

The TIME AS SPACE Metaphor in English and in French: A Cognitive Analysis

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■ ABSTRACT ■

Metaphors were conceived of as a figure of speech whose role consisted in merely ornamenting the language. However, with their seminal book *Metaphors we live by* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson have revolutionized the conception of metaphors by placing them as central to human language, thought and action. Cognitive linguists argue that humans tend to conceptualize abstract concepts, such as time, through more experiential and tangible concepts. For instance, it has been observed that the abstract concept of time is conceptualized as space in several unrelated languages. According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), TIME AS SPACE metaphor covers two more specific metaphors: (1) The MOVING TIME metaphor wherein the observer is conceived as a stationary entity, as in *The end of the academic year is getting closer*; and (2) The TIME AS A LOCATION metaphor wherein times are conceived as stationary points and the observer is conceived as moving relative to these locations, as in *We are first approaching the end of the year*. This paper aims at probing the validity of the CMT representations of time on the basis of an analysis of time metaphors in two languages: English and French. This analysis is conducted within the framework of CMT. The results corroborate the CMT representations of time, suggesting that in both languages the abstract concept of time is expressed in spatial terms. In English, as in French, time is conceptualized as a moving entity and as having extension in space. In both languages, time can be seen as bounded; therefore, one can perform

actions within defined limits of time.

Key Words

Metaphor, CMT, French, English, space, time.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, metaphors were considered as figures of speech, i.e. as stylistic ornaments used by literary people to embellish verbal performance. Metaphor was a crucial feature of what has been called “poetic” language, i.e., a language containing “novel” expressions wherein words for a concept were employed outside their conventional meaning to express another somehow similar concept. It was widely assumed that everyday language was not metaphorical. Consequently, the study of metaphor as a phenomenon was limited to the realm of literature (Bacz 2001: 63).

The originality of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) lies in the fact that the so-called “metaphorical” uses of language ceased to be viewed as figurative ornaments of rhetorical style, but came to be perceived and studied as a surface realization of the speakers’ thought. In other words, with the CMT, metaphors have come to be studied as reflecting how native speakers conceptualize abstract concepts making use of the concepts that are familiar to them from everyday experience. Thus, metaphor comes to be considered as a matter of language, thought, and action.

For the CMT, metaphor is a cognitive instrument involving a process of “conceptualizing one mental domain in terms of another,” a mental operation which cognitive linguists call a “cross-domain mapping” (Lakoff 1993: 202). The term domain used in this definition refers to a body of knowledge “experienced and stored for a certain field by individuals and social groups or cultures” (Ungerer & Schmidt 1996: 120). Metaphorical mapping implies transfer from the source domain to the target domain.

What gets transferred in the process is the entire structure of internal relationships characterizing the domain of the source category. Internal relationships of the source category that exploited in a given metaphor are called “structural mapping.” They capture basic structural correspondences between the source and the target categories and are reflected in language by a series of linguistic metaphors (Bacz 2001: 63). For example, in the metaphor TIME AS AN OBJECT, one such an analogy would be: GIVING AN OBJECT CORRESPONDS TO GIVING TIME and it would be reflected by such everyday expressions as “give me time to conduct the project” and “I will give you three weeks to get ready for the quiz.”

2. Spatial Metaphorization of Time

It has been noticed by several scholars that space has an impact on human thought and on our understanding of time. For instance, Lakoff asserts that our metaphorical understanding of time in terms of space is biologically determined “in our visual systems, we have detectors for time. Thus, it makes good biological sense that time should be understood in terms of things and motion” (1993: 218). Lakoff and Johnson state that “it is virtually impossible to conceptualize time without metaphor” and that “most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space” (139). Thus, humans use concepts referring to concrete physical experiences (eg. *SPACE*) to understand and express concepts referring to more abstract concepts (eg. *TIME*).

