

Language and Embodiment

Nguyen Tat Thang*

*Department of Foreign Languages, Dalat University,
01 Phu Dong Thien Vuong Street, Dalat, Vietnam*

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Abstract. This paper illustrates the relationship between language and embodiment through evidence of the English and Vietnamese language. Evidence presented confirms that there is a close correlation between language and embodiment, thus inferring the implication for the job of teaching and learning languages, which requires the task takers to be equipped with knowledge of this relationship in order to provide a meaningful and productive work.

1. Introduction

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) has emerged since the early 1980s, and has been of great interest for linguists. It is not only that CL is a new theory of linguistics, but it also includes latest notions that seek the explanation of language structures and meanings with the relationship with mind.

One of the central theses of CL is the embodiment of language. The term embodiment has attracted a huge amount of attention in the school of cognitive linguistics. The embodiment thesis is “central to cognitive semantics” (Shina and Lopéz,) [1] And embodiment has been serving as one of the most important tenets in cognitive linguistics. Language is the major source of communication, and according to CL, language “cannot be investigated in isolation from human embodiment” (Evan and Green, 2006) [2].

This paper aims at presenting an understanding of the notion of embodiment and its relationship with language analysis, thus hopefully producing implication for the task of language teaching and learning with a new perspective and methodology.

2. The embodiment thesis

Cognitive Linguistics or cognitive semantics in particular, claims that the meanings of language are embodied, which means that it is the speaker’s bodily experience that triggers the linguistic expressions that carry the meaning(s) to the hearer(s). In other words, “our construal of reality is likely to be mediated in large measure by the nature of our bodies” (Evan and Green, 2006) [2].

All experiences are “filtered by perception” (Janda) [3]. We perceive things in the world differently; each of us has different perceptions on even one event or situation. As a result, language used by us to describe the world must undergo changes through speaker’s or writer’s perception, resulting in a fact that la

* Tel.: 84-0633-812808.
E-mail: thangnt@dlu.edu.vn



not the “description of the real word (nor any possible world), but rather a description of human perception of reality” (Janda) [3].

We now go back to the beginning of people’s development when babies experience the world around them through their bodies. Before babies start to have their so-called “concepts”, they have gone through experience of the real world - the reality. Evan [2] states that “the concepts we have access to and the nature of the “reality” we think and talk about are a function of embodiment: we can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience”.

Johnson [4] developed a theory about image schemas which are “relatively abstract conceptual representations that arise directly from our everyday interaction with and observation of the world around us” (Evan) [2]. This means that the image schemas are concepts which come from our embodied experience.

One of the classic examples of image schema is CONTAINER. Babies experience their own bodies as CONTAINERS (c.f. [4]: Chapter 2 [2]: Chapter 6). They put IN their mouth something to eat, and spit OUT of their mouth the things they feel bitter, for instance. We have these image schemas from experience of being physically located ourselves within bounded locations like rooms, beds, etc.; and also putting objects into containers (c.f. [5]: 308 ff.) Therefore, we often see or hear these phrases: wake *out* of a deep sleep; daze *out* of the bedroom; walk *into* the bathroom, etc. Or sometimes we may hear someone mention that he or she is *in* love; the country is *in* a financial crisis; we are *out* of trouble now; he fell *into* a depression (c.f [6]).

Regarding the relationship between embodiment and language, Zlatev [7] states that there are three major unresolved issues in the sciences of the mind. The first trend is that there are many different meanings behind the term

“embodiment”. The second one, as its nature, is that embodiment theories have a strong individualist orientation. And the third mentions the underestimation of the role of consciousness in many embodiment theories. Despite slightly different ideas about embodiment, there is a high scale of agreement of the central role of embodiment in cognitive linguistics [1].

Also, one of the four central assumptions of cognitive semantics is about the embodied cognition thesis, i.e. conceptual structure is embodied, which means that the “nature of conceptual organization arises from bodily experience, so part of what makes conceptual meaningful is the bodily experience with which it is associated” [2]. We perceive the world from our independent perspective(s). Each person has his/her own way(s) of looking at the world, which is fundamentally based on his/her own bodily experience. The perception then becomes our conceptions of the perceived world, which remains in our mind as concepts. As stated previously, we can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience. This means that our mind bears the “imprint of embodied experience” [2].

Cognitive semantics claims that meaning is embodied (c.f. [4] & [8]). Language is not an abstract cognitive faculty, independent from other human cognitive processes; on the contrary, our language is created from our daily and real experience. We construct and understand our categories on the basis of concrete experiences, and under the constraints imposed, first and foremost our bodies [9].

Human conceptual categories, the meaning of words and sentences, the meaning of linguistic structures at any level, are not just a set of universal abstract features, or of uninterpreted symbols (Barcelona: *ibid*); quite the opposite: they are activated and motivated directly in the daily experience in or



our bodily, social, physical, or social experiences (c.f. [10] & [3]).

