Emotion and conceptual metaphor

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Introduction: conceptual metaphor theory

Language is a powerful tool for the study of emotion. Scholars interested in how different languages express and represent affective experience have a variety of methods available to them. In this chapter I introduce one of the approaches frequently used in cognitive linguistics to study conceptual representation, including the representation of emotion concepts. The approach, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), has been applied to the study of emotion since the early 1980s, generating a large number of studies in languages from all over the world.

CMT is based on the observation that much of what we say in everyday language is figurative and fairly systematic. It contends that regularities in the way we speak figuratively about a domain (e.g., time or emotion) inform us about the way the domain is conceptualized (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). For example, time is conventionally talked about in terms of space and motion (e.g., time flies, Christmas will be here soon, we can’t go back to those days), suggesting that space and motion are used in the conceptual representation of time—giving it shape and potentially constraining our reasoning about it. Cognitive linguists refer to such stable cross-domain mappings as conceptual metaphors.¹

Notice that the figurative expressions instantiating conceptual metaphors may be very conventional ways of speaking, but they are figurative nonetheless. For example, English speakers conventionally refer to their feelings for a partner as being “in love,” but love is hardly a physical thing one can be “in.” The existence of this and many other similar expressions indicates that we represent states (including emotional states) as “locations” or “containers” that we can occupy, go to, abandon, and even fall into or out of, as illustrated in the metaphorical expressions (1–4) below:

1. to be in a panic
2. to drive to despair
3 to abandon hope
4 to fall in/out of love.

An increasingly large body of experimental evidence in psychology attests to the existence of these and other cross-domain associations uncovered by cognitive linguists, and to their influence on perception and reasoning. Additionally, there are other reasons why conceptual metaphor scholars claim that expressions like those in 1–4, above, are not mere accidents in language, but the manifestation of stable conceptual associations recurrently activated in thought. First, novel or colorful metaphorical expressions often reflect the same associations as the standard expressions (e.g., “exile oneself from love”).2 Second, patterns in polysemy and semantic evolution can be successfully explained through conceptual metaphor. Third, large metaphorical systems seem to govern our discourse in politics, advertising, economics, religion, and science. Finally, gestures, behavior, images, and the objects we create for everyday use also exhibit these conceptual patterns.

CMT is a well-established research paradigm in cognitive linguistics, with a wide range of applications. For example, conceptual metaphors have been used in the study of literature, grammar, specific discourses, and in second language teaching—where it has been argued that knowing the metaphor-based explanation for idiomatic and polysemic expressions can aid in their learning.

In the remainder of this paper I will illustrate the type of research done in the field, and its utility for the investigation of emotion—with examples from my own research and that of my collaborators on the conceptualization of (different types of) anger in English, Spanish, and Russian. In doing so I will address a number of relevant questions in CMT research:

• How can we know what conceptual metaphors underlie the representation of a particular emotional domain?
• What can we learn about the conceptualization of an emotion by looking at conceptual metaphors?
• Why is metaphor analysis useful in cross-linguistic emotion research?
• How is metaphor analysis useful for other disciplines?

Identifying conceptual metaphors

The question addressed in this part is mainly methodological: how do linguists identify the conceptual metaphors underlying the representation of a given emotion concept? The first works on emotion conceptual metaphor relied on introspection and dictionaries to collect examples of figurative language (e.g., Kövecses 1990). Contemporary research relies on large electronic corpora, i.e., collections of naturally occurring texts
sampled from a number or written and oral sources to represent, to the
extent possible, the nature of a given language. This kind of corpus can
comprise hundreds of millions of words and is considered more compre-
hensive and accurate in “speaking for a language” than any one native
speaker, however well trained.

Different methods can be used to probe a corpus for figurative expres-
sions used to talk about emotion in a given language. One option is to
focus on specific emotion words of the domain under scrutiny. For
example, in order to study the domain of anger in English, one may
select words like anger, irritation, fury, indignation, frustration or resentment.
Once the target words are identified, we can retrieve from the corpus all
the sentences in which those words are employed. This usually involves
numbers too high for manual inspection, but a typical approach in the
field is to analyze 1,000 of them randomly selected from the full list. The
following are some examples for the word anger extracted from the British
National Corpus (BNC):

5 Julius couldn’t remember when he had last been hit by such a wave of
anger.
6 Anger was still simmering in him.
7 He was also formidable, demanding, difficult—and smoldering with
anger.
8 Once out of his presence he vents his anger for his dead friend on
nature.
9 His occasional outbursts of anger shocked those around him.