According to the CMT, the TIME A SPACE metaphor covers two more specific metaphors: (1) The MOVING TIME metaphor wherein the observer is conceived as a stationary entity, as in *The end of the academic year is getting closer*; and (2) The TIME AS A LOCATION metaphor wherein times are conceived as stationary points and the observer

is conceived as moving relative to these locations, as in *We are first approaching the end of the year*.

This paper aims at probing the validity of Lakoff and Johnson's representations of time on the basis of an analysis of time metaphors in two languages: English and French. This analysis is conducted within the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

This paper comprises two main sections. The first section outlines the basic concepts of the study's theoretical framework, i.e. the CMT. The second section gives insights into similarities of the conceptualization of time as space in French and English by showing that, in both languages, the abstract concept of time is conceptualized and expressed in terms of a moving entity and a location.

3. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

The CMT forms the theoretical basis for the analysis of time metaphors in English and French presented in this paper. This section will outline the main theoretical tenets of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

The originality of the CMT such as that developed by Lakoff and others in the 80's is attributable to the way it treats metaphors and the importance it attributes to metaphorical processes in human language and cognition. According to this theory, metaphor is the essence of human language, thought, and actions.

For the CMT, metaphor is a motor for action, influencing our actions, behaviours and attitudes in the physical world. For instance, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR in English, not only enables English speakers to understand and talk about the concept of argument in terms of war by transferring elements of the domain of *WAR* onto elements of the domain of *ARGUMENT*, but it also shapes their behaviours and attitudes when carrying out an argumentative act. Thus, despite the

differences between the act of argumentation, i.e. a verbal conflict, and the act of war, i.e., an armed conflict, when arguing, many of the verbal actions are shaped by the image-schematic structure of the war domain. Thus, when carrying out an argumentative act, English speakers *attack* the opponent's view, *defend* their position, *support* their arguments, try to make their arguments *solid* and *strong* to *win*, not to *lose*, and by the end of the argumentative act, they conceive of themselves as either *losers* or *winners* (KÖvecses 2002: 194).

Interestingly enough, metaphors have been shown to influence our reasoning, attitudes, and actions in different areas, such as teaching and learning (Block 1992: 41), political discourse (Mio 1997: 113; Charteris-Black 2005: 166; Kennedy 2000: 209), social policy (Romaine 1996: 175) and foreign policy (Ivie 1987: 165).

3.1. Types of Metaphors

The CMT distinguishes between *conceptual metaphor*, on the one hand, and *linguistic metaphors*, on the other hand. What native speakers say is linguistic metaphors. Conceptual metaphor, on the other hand, refers to a mental representation that describes how two words or expressions from apparently disparate domains may be associated at the underlying level. As such, conceptual metaphor is an abstract notion revealed through linguistic metaphors. For instance, English linguistic metaphors used when talking about time, such as *I am wasting my time* and *Use your time wisely*, are some of the linguistic realizations of the underlying conceptual metaphor TIME AS A LIMITED RESOURCE.

The CMT argues that the essence of a conceptual metaphor consists in the comprehension of one concept in terms of another. It is understood in terms of the systematic set of mappings that characterize the transfer from one concept to another. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor TIME AS AN OBJECT, the elements of the source domain, *OBJECT*, map onto elements in the target domain, *TIME*. Thus, the possession

of an object corresponds to the possession of time, taking an object corresponds to taking time, etc.

3.2. Functions of Conceptual Metaphors

Cognitive linguists argue that from the point of view of their functions, conceptual metaphors can be structural, ontological and orientational. Structural metaphors allow us to understand the target domain in terms of the structure of the source domain. This understanding occurs through conceptual mappings between the source and the target domains. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor TIME AS A LIMITED RESOURCE, elements of *LIMITED RESOURCE* domain (source) are mapped onto elements of *TIME* domain (target). The TIME AS A LIMITED RESOURCE metaphor accounts for a large number of linguistic metaphors in English, such as “It is a waste of time.” The mappings of structures such as the ability of a limited resource to be wasted explain why these linguistic metaphors of time mean what they do: they provide a basic overall structure, hence understanding, of the notion of time in terms of a limited resource.

