



A Metaphorical Study of Preposition WITH

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Abstract

Prepositions, despite their relatively small number in the English language, play a crucial role in conveying meaning and relationships within sentences. The metaphor and image schema are two main approaches in understanding the polysemy of prepositions. By delving into the various metaphorical domains of "with," including ontological, structural, and orientational metaphors, illustrating how these metaphors extend the basic concrete meaning of "with" into abstract domains, the study concludes with implications for language learning and teaching, suggesting that a cognitive approach can enhance the comprehension and creative use of prepositions in English.

Keywords

with; preposition; metaphor; image schema

1. Introduction

Preposition, though accounting for a relatively small proportion (only 286 among over 1 million words) in English, plays a crucial part in English. As one of the most significant functional words, it always occurs in sentences while carries various meanings according to the context or background. It is often used to represent the relationship between nouns, pronouns and other compositions in sentences. In English, preposition can be classified into space, location, state, manner, etc. They can be regarded as essential adverbial modifier part in most cases because they always express core meaning. Without these preposition words, sentence meaning could be incomplete. One out of eight words in English is a preposition (Kennedy, 2000:13). That is to say, even though preposition just has small quantity, the function it plays is definitely important.

However, the learning of usage of preposition is not easy because in most cases it has various meaning because of complicated contexts, complex grammatical functions and its various meanings. It is hard to use prepositions correctly in realization for there are countless set phrases that look similar but distinct meanings. As a result, whether learners can use preposition properly is considered as the standard of whether they master the language in the right way. And how to help Eng-

lish-learners acquire the usage of it has been the focus of linguistic research. Cognitive linguistics provides a grand new perspective in studying and teaching prepositions. Cognitive linguists put forward that the basic spatial meaning of a preposition comes from the interaction of humans with the real physical world, and that other metaphorical meanings originate from the basic one through systematic ways. The cognitive semantic approach is a novel way for students to comprehend and master the relationships between the spatial meanings and the metaphorical semantics of prepositions. It allows English-learners to understand the core spatial meaning of prepositions and help them to image the extended meaning based on that.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition of Metaphor

Cognitive linguists believe that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a way of thinking. It is a perceptual and conceptual tool for human beings to effectively understand the surrounding environment. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:53) pointed out that metaphor is a structural mapping from source concept to target concept in *Metaphors We Live By*. They figured out the importance of metaphor and divided it into three basic types: spatial metaphor, ontological metaphor, and structural metaphor.

Generally speaking, metaphor involves the comparison of two concepts in that one is constructed in terms of the other. The two concepts are two domains related to each other. The one that is described by the metaphor is called the target domain and the other one that we use to describe the experience is called the source domain. It is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a way of thinking. People tend to expand word meaning in accordance with physical experience, that is, from simple to complex; from concrete to abstract. For example, there are several weather words like “wind” “thunder” “rain” “snow” etc. They are used to describe weather in the first place. As abstract thinking gradually develops, they slowly convey other abstract meanings like “trouble” “risk” “hardship” “suffering” and so on. It is a kind of mental construction mapping, which maps from the concrete origin domain to different abstract domains. People connect two things belonging to different categories through similarity, explaining, and understanding other fields with the experience of one field.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor can be divided into three types: orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor, and structural metaphor. Firstly, orientational metaphor enables speakers to make a set of target concepts coherent by means of some basic human spatial orientations, such as up-down, in-out, center-periphery, etc. Some spatial prepositions can refer to other states like HAPPY IS UP or HIGH STATUS IS UP. These spatial directions stem from our bodies and physical environment, so the metaphors derived from them are based on our natural and

cultural experiences. Secondly, ontological metaphor refers to that human experiences with physical objects provide the basis for ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances. It means to materialize experience, that is, using concrete objects to understand our abstract experience. Thirdly, structural metaphor provides highly structured, clearly delineated source domain to structure target domain. It implies how one is metaphorically structured in terms of another.