The researcher would then identify the metaphorical expressions and clas-
sify them according to the metaphor they instantiate. As analysis method,
my colleagues and I employ Metaphorical Profile Analysis (Ogarkova and
Soriano 2014b). This method entails the rephrasing of the observed meta-
phorical expressions as metaphorical patterns. A metaphorical pattern is
“a multi-word expression from a given source domain into which a specific
lexical item from a given target domain has been inserted” (Stefanowitsch
2006: 66). For example, the metaphorical patterns in sentences (5–9) are
wave of [emotion], [emotion] simmer, smolder with [emotion], vent
[emotion], and outbursts of [emotion]. Then the metaphorical patterns are
grouped according to source domain (e.g., fire, hot fluid), and the
number of expressions in each group is counted. The resulting list of con-
ceptual metaphors and their degree of exploitation for a given word con-
stitutes the word’s “metaphorical profile.”

Some of the conceptual metaphors in the metaphorical profile of anger
are presented in Table 19.1, with examples of the metaphorical patterns
that instantiate these metaphors, and the number of occurrences of them,
in a random sample of 1,000 citations from the BNC.
### Table 19.1 Examples of conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphorical patterns in the representation of ANGER in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual metaphor (ANGER is a ...)</th>
<th>Metaphorical patterns</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESSURIZED FLUID IN THE BODY-CONTAINER</td>
<td>[anger] rise in X, [anger] wells up in X, contain [anger], vent [anger], [anger] spill-over, outburst of [anger], explode with [anger]</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIRE</td>
<td>[anger] burn, flame of [anger], spark [anger], kindle [anger], stoke [anger], blaze with [anger], fume with [anger], [anger] scorch</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEAPON</td>
<td>turn/direct/cast [anger] against (/at, /on) Y, target of X's [anger], deflect [anger], [anger] be (sharp) like a knife</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPPONENT IN A STRUGGLE</td>
<td>fight [anger], conquer [anger], overcome [anger], imprison [anger], [anger] assail X</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANIMAL</td>
<td>leash/unleash [anger], rein in [anger], fierce [anger], [anger] roar inside X</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FORCE OF NATURE</td>
<td>eruption of [anger], storm of [anger], [anger] engulfs X, wave of [anger], [anger] ebbs away, tide of [anger]</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILLNESS</td>
<td>spasm of [anger], festering [anger], suffer from [anger], chronic [anger]</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSANITY</td>
<td>fit of [anger], beside oneself with [anger]</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note

X = emoter, Y = third person, N = observed number of figurative expressions instantiating the metaphorical patterns.

**What do conceptual metaphors tell us about emotion?**

If emotions are represented conceptually in terms of more concrete domains like FIRE or ILLNESS, what does it tell us about the emotions themselves? A way to answer this question in a manner useful across disciplines is to resort to the notion of “semantic focus” originally proposed by Kövecses (2000: 40–6). Semantic foci are aspects of emotional experience foregrounded by metaphor. Kövecses mentions evaluation (i.e., the positive or negative axiology implied by many metaphors), intensity, and harm, among others. For example, emotions conceptualized as ILLNESS are represented as negative and harmful, and emotions conceptualized as FIRE are seen as intense. Other semantic foci are the self-regulation one may
exert on one’s feelings and/or their manifestation, the intrinsic controllability of the emotion, and its degree of expressivity (i.e., whether the emotion is conceptualized as openly visible or, on the contrary, as internalized) (see Soriano 2013; Ogarkova and Soriano 2014b). A look at semantic foci in the set of conceptual metaphors identified for the words anger, irritation, fury, rage, frustration, indignation, and resentment in English indicates that anger in this language is represented as being intense (e.g., fire, hot fluid), negative (e.g., opponent, insanity), harmful for the person and others (e.g., illness, weapon), involving expressive behavior (e.g., animal), and requiring regulation (e.g., opponent, pressurized fluid), although the emotion is inherently difficult to control (e.g., force of nature). This overall characterization is coherent with descriptions of the category from psychology (e.g., Russell and Fehr 1994). But the important thing in this case is that we can use these semantic foci to compare different types of anger and the variants of the emotion in different languages, as will be shown next.