In ontological metaphors, we conceptualize our experiences in terms of objects, substances, and containers. Personification, for instance, is a form of ontological metaphor. E.g. the conceptual metaphor TIME AS A PERSON underlies the English linguistic metaphor *Time works wonders, Time tries all, Time will tell us*. In personifying time, which is not human, we understand the target concept better by attributing to it the human ability to try, tell and work.

As explained by Kövecses, the role of orientational metaphors is to make target concepts coherent in our conceptual systems. The name “orientational” derives from the fact that metaphors that serve this function relate to the basic spatial orientations, such as up-down, center-periphery, etc. For instance, MORE IS UP, LESS IS DOWN are orientational conceptual metaphors underlying the English linguistic metaphors *Speak up, Keep your voice down*. Cognitive linguists contend that these three

types of metaphors are experientially motivated in that we use our basic and physical experiences to understand concepts with which we are not very familiar (2002: 195).

3.3. Constraints on Metaphoric Mappings

The CMT maintains that human experience limits the selection of particular source domains for particular abstract targets. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP, quantity is understood in terms of verticality because there is, in our everyday experience, a correlation between quantity and verticality. We repeatedly see that when the quantity of a substance increases (MORE), the level of verticality rises (UP).

Some conceptual metaphors, e.g. emotions metaphors, have their experiential bases in the functioning of the human body and, thus, tend to be universal. For instance, the English conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEAT, as reflected in the linguistic metaphors *To be burning up* and *To be stewing*, is grounded in human experience of the emotion of anger which is accompanied by physiological effects, such as feeling hot, burning, interference with visual perception and redness of face and of neck. These conceptual metaphors of emotions tend to be found in unrelated languages, such as Chinese, Hungarian, Japanese, Polish, Tahitian, Wolof, and Zulu (KÖvecses 2002: 155; Yu 1995: 223).

Yet another restriction on metaphoric mappings is related to the partial nature of these mappings. The mappings between the source and the target domains are only partial, that is, only some parts of the source are mapped onto some parts in the target because a metaphor highlights some aspects of the target domain, and hides other aspects. For example, in the conceptual metaphor AN ARGUMENT IS A CONTAINER, as manifested by the English linguistic metaphor *Your argument has a lot of content*, the core of the argument highlights and focuses on specific aspects of the concept of argument, its content; it hides other aspects, such as its progress, its construction and its strength (KÖvecses 2002:

145).

The CMT holds that the Invariance Principle structures metaphor because it involves the following constraint on conceptual mappings:

Given the aspects that participate in a metaphorical mapping, map as much knowledge from the source onto the target as is coherent with image-schematic properties of the target (KÖvecses 2002: 103).

The Principle guarantees that such things as interiors or exteriors of containers from the source domain will get mapped respectively onto interiors and exteriors in the target domain. For instance, in the TIME AS AN OBJECT metaphor, the Invariance Principle ensures the following mappings:

- To possess an object→ To possess time.
- To take an object→ To take time.
- To give an object to someone else→ To give time to someone else.
- To lose an object→ To lose time.
- To steal an object→ To steal time.

4. The TIME AS SPACE Metaphor in English and French

In this section, it will be shown that both languages conceptualize the abstract concept of time through more experiential spatial source domains, i.e. a moving entity and a location.

4.1. The TIME AS A MOVING ENTITY Metaphor

The spatial schema that accounts for the metaphor TIME AS A MOVING ENTITY is explained by Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 141) as follow “There is a lone, stationary observer facing a fixed direction. There is an indefinitely

long sequence of objects moving past the observer from front to back.”

