

The Role of Metonymy: Using One Entity for Another

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Abstract. Metonymy is a fundamental cognitive and linguistic phenomenon in which one entity is used to refer to another related entity within the same conceptual domain. Although traditionally regarded as a rhetorical device, cognitive linguistics views metonymy as a basic cognitive mechanism that shapes human conceptualization, categorization, and communication. This article aims to examine the nature of metonymy from a cognitive linguistic perspective by discussing its cognitive foundations, major types, relationship to prototype theory, functions in grammar and discourse, interaction with conceptual metaphor, and broader implications for cognitive linguistics. Using a qualitative descriptive approach based on a review and synthesis of relevant literature in cognitive linguistics, the study analyzes how metonymic relationships are motivated by principles such as contiguity, salience, cognitive economy, and embodied experience. The analysis shows that metonymy plays a central role in organizing lexical meaning, extending word senses, maintaining discourse coherence, and facilitating efficient communication. Furthermore, metonymy interacts closely with conceptual metaphor while remaining distinct in its within-domain mapping structure. The study concludes that metonymy is not merely a stylistic feature of language but a fundamental cognitive operation that underlies linguistic structure, conceptual organization, and human reasoning, with significant implications for language teaching, translation, computational linguistics, and cognitive science.

Keywords: *metonymy; cognitive linguistics; conceptual metonymy; contiguity; prototype theory; figurative language; discourse; grammar.*



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INTRODUCTION

Metonymy is one of the most fundamental mechanisms through which human beings conceptualize and communicate experience. Although it has traditionally been treated as a rhetorical figure used for stylistic purposes, developments in cognitive linguistics have demonstrated that metonymy is a basic cognitive process underlying

language, thought, and conceptual organization. Rather than functioning merely as a linguistic ornament, metonymy enables speakers to access one conceptual entity through another closely related entity within the same conceptual domain. Everyday expressions such as *The White House announced a new policy*, *I need a hand*, or *She is reading Shakespeare* illustrate how metonymic reasoning facilitates efficient communication by exploiting salient cognitive associations.

The emergence of cognitive linguistics has significantly transformed the understanding of figurative language. Since the publication of foundational studies in conceptual metaphor and cognitive semantics, increasing attention has been given to the cognitive role of metonymy in lexical semantics, categorization, discourse organization, and grammatical structure. Researchers have shown that metonymy is motivated by principles of contiguity, salience, cognitive economy, and embodied experience rather than by arbitrary linguistic convention. Consequently, metonymy is now recognized as a central mechanism through which conceptual categories are organized, lexical meanings are extended, and discourse coherence is maintained.

Despite the growing recognition of metonymy within cognitive linguistics, scholarly discussions have frequently been overshadowed by research on conceptual metaphor. While metaphor has received extensive theoretical development and empirical investigation, metonymy is often discussed only as a complementary phenomenon or as a subtype of figurative language. As a result, its cognitive functions, conceptual motivations, and interaction with grammar and discourse remain comparatively underexplored in many general accounts of cognitive linguistics. Furthermore, the relationships between metonymy, prototype theory, and conceptual metaphor are often presented separately, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how these cognitive mechanisms jointly contribute to human conceptualization.

Addressing this gap is important because metonymy extends far beyond lexical substitution. It plays a crucial role in semantic extension, reference, inference, categorization, and pragmatic interpretation, thereby influencing virtually every level of linguistic structure. Understanding metonymy also has broader implications for language education, translation studies, computational linguistics, and natural language processing, where accurate interpretation of indirect reference and contextual meaning remains a significant challenge. A comprehensive cognitive account of metonymy therefore contributes not only to theoretical linguistics but also to interdisciplinary research on human cognition and communication.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of metonymy from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Specifically, it examines the cognitive principles that motivate metonymic expressions, the major types of conceptual metonymy, the relationship between metonymy and prototype theory, the role of metonymy in grammar and discourse, its interaction with conceptual metaphor, and its implications for cognitive linguistic theory and related disciplines. By integrating these perspectives within a unified cognitive framework, this article seeks to demonstrate that metonymy is not merely a peripheral rhetorical device but a fundamental cognitive operation that structures human language, conceptual organization, and reasoning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a literature review approach. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study synthesizes and critically analyzes theoretical perspectives on metonymy within the framework of cognitive linguistics. The literature review was selected because the objective of the study