Why is metaphor analysis useful in cross-linguistic emotion research?

The metaphorical profiles constitute a semantic profile of the words, informing us of the ways the emotions designated by those words are conceptualized. Words can be compared within and across languages, in search for similarities and/or differences. For example, Spanish has two salient terms to label the anger category. One of them, ira (“anger,” but also “wrath”), is the term typically used in emotion psychology. The other, rabia (“anger,” but also “rabies”), is a term more frequently used by lay people to refer to the emotion.

An analysis of their metaphorical profiles using distributional statistics reveals important differences: ira is significantly more associated with the conceptual domains of fire, force of nature, and weapon, while rabia is more associated with illness. This suggests that the preferred term in psychology refers to a more intense (fire), violent (force of nature) and aggressive (weapon) emotion, while the more popular term is more saliently associated with a disruption of normal body functioning.

Zooming onto the specific linguistic expressions that instantiate a conceptual metaphor also provides important insights. For example, both in English and Spanish anger is a pressurized fluid is a salient metaphor. However, it is not elaborated linguistically in the same way. The metaphor represents anger in both languages as a substance inside the body that increases in quantity, thus rising in the container and exerting pressure on it. In Spanish it is also conventional to express the idea that somebody is accumulating anger inside by saying that they (or parts of their body, like the nose) are “swelling” (10, see below). This is a possible inference
afforded by the logic of the metaphor in English as well, but the inference has not given rise to any conventional expressions in this language. In English people do not typically “swell with anger” (although they do with pride).

10  Me estás hinchando las narices (Literally, “you are swelling my nose,” i.e., “you are making me angry”).

We have also found that the different use of “swelling” expressions in English and Spanish echoes a more general pattern: metaphors highlighting “containment” in general are more salient in the representation of anger in Spanish than in English (Ogarkova and Soriano 2014b). This, in turn, may be linked to socio-cultural traits, as will be further described below.

In sum, metaphorical profiles allow us to make useful distinctions between words in the same language or close words in different languages. This is undoubtedly useful for linguists and translators, but can metaphor research be useful to other disciplines as well?

How is metaphor analysis useful for other disciplines?

A way in which metaphor research can be brought to bear on neighboring disciplines is through the notion of semantic foci, earlier defined as aspects of emotional experience foregrounded by metaphor. Some semantic foci resemble well-known constructs in emotion psychology, like valence (akin to “evaluation”), and arousal (related to “intensity”) (Soriano 2013). The semantic foci may thus be used as common currency by both disciplines. For example, cross-cultural psychology may be informed about the valence/evaluation of an emotion by looking at the axiology (positive versus negative) of its metaphorical expressions. In the case of anger, for example, negativity seems to be more salient in Spanish than in English (Ogarkova and Soriano 2014b).

Metaphor analysis can also reveal aspects of emotion salient for the speakers of a language, but potentially disregarded by emotion theorists. Two examples are the association of anger with irrational behavior (captured by the metaphor ANGER IS INSANITY), and the damage it can cause to the person him/herself (captured by ANGER IS AN ILLNESS) (Soriano 2013). The first aspect is overshadowed in emotion psychology by the tendency to emphasize the overall utility of emotions as adaptive mechanisms that prepare the organism for optimal interaction with the environment. And if anger prepares us to correct wrongs inflicted on our person, how can it be irrational? Indeed, in an analysis of English (1) psychology guides, and (2) websites, where lay people seek advice for their
psychological problems, Beger and Jäkel (2009) found that experts hardly talk about anger resorting to the ins *anity* metaphor, while this strategy is common among lay people. Our folk-representation of the emotion, as suggested by language, invites a more nuanced view: anger may be rational overall, but it often results in irrational reactions nevertheless. The second aspect, often disregarded by psychology (except in clinical contexts), is the potential damage of the emotion to the person. It is common in psychology to refer to anger as a “negative” emotion because it feels unpleasant, it is caused by something negative, and it leads to confrontation. But nothing is typically said (when justifying the “negativity” of anger) about the possible negative effects of the emotion for one’s well-being. By contrast, metaphor highlights the “pain” inherent in anger, the disruption it causes to body functions, and its possible long-term negative effects. In sum, both aspects of the emotion (irrationality and damage) are present in expert theories of emotion to some extent, but a look at language can remind psychologists that these two factors are much more salient in the way lay people represent anger for everyday purposes.