Both languages conceptualize time as a moving entity, which is reflected by the use of motion words with reference to time, such as “come”, “arrival”, “approach,” “fuit,” “passe,” as in the following examples:

- 1) **The arrival of the computer revolution** and the founding of the computer Age have been announced many times (Postman 2001: 326).
- 2) Never think of **the future**, it **comes** soon enough (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 244).
- 3) **The time is approaching** when we must think about buying a new house (*Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* 1989: 48).
- 4) **Le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va!** (Pierre Ronsard).
Time goes by !
- 5) **Le temps passe** (Jules Romains).
Times pass by
- 6) **Le temps fuit** sans doute (Hubert Aquin).

Time flees with no doubt.

In their literal sense, these motion verbs describe how a physical entity changes from one place to another space. However, when used non-literally, i.e. metaphorically, these motion verbs have nothing to do with physical motion. For instance, in sentences like *Christmas is approaching* and *le nouvel an s'approche*, no movement transpires. Instead, time is understood and conceptualized as “moving.” This is what some linguists call “fictive motion.”

Interestingly enough, in both languages, a motion verb may grammaticalize, adopting a new grammatical function, such as the English

“go” and the French “aller,” which have become future markers, as in *I am going to drive home* and *Je vais travailler ce soir*.

In both languages, a typical characteristic of verbs expressing motion in time is deicticity, as in the following examples, which all contain deictic motion terms, such as “come,” “approach,” “arrival,” “passe”:

- 7) **The arrival of the computer revolution** and the founding of the computer Age have been announced many times (Postman 2001: 326).
- 8) Never think of **the future**, it **comes** soon enough (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 244).
- 9) **The time is approaching** when we must think about buying a new house (*Oxford Advanced Dictionary* 1989: 48).
- 10) **Le temps passe**. Et chaque fois qu’il y a du temps qui passe, il y a quelque chose qui s’efface (Jules Romains).

Time goes by. Whenever time passes by, something gets erased.

In examples (7)-(10), events (computer revolution, the future, the time, le temps) are understood as displacing themselves from where they were at first to where the observer is. In other words, the use of the deictic verbs of motion with nominal expressions referring to time implies that these events are conceptualized as coming toward, i.e. moving, from the front in the observer’s direction.

4.1.1. Time Brings Something with It

The time not only moves towards the observer, but brings something with it, making an impact on the observer by whom it passes, as in the following examples:

- 11) **Time brings everything to those who can wait for it** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 598).
- 12) You are just **looking forward dreamily to the weekend** (Roberts 2001: 154).

The observer can be upset at the coming time, as in the following sentences:

- 13) **One can never tell what the future will bring** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 244).
- 14) **Fear not the future, weep not for the past** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 244).
- 15) **C'est l'angoisse du temps qui passe qui nous fait tant parler du temps qu'il fait** (Jean Pierre Jeunet).

It is the fear of time which goes by that makes us talk about time.

As one cannot guess what the future holds for us, the observer has no choice other than wait for the future to come to where he is, to see what it has in stock for him, as in example (13). The observer might weep over the past for when the present time left him, it took away things that were precious to him, such as youth and happy past moments, as in (14). These things cannot be back once they are gone with time. In (15), the passage of time is portrayed as capable of triggering the observer's worries and apprehensions.

4.1.2. Pace of Time in Motion

Time moves at different speed and pace; it can go slow or fast. This characteristic of time motion is reflected by the following examples:

- 16) **Little by little time goes by**, short if you sing, long if you sigh

(*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 595).

- 17) **Time goes slow** for those who watch it (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 597).
- 18) **Time passes quickly** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 599).
- 19) **Le temps passe si vite** qu'on ne le voit pas passer. Et pourtant il passe, il ne fait que ça, il fait aussi vieillir (Paul Toupin).

Time goes by so fast that we do not see it pass by. It goes by, it is the only thing it is doing, and it makes us get older.

20) Comment faire **passer le temps plus rapidement** ?

How to make time pass faster?

