of. Image-schematic conceptual metaphors are usually available crosslinguistically, so Arabic and English are no exceptions. The ubiquity of these metaphors may be ascribed to the fact that they derive directly from the generic human experience available to all human beings. However, conceptual metaphors that are derived from these image-schematic metaphors might vary across languages. For instance, consider the following Arabic example:

17. *Daxala al-qafas'a ath-thahabi.*
 Entered (he) the-cage the-golden
 He entered the golden cage.
 He got married.

Here we have the source domain of GOLDEN CAGE and the target domain of MARRIAGE. Marriage is conceived of as a golden cage, concepts which both represent specific types of STATE and CONTAINER, respectively. There are other metaphoric entailments involved, such as the source domain aspect of GOLDEN being mapped onto the target domain aspect of HAPPINESS or SWEETNESS, and the source domain aspect of CAGE mapped onto the target domain aspect of COMMITMENTS, which is a conventional mapping, providing more evidence for another productive conceptual metaphor in both Arabic and English, that is, COMMITMENTS ARE FETTERS. The above example illustrates how image-schematic metaphors that are potentially universal are specified differently in different languages.

2. Relational Motivations

Relational motivations describe the relationship between the source concept and the target concept as they emerge from the human experience. A clear line of distinction should be drawn between three types of relational motivations: Experiential correlation, GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC, and perceived resemblance (Grady 1999). Thus far we have come across the first two in the previous discussions under bodily and perceptual motivations, but not yet the latter, which is the object of analysis in this section. These motivations should not be confused with the motivations discussed earlier. The earlier motivations concern how conceptual metaphors emerge in the first place from the human experience, whereas these motivations characterize the relationships between the source domains and the target domains as they emerge from the human experience. Let's consider the following example:

18. *Throughout the negotiations, the Russians tried to **water down** the resolution* (Sciolino 2007).

To water down in the above example is a metaphorical expression meaning *to make a statement or report less forceful by modifying its language* (LDCE). This expression literally means to

dilute a liquid with water. We can initially, for argument's sake, derive the conceptual metaphor SOFTENING LANGUAGE IS DILUTING WITH WATER. We have here two cognitive domains the relationship of which cannot be said to be correlation in experience because simply the two concepts are totally different and uncorrelated. By the same token, this metaphor is not a realization of the GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC metaphor because DILUTING WITH WATER is not a specific concept that can potentially be mapped onto a number of other specific concepts among which is SOFTENING LANGUAGE that all share the same generic-schematic structure. In other words, the mapping from the concept of DILUTING WITH WATER is not very productive such that it manifests in other specific concepts besides SOFTENING LANGUAGE. What remains then is the *perceived resemblance* motivation. *Resemblance* in the cognitive view of metaphor is different from *similarity* in the Aristotelian traditional view which maintains that metaphor is an objective similarity between two things. The resemblance hypothesis (Grady 1999) claims that such similarity is only subjectively perceived based on some feature that is conceivably shared by two cognitive domains. The following diagram sketches the relationship between the two cognitive domains according to the perceived resemblance hypothesis. The arrow shows the direction from the source domain to the target domain. The blank circles stand for some other potential features that are not conceivably shared between the two domains.