Metaphorical profiles can also be relevant for cross-cultural studies. For example, Wierzbicka (1989) has observed that Russian “duša” (soul) and English “mind” are salient terms in their respective cultures to discuss intangible aspects of human life. Congruently with these observations, our analysis of metaphor across several terms revealed that when the body is conceptualized as a container for anger the emotion is more frequently associated with the soul and heart in Russian; and with the head and mind in English (Ogarkova and Soriano 2014a).

Another example of cultural specificity is the pattern observed for the semantic foci of expression (the visibility of the emotion) and regulation (the willing control of the feeling). Significantly, more expressions related to containment are found in Spanish than in English for the metaphor ang er is a pressurized fluid. Additionally, more Spanish expressions are related to pressure. The latter is also true for Russian. By contrast, English compared to Russian has a significantly larger number of metaphors highlighting expression—the coming out of the anger-fluid. It has been suggested (Ogarkova and Soriano 2014b) that these patterns may reflect the more collectivistic nature of Spain and Russia, compared to English-speaking communities like the USA and the UK—which score high on individualism. Cross-cultural psychology suggests that collectivistic communities experience a greater urge to repress the overt manifestation of intense negative emotions for the sake of harmony within the group. This would explain the relevance of containment metaphorical expressions in Russian and Spanish. Individualistic communities, on the contrary, would have a comparatively more positive evaluation of the open manifestation of anger, seen as an affirmation of the self. This is coherent
with the comparatively greater number of expressions profiling the
“coming out” of the anger-fluid in English.

**Conclusions**

The goal of this paper was to present and illustrate CMT, a popular
approach to the study of conceptual representation in cognitive linguistics
that can also be of use to the interdisciplinary field of the affective sci-
ences. CMT is a theoretical framework in that it posits the existence in our
minds of stable associations between different domains recursively
employed to help us represent reality. CMT is also a methodology in the
sense of proposing a way of looking at language to identify these stable
associations. The theoretical paradigm introduced in the 1980s was
applied from the very beginning to the study of emotion concepts, and
continues to generate new studies all over the world. Cognitive psychology
has also used metaphor research for the experimental investigation of
embodied cognition. Furthermore, the paradigm has inspired cross-
cultural and social psychology, which now advocate a “metaphor-enriched
social cognition” (Landau *et al.* 2010).

In the middle of this interdisciplinary interest in metaphor, constructs
like the semantic foci discussed here are particularly useful to compare
findings across disciplinary domains. Another important development is
the adoption of corpus-based quantitative approaches to metaphor ana-
lysis, which allow us to measure the relative significance of the observed
patterns for different emotion concepts within and across languages. This
has useful applications in linguistic research, but also in other disciplines.
As illustrated in previous sections, patterns in metaphorical language use
inform us of the way communities represent their emotional experiences
and can reveal underlying cultural differences.

Emotion is a multifaceted phenomenon and its study requires a multi-
disciplinary approach. Linguistics, anthropology, and psychology look at
it, respectively, from the standpoint of language, culture, and cognition.
Conceptual metaphor research stands halfway between the three, provid-
ing a privileged vantage point on the phenomenon. This may be the greatest
advantage of CMT for the affective sciences. The various disciplines
involved in the study of emotion can communicate, quite literally, through
metaphor.

**Acknowledgments**

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national Studies (SNIS) and the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences.
Notes

1 A conceptual metaphor comprises a target domain (i.e., the domain represented, like time) and a source domain (i.e., the domain invoked to represent the target, like space). Their association is typically expressed in small capitals through the formula source is target (e.g., time is space). The label “metaphorical expression” is reserved for the specific linguistic instantiations of these conceptual patterns, like time flies or we are approaching Christmas. I follow the convention in CMT of writing concepts in small capitals and linguistic expressions in italics.

2 Due to space constraints only a few works in the metaphor literature concerning emotion can be mentioned. See Soriano (2012) for references on all these aspects and an overview of relevant research on conceptual metaphor in general.

References