The motion of time is experienced subjectively by the observer. In examples (16) and (17), time is experienced as going slowly when you spend it unsatisfied complaining about things, and fast, if you spend it having fun. Evans (2004) stresses this idea stating that a given duration of time is experienced as lasting longer or shorter depending on the observer's state of awareness. She observes that in our human experience of time, the duration of time in situations of suffering and danger is experienced as long, while the situations of routine activities or when we are enjoying ourselves, time appears to pass more quickly.

4.1.3. The Manner of Time Motion

Both languages pay attention to the manner in which time metaphorically moves by using motion verbs encoding manner, such as “fly,” “march on,” “fuit” and “s’envole”:

- 21) **All the Christmases roll down** the hill towards the Welsh-speaking sea (Thomas 2001: 33).
- 22) **Time marches on** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 33).
- 23) **Time flies like an arrow**, and time lost never returns (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 597).
- 24) **Le temps fuit sans soute** (Hubert Aquin).
Time flees with no doubt.
- 25) J'aime quand **le temps s'envole** (Georges Perros).

I like it when time flies.

In examples (21)-(25), time is shown to move in different manners: it rolls down like a ball in (21), it walks with regular and firm steps as soldiers do in (22). Time can flee and fly through the air as in (23) - (25).

4.1.3. The Non Return of Time

Time, once gone, cannot be back to where the observer is. This characteristic of time is reflected by the following examples:

- 26) **Time flies like an arrow**, and time lost **never returns** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 597).
- 27) **Le temps qu'on perd ne revient pas** (Jean Marie Poupart).
The time we waste is never back.

In examples (26) and (27), time is viewed as moving fast despite all that might happen in the surroundings. Once it passes us by, it cannot be back.

4.1.4. The Impact of the Motion of Time on Things and Observer

Since time is conceptualized as a moving entity, it can make an impact on the observer and on the observer's environment as it passes by. The impact of time is illustrated by the following examples:

- 28) **Time changes the oak into a coffin** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 598).
- 29) **Time has not been nice to her looks** (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 1989: 1343).
- 30) **Le temps mûrit toute chose, par le temps toutes choses viennent en évidence** (François Rabelais).

Time ripens everything, over the time everything gets evidence.

- 31) **Le temps** passe si vite qu'on ne le voit pas passer. Et pourtant il passe, il ne fait que ça, **il fait aussi vieillir** (Paul Toupin).

Time goes by so fast that we do not see it pass. It goes by, it is the only thing it is doing, and it makes us get older.

- 32) Ce n'est pas nous qui décidons de notre temps, mais **le temps qui tisse les jours, fait et défait les volontés, les aspirations de l'Homme** (Laurence Harvey).

It is not the Man that decides, but it is the time that makes the days, shapes the will, and structures Man's aspirations.

- 33) Le temps passe. Et chaque fois qu'il y a du **temps qui passe, il y a quelque chose qui s'efface** (Jules Romains).

Time goes by. Whenever time passes by, something gets erased.

34) **An hour may destroy what was an age of building** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 594).

35) **Time devours all things** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 597).

Examples (28)-(35) show that, in both languages, time is conceptualized as capable of changing things, of exerting power on the observer and on the environment, and of causing damage so bad that things no longer exist. Time can transform people's bodies as in (29) and (31) and defy people's wills as in (32); it can also destroy and erase the environment in its passage as in (33) and (34). These kinds of acts typically require agents with particular skills. Devouring, for instance, as in (35), evokes the image of a ferocious beast.

In this section, it has been shown that time, in both languages, is conceptualized as a moving entity. Time, in its motion, brings something with it to the observer. It metaphorically moves at different speed and in different manners. A characteristic of time shared by the two languages is that it cannot be back once gone. Interestingly enough, moving time is capable of making an impact on the observer and changing the environment it passes by.

The following section will deal with the spatial metaphor TIME AS A LOCATION wherein times are conceived as stationary points and the observer is conceived as moving relative to these locations, as in *We are first approaching the end of the year* and *on s'approche du nouvel an*.