People experience the real world and examine what they perceive; then it is their perception that filters the experience. And it is a fact that no-one is alike; thus, their perception about the world differs, resulting in the difference in their description of what they experience. "Therefore, when we examine meaning, our goal is not to find a correspondence between utterances (real or otherwise), but rather to explore the ways in which meaning is motivated by human perceptual and conceptual capacities" [3].

Due to their unique ways of interpreting the objective reality, people construe the world differently. One situation or event can be reported in a number of ways depending on who does the reporting, and even the same person can have more than one way of releasing the report at different times of speaking.

Language comes not only from the direct relationship with the external world but also from the nature of their bodily and social experience and from their capacity to project from some aspects based on this experience to some abstract conceptual structures [10].

3. Evidence from language

Evidence has been found to confirm the fact that language conveys meaning through embodied objects and experiences [11]. Lakoff [8] states that "thought is embodied, that is, the structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it". He further indicates that "the projection of *in-out* orientation onto inanimate objects is already a first move beyond the prototypical case of my bodily movement".

In everyday language, we often see a direct reflection of the embodied nature onto object names. In English, we speak of the hands of a clock, the mouth of a river, and the foot of a

hill. Especially, we use plenty of body-related concepts in metaphors, e.g. swallow one's idea; sink their teeth into the theory; keep an eye on something.

In Vietnamese, people say,

(1) Ông ấy có tấm lòng vàng

He / that -demonstrative / have / heart / gold

He has a golden heart.

This is definitely a metaphor, but in terms bodily experience, the heart is used as a symbol of a person of good will. The heart is perhaps one of the most important organs in our body, which influences the way we think or act. Or as in another situation, when someone is in danger, we say,

(2) Anh ấy đang nằm trong tay kẻ địch

He / is / in / hand / enemy

He is the enemy's hand.

Bodily experience plays a crucial role not only in expressing people's mind, but also in people's understanding of the language they hear or read. Take an example of the following sentence from the song "Everybody is free to wear Sunscreen" by Baz Luhrman [12].

(3) Live in New York City once, but leave before it makes you hard; live in Northern California once, but leave before it makes you soft.

Listeners/readers of little or no knowledge of the culture to which the sentence refers, would find the sentence hard enough to understand, even impossible to get what the singer really means. New York is a busy and bustling city, which is supposed to be known by people, but only by living there, do we understand how hard it is to live in this cosmopolitan city with competitions, expensive living standard, etc.

Similarly, how "soft" life is in Northern America would pose a problem to those listeners of the song who have never witnessed or experienced life in a peaceful and vast country like Northern California. The



order to understand the metaphor (or the implicit meaning) of the sentence, listeners must at least possess a grasp of the literary meaning of the sentence, which can only be achieved by bodily experience.

We now take an example in car driving. Since driving laws/rules slightly vary in different countries, we do not always understand the rules unless we are living in the culture of destination country or at least equipped with a basic knowledge of it. The following example would illustrate the point.

(4) Tom: Would you like some wine or beer?

John: Well, I am still on my P's.

Or ... Well, I'm still a P- plater.

In Vietnam, as soon as one passes the driving test, he/she can drive her/his car and be fully respected as a driver. The matter differs in Australia, for example, where first two year license holding drivers are subject to some rules, of which the zero-alcohol rule is strictly applied. The "P" in John's response stands for *probation*. John refuses the offer since he would break the law if he had even a little wine or beer. Another example one may find in a newspaper might be "P-plater clocked at 120kmh".

Given that the readers/listeners live in Australia where everyone is aware of the driving rules, they would find no difficulties in understanding the conversation between Tom and John. This means that only by being equipped by the knowledge of the rules can the readers/listeners of the conversation catch the meaning of interlocutor in the language exchange above. This could be, in contrast, a completely incomprehensible chunk of language if the listeners have little or no knowledge of the driving rules in Australia.

Nowadays, a great deal of Vietnamese school children are brought up isolated from paddy rice where their parents or grandparents made their livings. As a result, the term 'chăn

trâu' - looking after the buffalos - seems unfamiliar to them. Most farmers used to, some now still do, keep the practice of using buffalos or oxen to pull the plough - an act to turn over the upper layer of the soil, bringing fresher nutrients to the surface. Most families owned at least one buffalo or an ox. Often times these buffalos or oxen were taken out for feeding places such as a hill or the paths on paddy rice farming land. And the most likely person to take the job would be little kids, a job often considered boring and uninteresting

Equipped with this experience, listeners of the phrase "ai bảo chăn trâu là khổ" - who says taking care of buffalos is a hard job - may visualize the picture of the job, understanding both the hardship and possible enjoyment of the task. On the contrary, people being raised in "white-collar" families would struggle to grasp the meanings of the phrase literally and figuratively. This is due to listener's experience which plays an essential part in their comprehension of the language being exposed to them.

It would be a good idea to present another example which may pose difficulties to not only Vietnamese teenagers, but also to adult learners of Vietnamese unless they are bodily experienced with the task. The following example will present the case:

(5) Con mà không học hành đàng hoàng thì chỉ có đi cuốc đất mà sống.

You - if not - study well - then - only digging - soil - to earn your living

If you do not study hard, you have to earn your living by working on farms.