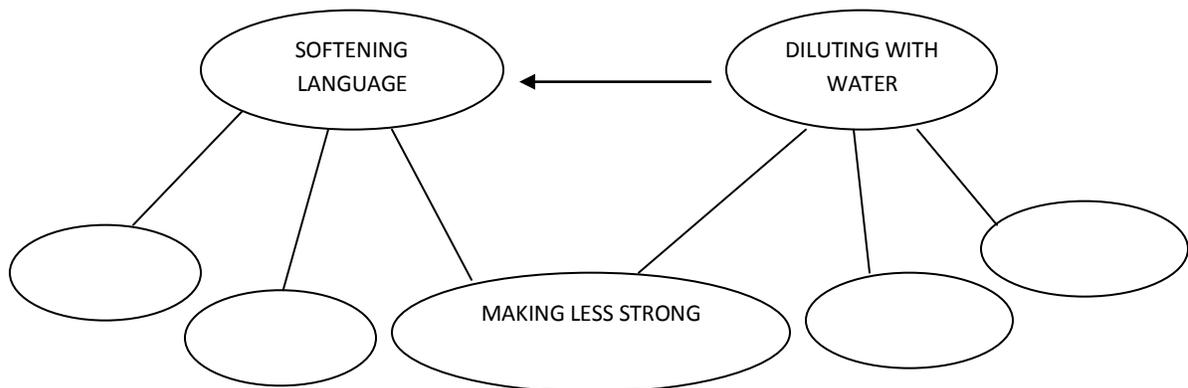


Figure 3. *Perceived resemblance between two domains based on two conceived common features*

Figure 3 above illustrates how the metaphor in example (18) above employs the conceived common feature of the two domains to linguistically project some similarity between them. Based on this analysis alone we may not venture to say that there exists the conceptual metaphor SOFTENING LANGUAGE IS DILUTING WITH WATER. But when we know that there is some additional linguistic evidence suggesting the existence of some underlying conventional mappings entailed in this metaphor, specifically between the domains of LANGUAGE and FLUID in general, we may reconsider. LANGUAGE, especially written language, is sometimes conceived of as A FLUID, whether it be water or otherwise, for instance:

19. *His writings flow easily.*

20. *?Clear (transparent) language.*
 21. *Luyatun insiyaabiyah.*
Language flowing
Flowing language (writing).

The conceptualization of language as a fluid must precede the conceptualization of softening language as watering down a fluid. But it is only through the more primary ontological metaphor of WORDS ARE OBJECTS that we could further conceive of language as a fluid in the first place:

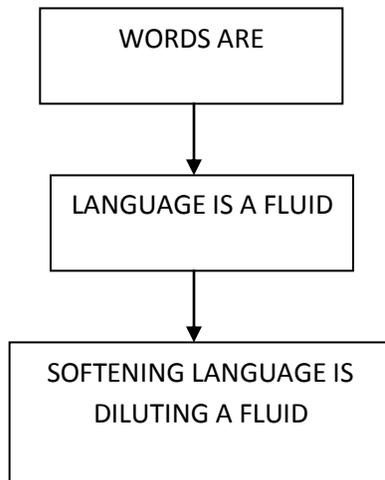


Figure 4. Derivations of specific metaphors from ontological metaphors

The first conceptual metaphor, WORDS ARE OBJECTS, readily exists in both Arabic and English as manifested in the following:

22. *Don't put words into my mouth.*
23. *?alqaa kalimatan t'ayyibah.*
 Dropped (he) word good
 He dropped a good word.
 He delivered a good speech.

I strongly suspect that such a primary metaphor would have a strong crosslinguistic tendency, if it is not universal. The second conceptual metaphor in the hierarchy in figure (4) above, LANGUAGE IS A FLUID, also exists in the two languages as demonstrated in examples 19-21. The third metaphor, SOFTENING LANGUAGE IS DILUTING A FLUID, represents a point where the two languages diverge since, to my knowledge, this metaphor is not explicitly attested in Arabic.

IV. Conclusion

In this article, the varied emergence motivations for conceptual metaphors have been examined taking the languages of Arabic and English as a case in point. Motivations for metaphors have been shown to be divided into two types or categories: emergence motivations which describe how conceptual metaphors emerge from our experiential interactions, and they include the human body, the human perceptions, culture, and image-schema metaphors; and relational motivations which characterize the relationship between source and target concepts as they emerge from our experiential interactions. The latter motivations include experiential correlations, GENERIC-IS-SPECIFIC, and perceived resemblance.

Given that speakers of different languages sometimes share a number of specific motivations that may be subsumed under these large categories, it is not always the case that languages end up having exactly identical conceptual metaphors. Cognitive as well as cultural preferences play an important role in this process. Nonetheless, out of all these variations, we can be certain about one thing: no conceptual metaphors would emerge in violation of the experiential backgrounds of speech communities.

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