4.2. The TIME AS A LOCATION Metaphor

Since time is a path on the ground the observer moves over, it has

length and can thus be measured. Thus, time is expressed as having extension in space, as in the following examples:

- 36) **Over the past year**, home computers have begun outselling televisions (Tierney 2001: 291).
- 37) It seemed to me unparsimonious to keep expending all that energy on such a **long period** of vulnerability and defenselessness (Thomas 2001: 246).
- 38) Joseph Stalin ruled the Soviet Union **from 1928 to 1953** (Swerlow 2001: 148).
- 39) J'ai passé **une longue période** en Angleterre.

I spent a long period in England.

Examples (36)-(39) reflect the conceptualization of time as an extension. The duration of time is expressed in terms of spatial extensions. Thus, the words usually used to talk about spatial extensions, such as “over,” “long,” “longue” and the spatial preposition “from” and “to” are borrowed from the domain of space to express duration in time. These terms are primarily spatial because in the dictionaries their spatial uses are listed before their temporal uses, which indicates that the spatial uses are more frequent, and, therefore, more basic.

Interestingly enough, the observer can manipulate the extension of time by doing something to shorten or lengthen it. In examples (40) and (41) below the verbs “lengthen,” “shorten” and “raccourcir” indicate that characteristic of time: its capability to yield to the activity of lengthening or shortening performed by the observer:

- 40) Many individuals **shorten their days** by **lengthening their nights** (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs* 1992: 136).

- 41) Je compte **raccourcir mon séjour**.

I intend to shorten my stay.

Since humans can manipulate time by making it appear short or long, time can be characterized as elastic with respect to its length and as vulnerable to manipulation.

4.2.1. Time as a Container

Time can be seen as bounded; therefore, one can perform actions within defined limits of time. Time within which actions are performed can be seen as a temporal container for events:

- 42) **Within five minutes**, he knew my age (Clark 2003: 5).
43) **To fill the hour-** that is happiness (*A Dictionary of American Proverbs 1992: 593*).
44) **In the afternoon**, the plane coming in from the South flies over the water.
45) Je finirai le projet **dans dix jours**.

I will finish this project within ten days.

In examples (42)-(45), time is conceptualized as a location with an inside capable of containing events and states. It is argued that the container-schema is the dominant ontological conceptual metaphor that provides mapping domains for many non-spatial areas of knowledge. Lakoff and Johnson argue that even humans are containers: “we are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the world as outside us” (29).

5. Conclusion

The goal set out at the beginning of the paper was to give insights into similarities of conceptual metaphors of time as space in two languages: English and French. The results corroborate the CMT representations of time, suggesting that in both languages the abstract concept of time is expressed in spatial terms. In English, as in French, time is conceptualized as a moving entity and as having extension in space. In both languages, time can be seen as bounded; therefore, one can perform actions within defined limits of time.

These similarities can be attributed to cultural, geographical and historical factors. In fact, English and French are geographically, historically and etymologically close languages.

This study is contributive to metaphor research. For instance, the choice of conventional metaphors as the focus of this study has been contributive because there is a continued need for thorough research of conventional metaphors. As mentioned in the Introduction, for centuries, the treatment of metaphors has been limited to novel metaphors only; conventional metaphors were still undiscovered and, as such, banished from the realm of metaphor research. It is only recently, with the emergence of the CMT in the 1980s, that conventional metaphors have started to gain credence. Yet, the balance has still not quite been adjusted. As stressed by Yu, this area of study has remained almost “uncultivated” (223). Thus, the conceptual metaphors of time in English and in French discussed in this paper represent a contribution towards this area.

The paper has contributed to research into the concept of time by shedding light on the concept of time from the linguistic perspective of English and French. Indeed, even though the concept of time has drawn the interest of several disciplines, it is a topic which has remained underresearched. Thus, this study represents an effort to study this still underresearched domain of time metaphors.

This comparative study is revealing of how languages and cultures work. It has uncovered some similarities between English and French in the way the two languages conceptualize time as space.

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