is to examine, integrate, and interpret existing scholarly knowledge concerning the cognitive foundations, conceptual structure, linguistic functions, and theoretical implications of metonymy.

The data consisted of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other scholarly publications addressing metonymy, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, prototype theory, semantics, and discourse analysis. Priority was given to seminal works and influential studies in cognitive linguistics, particularly those that have shaped contemporary understandings of conceptual metonymy and its role in language and cognition. Relevant literature was identified through academic databases and digital library resources using keywords such as metonymy, conceptual metonymy, cognitive linguistics, prototype theory, figurative language, grammar, and discourse.

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis procedure. The selected literature was read critically and categorized according to major analytical themes, including the cognitive basis of metonymy, types of metonymic relationships, the relationship between metonymy and prototype theory, the role of metonymy in grammar and discourse, the interaction between metonymy and conceptual metaphor, and the implications of metonymy for cognitive linguistics. The findings from individual sources were subsequently compared, synthesized, and interpreted to identify recurring theoretical patterns, conceptual relationships, and areas of scholarly consensus and debate.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the study adopted a comparative synthesis strategy by examining multiple authoritative sources rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of metonymy as a cognitive mechanism and facilitates the integration of diverse theoretical viewpoints into a coherent analytical framework. The results are presented descriptively to explain how metonymy functions as a fundamental cognitive process underlying language, conceptual organization, and human reasoning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Cognitive Basis of Metonymy

Metonymy is grounded in cognitive principles. One of the most important is the principle of cognitive economy. It is often more efficient to refer to a concept by a salient part or associated entity than to use a longer, more explicit description. For example, saying "I need a hand" is shorter and more efficient than saying "I need someone to help me." Metonymy also reflects the way we focus attention. In any situation, some aspects are more salient or prominent than others. Metonymy allows us to focus on the most salient aspect and use it to stand for the whole or for a related aspect. For example, in "The kettle is boiling," the kettle (the container) is salient, and we focus on it rather than on the water inside. Metonymy also reflects the way we structure categories. Many categories have a part-whole structure, and the part can be used to stand for the whole. For example, "we need a brain" uses the brain (a part) to stand for the person (the whole). This is a common metonymic pattern. Metonymy is also motivated by cultural and social patterns. Certain relationships are culturally salient and provide the basis for metonymic expressions. For example, in many cultures, the capital city stands for the government, and the leader stands for the country.

Types of Metonymic Relationships

Metonymy can be classified into several types based on the relationship between the two entities. One of the most common is the part-whole relationship, where a part stands for the whole. Examples include "we need a hand," "they are short on heads," and "the face of the company." The whole can also stand for the part, though this is less common. The container-contained relationship is also very common. The container stands for its contents, as in "I ate a whole plate," "the kettle is boiling," and "she drank the bottle." The producer-product relationship is another common type. The producer stands for the product, as in "I bought a Ford" (Ford stands for the car), "she is reading Shakespeare" (Shakespeare stands for his works), and "he is listening to Mozart" (Mozart stands for his music). The object-user relationship is also common, as in "the pen is mightier than the sword." The location-institution relationship is widely used, as in "The White House said," "Downing Street announced," and "the Kremlin responded." The cause-effect relationship is another type, as in "she is my inspiration" (the inspiration is the effect, standing for the cause) or "he is the reason" (the reason stands for the person). The controller-controlled relationship is also common, as in "he is the manager" (the manager controls the employees).