Centuries of cultivating on small pieces of farming land with difficult lives has made Vietnamese farmers struggle to escape from their traditional ways of earning their lives, knowing for sure that life as a farmer would pose heaps of hardship and obstacles for themselves and their offspring. The dream of possessing a better job comes in farmers' mind. And the most possible



their hope is by studying hard, expecting to achieve good results at school, which would probably secure them a place in organizations or companies where they would have good jobs and good salary.

The term would possibly cause difficulties for young teenagers to understand now since lands currently become a rich source of wealth. Children would think of having a big fortune by selling the land given by their parents, unaware that the land used to belong not to their parents but to the government. Their parents or grandparent had to rent the land. And taxes would cost half or more of the income made from those pieces of land.

We not only use words and phrases that might be already in dictionaries or in every body's lexicon, but we also improvise our opinions when we make a judgment or expressing our view on a particular event or situation, all of which are based on our bodily experience. Looking at a given event or situation, different people have different viewpoints. The difference results from the differences in their perception, which in turn yields different linguistic expressions. These expressions actually display their perception on the given event, not the description of the real world. Take for example: Suppose two tourists, Nam and Bắc, are in Đà Lạt, sharing one room. Nam may say that the room is too small, but Bắc may say the room is fine for two people to take shelter. Given a situation that Nam and Bắc may ring back to their family in Hà Nội, describing the room where they are staying, and then we may imagine what "reality" is perceived by these two people's family members: Nam's family may visualize a tiny room with a bunch of things scattered around while Bắc's family may think of a cozy room, big enough for their son's short stay.

One possibility of tracing the difference between the attitudes of these two speakers is from their experience. Nam, feeling the room is small, may have been experiencing and living

in comfortable environment while Bắc have been familiar with petite chambers.

In short, "there is no doubt that language comprehension is ultimately embodied" [11]. Embodiment plays a crucial role in our understanding of the language to which we are exposed. Working with language, both as learners and teachers, requires thorough understanding of the embodiment thesis, which is necessary for successes language learning and teaching. The next section presents implications for this work.

It could be worth reviewing the theory of frame semantics by Fillmore [13] since frame semantics has a close relationship with embodiment. Frame Semantics presents a theory that relates linguistic semantics to encyclopedic knowledge. An undeniable assumption made by frame semantics is that in order to understand the meanings of the word(s) of a language, one must have in mind the knowledge of conceptual structures, or semantic frames, that set the motivation and background for their (the words') existence and their use in the context or discourse. According to Fillmore, a frame is a system of categories whose structure is rooted in some motivating context. Or rather, a frame is any system of concepts that relate and in order to understand any one concept, we must understand the whole system in which that concept appears; and when we introduce one concept, the system in which that concept takes place must become available [14].

4. Implications for language learning and teaching

It is obvious that the task of learning and teaching languages requires much more than just grammar and dictionaries. The comprehension and the production of the target language lie in "embodied processes whose goal is the creation and extraction of meanings" [15]. Language teachers :



aware of the language they use when they introduce it to their learners. Language learners would not be able to comprehend the meanings of the target language unless they possess a frame, i.e. background knowledge, which enables them to understand the target language.

To achieve the goal of providing language learners of a “frame”, language teachers should be able to build a net work of the language in their lesson planning so that there is a logical correlation between the exposed language and their learners’ knowledge, i.e. learners’ embodied experience, either by real life experience or through careful explanation by the teachers.

Language teachers should be able to clarify the language, especially examples, in textbooks, which often cause difficulties for learners, not by the individual meanings of the words in isolation, but the frame semantics of those words as a whole. For example, in the book by Soars [16] entitled *New Headway*, which is a popular textbook in language centers in Vietnam, we would find the sentence “How would you like your tea?”. It is no doubt that in order to comprehend the sentence, one must be able to understand the practice of tea drinking of English people, which is very much different from that of Vietnamese, in terms of the ritual and the materials to make tea.

The knowledge of frame semantics and embodied experience is more seriously required when one is doing the job of translation; otherwise, a misleading interpretation of the language will be likely to happen. It is now obvious that the task of either learning, teaching, or translating language is much of the job that requires the task takers lot of embodied knowledge or experience which can only acquired through training and definitely real life experience.

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Ngôn ngữ và tính hiện thân

Nguyễn Tất Thắng

*Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Đà Lạt,
01 Phù Đồng Thiên Vương, Đà Lạt, Việt Nam*

Bài báo trình bày dẫn chứng về mối quan hệ mật thiết giữa ngôn ngữ và tính hiện thân của ngôn ngữ thông qua các dẫn chứng trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Bài báo khẳng định sự tồn tại của mối tương quan mật thiết giữa ngôn ngữ và tính hiện thân. Qua bài báo, chúng tôi hy vọng đưa ra các gợi ý cho việc giảng dạy và học ngoại ngữ, một công việc đòi hỏi kiến thức về mối quan hệ này nhằm tạo ra một kết quả khả quan trong việc dạy và học.