2.2. Image Schema

Image Schema is the basic concept and core theory in cognitive linguistics. It can offer the basic spatial meaning, and other non-spatial meanings can be constructed through metaphorical extension.

Since the birth of image schema theory, many scholars have studied it in depth. The first one to classify image schema was Johnson. In his book *The Body in the Mind* published in 1987, he lists 27 image schemas. Lakoff (1987:23) mainly discussed 7 image schemas: CONTAINER, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, LINK, PART-WHOLE, CENTER-PERIPHERY, UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, which also relate to the metaphorical study of preposition.

According to Li (2007:3), image schema has several distinguished features. Firstly, image schema can be represented by sketches. Image schema is obtained through a high degree of abstraction of spatial relationships, thus most image schema can be represented by simple graphics such as lines. We can use the following diagram to represent the sketch of path schema:



Figure 2.2 The sketch of path schema

Secondly, image schema is a type of domain. Domain is an important concept in cognitive linguistics as well. Clausner and Croft (1999:4) argued that the key to determining two different domains depends entirely on the concepts within the domain. Therefore, they believe that image schema can categorize concepts in the same way as the domain.

In conclusion, metaphor and image schema are two major approaches to preposition cognition. Metaphor allows us to understand one domain of physical experience in terms of another, while image schema covers a wide range of experiential structures that are pervasive in experiences, and can be metaphorically elaborated to provide for our understanding of more abstract domains (Gibbs, 1994:5; Johnson, 1987:7; Lakoff, 1987:8).

2.3. The Metaphorical Study of Preposition

As an essential category of grammar, English prepositions can link nouns, pro-

nouns and so on to other words in a sentence. Traditional schools of linguistics have made their own contributions to the study of prepositions. However, they just interpret the uses of a given preposition according to the meaning of the nominal phrases that the preposition is combined with.

In terms of the metaphorical study of preposition, cognitive linguistics illustrates the comprehension of polysemous prepositions. At abroad, Brugman (1981:11) was the first to begin a study of prepositions in the book *The Story of over: polysemy, semantics, and the structure of the lexicon*. He concludes that the meaning of the preposition “over” could be explained from perspectives of metaphor and image schema in cognitive linguistics. Since then, the research on metaphorical study of preposition in English has become an important research problem in the field of second language acquisition and a focus of polysemy research (Tyler, Mueller&Ho, 2011:32).

At home, Mao Zhihui(2005:3) discussed spatial metaphorical meanings of the word “within” from cognitive linguistics and revealed functions of human body experience and cognitive processes in building abstract meanings. Bi Yiqing(2006:7) explored the cognitive basis of polysemy in prepositions, using “over” and “under” as examples to analyze the influence of central schema and variant schemas on polysemy in the spatial domain, as well as the impact of metaphorical extension on meanings in the abstract domain. She pointed out that while image schema can explain many meanings of prepositions, some meanings can only be explained through metaphor. This study skillfully combines metaphor and polysemy, providing a direction for the application of spatial metaphors in the study of polysemy. Qin Xiaofei(2017:8) analyzed the metaphorical meanings of the preposition “for” based on the theory of image schema. Not only did she depict the central and extend image schema of “for” in detail, but more importantly, she explained how the original meaning of “for” was metaphorically projected into the domains of direction, purpose, cause, quantity, and emotion, offering high reference value and opening up new research methods for subsequent scholars. Since then, more and more scholars combined metaphor and image schema with projection together to explore the polysemy prepositions and semantics. Bao Shunli (2020:8) used image schema to demonstrate the prototypical meaning of the preposition “toward” and based on the meanings listed in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (5th Edition)*, found that the prototypical meaning was metaphorically mapped to the domains of time, relationship, and purpose. She further pointed out the mainstream role of image schema and metaphor theory in the study of prepositional semantics, marking the formal and effective involvement of dictionaries in the study of polysemy and cognitive linguistics. Zhou Ling (2022:2) explored the metaphorical cognition and its semantics of the preposition “through” based on image schema and pointed out that “through” holds one prominent prototypical semantic and

two expanded semantics image schemas and that the spatial meanings of “through” are projected into other domains including reason domain, communication domain and so on. Zhao Nana and Rong Nannan(2024:6) used the similar method to analyse the cognitive semantics of the preposition “over” by means of metaphor and image schema theory, helping understand the meaning of “over” and promote the research. The database they referred to was the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition) and proved again the metaphor is available and significant.