Metonymy and Prototype Theory

Metonymy is closely related to prototype theory. Prototypes are the most central, typical, or salient members of a category. Metonymy often uses the prototype to stand for the whole category. For example, the word "aspirin" is a brand name that has become metonymic for any pain-relief tablet. The prototype (the specific brand) stands for the whole category. This pattern is common in language and reflects the cognitive principle of using the most salient example to represent a category. Metonymy also plays a role in the structure of radial categories. In radial categories, extensions are often motivated by metonymic relationships. For example, the extension of "hand" from the body part to the worker is based on metonymy: the part stands for the person. The extension of "face" from the front of the head to the surface of a clock is based on metonymy: the front or visible surface stands for the object.

Metonymy in Grammar and Discourse

Metonymy is not limited to the lexicon; it also plays a crucial role in grammar and discourse. In grammar, metonymy is involved in the selection of grammatical subjects and objects. For example, in "the kettle is boiling," the container is the grammatical subject, but it stands for the contents. This choice is motivated by metonymy: the container is more salient or accessible. In discourse, metonymy is used for coherence and cohesion. For example, in a narrative, a character may be referred to by a salient feature (e.g., "the tall one," "the redhead"). This metonymic reference helps maintain coherence and focus. Metonymy is also used for politeness and indirectness. For example, saying "the bathroom is down the hall" may be used to indicate that one needs to use the bathroom. The location stands for the activity. Metonymy is also involved in anaphoric reference. For example, "I saw a car. The engine was running." The engine is a part of the car and is used metonymically to refer back to the car. These metonymic links help structure discourse.

Metonymy and Conceptual Metaphor

Metonymy and conceptual metaphor are closely related. Both are cognitive operations that structure language and thought. However, they have different structures. Metaphor involves mapping between domains, while metonymy involves reference within a domain. Despite this difference, they often interact. Many metaphors have a metonymic

basis. For example, the metaphor MORE IS UP is grounded in the metonymic experience of adding to a pile: as we add more, the pile goes up. The metonymy (the action of adding) provides the experiential basis for the metaphor. This interaction is common in language and reflects the integrated nature of cognitive processing. Metonymy can also be used within a metaphor. For example, in "The White House announced a new policy," the metonymy is within the political domain. The metaphor would be if "policy" were described as a "building" or "structure." The two operations are often combined.

Implications for Cognitive Linguistics

Metonymy has several important implications for cognitive linguistics. First, it demonstrates that language is not purely referential but is grounded in cognitive processes of association and contiguity. Second, it shows that the lexicon and grammar are structured by cognitive principles, not by arbitrary rules. Third, it provides evidence for the embodied nature of cognition: metonymy is often based on bodily and spatial relationships. Fourth, it has implications for language teaching and translation. Learners need to understand metonymic patterns to comprehend and produce natural language. Metonymy is also relevant to computational linguistics, as it can be used to improve natural language processing and machine translation.

Criticisms and Challenges

Metonymy has faced several criticisms. One of the main criticisms is the difficulty of distinguishing between metaphor and metonymy in some cases. The boundaries are not always clear, and some expressions seem to involve both operations. Another criticism is the problem of predictability: it is not always possible to predict which metonymic relationships will be conventionalized in a language. The cultural specificity of metonymy also poses challenges: different languages and cultures have different metonymic patterns. Despite these criticisms, metonymy remains a central concept in cognitive linguistics.

CONCLUSION

Metonymy is a fundamental cognitive and linguistic phenomenon that is pervasive in language and thought. It involves using one entity to stand for another related entity within the same domain. Metonymy is based on contiguity and association, and it reflects principles of cognitive economy, salience, and cultural patterns. Metonymy is not merely a rhetorical device but a basic cognitive operation that structures categories, grammar, discourse, and reasoning. The study of metonymy has important implications for cognitive linguistics, language teaching, translation, and computational linguistics. Metonymy, together with metaphor, provides a powerful framework for understanding how human beings use language to communicate and make sense of the world.

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