From the review of past research, it is evident that although the multiple meanings of prepositions presented in dictionaries seem to have no discernible pattern, scholars have meticulously extracted commonalities and identified similarities using conceptual metaphor and image schema theory. They have consistently found that there are intricate connections between the multiple meanings of prepositions, not only distinguishing between basic and extended meanings but also involving a cross-domain mapping process from the spatial domain to the abstract domain through metaphor.

3. Metaphorical Study of WITH

According to the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition), there are seventeen denotative meanings of WITH. In this section, they will be analyzed from the perspective of metaphor and image schema with examples respectively.

3.1. The Metaphor Domains of With

There are totally seventeen meanings of preposition “with” referring to the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition), those are: (1)in the company or presence of somebody/something; (2)having or carrying something; (3)using something; (4)used to say what fills, covers, etc.; (5)in opposition to somebody/ something; against something/somebody; (6)concerning; in the case of; (7)used when considering one fact in relation to another; (8)including; (9)used to show the way in which somebody does something; (10)because of something and as it happens; (11) in the same direction as something; (13) used to show who has possession of or responsibility for something; (14) employed by; using the services of; (15) showing separation from something/somebody; (16) despite something; (17) used in exclamations (used for complaint). Some of metaphorical meanings can only be interpreted in the context and others do not need context because the metaphorical meanings are fixed in the entry of dictionary. Most of example sentences and contexts are from the dictionary.

3.1.1. The Ontological Metaphor

It means to materialize experience, that is, using concrete objects to understand

our abstract concepts. The preposition “with” itself is an abstract preposition, which cannot be felt or touched. Therefore, by regarding it as a concrete objects, learners are allowed to comprehend its meaning better. One of the most typical types of it is CONTAINER METAPHOR, which containerizes the ontology that is not a container itself (such as emotions, horizons, events, behaviors, states, moods, etc.), so that it has boundaries and its contents can be entered and quantified. For instance, STATE IS CONTAINER. When people say in an abstract status, it may mean inside the container. On the contrary, not being in that state means outside the container. In the sentence “His father is out of control.”, “out of control” means outside control, which is “lose control”.

As to the preposition with, whose denotative meaning refers to accompanied by (another person or thing), almost all the connotative meanings are originated from it through metaphor.

EG.1 He behaved with great dignity.

“Dignity” is a kind of state, which is not concrete. There is not such a tangible thing called “dignity”, thus it can not occur “accompanied by (another person or thing)” like the sentence “He walks in with several books”. But when it is compared to a container which is tangible and concrete in terms of metaphor, it is easier to understand the sentence. “Dignity” can be seen as a concrete thing like “book” which can co-occur with subject. As a state, when it co-occurs with something or somebody, it is in that state. “With dignity” means in a kind of dignity state.

EG.2 Can we dispense with the formalities?

“Formalities” itself is also a kind of abstract concept. It is different from the last example, because its meaning is based on the context, especially the word “dispense”. At the first place, “with” means “accompanied by” or “occur together”, but when it comes with “dispense” and then forms “dispense with”, it conveys totally opposite meaning, that is, do it without something. Thus, the example sentence can be realized as “Can we do it without the formalities?”

3.1.2. The Structural Metaphor

Structural metaphor is how one concept is metaphorically constructed from another concept. Among the three types of conceptual metaphors, structural metaphor is the most commonly used. It provides the most abundant resources for us to understand, produce and create metaphors. Structural metaphor enables us to construct another concept with a highly structured and clearly defined concept. It provides highly structured, clearly delineated source domain to structure target domain. It implies how one is metaphorically structured in terms of another.

EG.3 a girl with red hair (=a girl who has red hair)

As shown in the example, the use of a preposition “with” can simplify a com-

plicated clause to construct a relatively high structure. Connecting with teaching and learning experience, students may feel confused when they see the construction “ a girl who has red hair” because its structure is a relatively complex clause, then teachers can explain the structure by means of another simple construction. That is to say, “with” is the target domain from people’s real experience because it can help people to deconstruct and comprehend another structure, which is called the source domain.

3.1.3. The Orientational Metaphor

The orientational metaphor is often connected with prepositional study as the spatial prepositions account for major part of preposition. Although “with” is not a kind of typical spatial preposition, it can express location relationship. At the same time, it also add its own meaning and put it on the orientation.

EG.4 The keys are with reception.

EG.5 I bank with the HSBC.

“With” in this sentence can express “in reception” and is used to show who has possession of or responsibility. More than just a location relationship, “with” in this context also implies that the reception is in charge of or take responsibility of the keys. As for the example 5, “with the HSBC” not just means the expressive location relationship that “my money is stored in the HSBC” , it can be understood as “I use the services of the HSBC” .

EG.6 Marine mammals generally swim with the current.

It also shows that “with” conveys different and it depends on various contexts.

“With the current” separately may be understand as under the trend of current, while in the sentence, especially with the verb “swim” , it reminds learners “swim in river” or something related to water. Thus “swim with the current” means to swim along the water. By connecting with the center meaning of the word “with” , it is obviously that the expanded meaning stems from its core meaning.

To make a conclusion, “with” conveys many extended meanings and these extended meanings of the proposition are mostly originated from its basic meaning.

3.2. Metaphorical Mapping of WITH

Experience is a basis for metaphorical mapping from source to target domain. The experience has its own structure which called image schema, in term of which metaphorical mapping occurs.

3.2.1. Mapping to Reason Domain

EG.7 The shadows lengthened with the approach of sunset.

EG.8 Skill comes with practice.

In this case, it is obvious that every expanded meaning is related to the basic meaning. Briefly speaking, the basic meaning of “with” can be realized as “and”, thus although “with” firstly shows reason in these two sentences, its core meaning also can make a difference. In the example sentence 7, “the shadows lengthened” because of “the approach of sunset”. What hides behind it is the reasonable logic relationship that only when sunset occurs the shadows would lengthen at the same time. In the example sentence 8, “comes with” means “comes together”. But the later collocation just expresses co-occurrence without reason logic. “With” can imply that practice is the essential precondition of “skill”.

3.2.2. Mapping to Mode Domain

Mode means a particular way of doing something. The word “with” also can map to the mode domain to express the method of doing something.

EG.9 Cut it with a knife.

EG.10 The bag was stuffed with dirty clothes.

In the example sentence 9, “a knife” is the tool of “cut”. Thus “with” express the tool of doing an action. In the example sentence 10, “dirty clothes” is the material used to fill the container “the bag”. Thus “with” here is used to elicit the material.

3.2.3. Mapping to Communication Domain

EG.11 I had an argument with my boss.

Communication requires more than two people who starting exchange information with each other. “Argument” means to exchange ideas vehemently, and “with” here is used to introduce the object of communication.

4. Conclusion and Implication

Besides these separate usage, “with” also be widely used together with certain verbs and then cause set phrases. Similar with its metaphorical terms and image schema, the meanings of “with” in set phrases are also related to its basic meaning.

Through analyzing the metaphorical semantics and the image schema, the comprehension of the preposition “with” and its usage can be promoted. By explaining and understanding the spatial and metaphorical meaning of prepositions from a cognitive perspective, learners can get rid of the dilemma of learning how to use preposition properly and master the ability to make creative use of language by enabling learners to improve the structure concise, make the sentence vivid and enrich the expression.

However, there are many other prepositions are still not researched using the effective approach. It is supposed to do more related research for scholars and try to enhance the theoretical development. Meanwhile, metaphor usage of preposition has also attract many scholars to explore it in the field of second language acquisition.

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