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THE COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC NATURE OF METAPHOR, METONYMY, AND SYNECDOCHE AND THE MECHANISMS OF MEANING CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract. The semantic potential of linguistic units extends beyond their nominative function and is intrinsically associated with the human cognitive capacity for conceptualization, associative thinking, and the restructuring of information. Although metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche have traditionally been regarded as figures of speech in classical rhetoric, cognitive linguistics conceptualizes them as fundamental mechanisms underlying the organization of human cognition. Metaphorical mapping is based on perceived similarities and systematic correspondences between distinct conceptual domains, whereas metonymic mapping operates through associative relationships among elements within a single conceptual domain. Synecdoche represents a particular manifestation of metonymic processes by foregrounding part–whole relationships. The interaction of these mechanisms facilitates semantic extension, the implicit communication of information, linguistic economy and enhanced communicative effectiveness. A comparative examination of theoretical approaches developed in Azerbaijani and international linguistic scholarship demonstrates that metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche function both as relatively autonomous cognitive-semantic phenomena and as interconnected mechanisms of meaning construction. Their realization in discourse generates diverse semantic nuances depending on the stylistic characteristics of the text, communicative intentions, and the culturally conditioned experiences of language users.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, conceptual mapping, semantic transformation, focalization, implicit meaning, linguistic economy.

Semantic changes and figurative mappings within the semantic system of language constitute significant manifestations of the human capacity to perceive, categorize and conceptualize reality. The extension of a lexical unit beyond its primary nominative meaning to designate new concepts is not merely a consequence of lexical-semantic development but also a linguistic manifestation of cognitive activity. From this perspective, metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche not only expand the expressive potential of language but also contribute to establishing relationships between concepts, condensing complex information and maintaining the semantic coherence of texts.

In traditional linguistics, metaphor has generally been defined as a figure of speech based on similarity, metonymy as one based on contiguity, and synecdoche as one involving part–whole relationships. However, the development of cognitive linguistics since the late twentieth century has provided an alternative theoretical framework for interpreting these phenomena. According to

this perspective, figurative mapping involves more than a transformation in the meaning of a linguistic unit; it results from interactions among conceptual structures underlying human thought.

Shenli Song compares the cognitive mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy and demonstrates that they emerge from fundamentally different types of conceptual relationships. The author's position may be summarized as follows: “Metaphorical mapping is grounded in perceived similarities between distinct concepts, whereas metonymic mapping is based on relationships existing between the concepts themselves” [9, p. 68]. This distinction is particularly important for identifying the semantic nature of figurative expressions.

The relevance of this issue arises from the fact that the boundaries separating metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are not always clearly defined, their cognitive mechanisms occasionally overlap and they frequently interact within discourse. A comparative analysis of these phenomena contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying figurative meaning, the relationship between language and cognition, and the principles governing the construction of implicit information.

Within cognitive linguistics, metaphor is interpreted as a conceptual mechanism through which individuals understand one domain of experience in terms of another. In this process, the properties of a relatively concrete and experientially accessible source domain are projected onto a more abstract target domain. Consequently, the semantic structure of a metaphorical expression is determined not simply by the figurative use of individual words but by the conceptual correspondences underlying their interpretation.

In examining the theoretical foundations of conceptual metaphor and metonymy, Shehla Salmanova emphasizes that these phenomena constitute integral components of everyday language, cognition, and communication. Her theoretical position may be summarized as follows: “Metaphor and metonymy are not merely rhetorical devices but cognitive mechanisms reflecting embodied human experience and the conceptual organization of thought” [8, p. 144].

This approach demonstrates that metaphorical expressions are not arbitrary manifestations of linguistic imagery but operate according to systematic cognitive principles. For example, expressions such as losing time, gaining time and the depth of thought conceptualize abstract notions through material and spatial relationships. The representation of time as a resource that can be gained or lost reflects the conceptualization of human economic and social experience at the linguistic level. Metonymy, by contrast, involves a different mechanism of meaning construction. Rather than understanding one concept through the characteristics of another conceptual domain, metonymy foregrounds one element in place of another within the same conceptual structure. It thus brings an existing conceptual relationship into focus in accordance with a particular communicative intention.

Luo Rui-feng characterizes metonymy as both a cognitive and linguistic process, emphasizing that it performs not only a referential function but also contributes to conceptual understanding. According to the author's theoretical position, “Metonymy provides mental access to one conceptual entity through another entity situated within the same cognitive model” [6, p. 445].

This characteristic determines the communicative function of metonymy. For example, in the statement The university made a decision, the actual decision-makers are not the physical premises of the university but the authorized individuals representing the institution. Nevertheless, the name of the institution is sufficient to designate these individuals. Such nomination eliminates the need

for further explanation because the speaker and listener possess shared conceptual knowledge. This mechanism, which underlies metonymic relationships, is also consistent with the principle of linguistic economy. The speaker expresses a complex referential relationship through a single linguistic unit, while the listener reconstructs the intended meaning on the basis of contextual information and previously acquired knowledge.

One of the defining characteristics of metonymy is the existence of real, functional, spatial, temporal, or associative contiguity between concepts. Such relationships facilitate the establishment of new semantic connections within the meaning structure of a lexical unit. However, the mere existence of a relationship between concepts is insufficient for metonymic mapping to occur. A communicatively relevant aspect of that relationship must be selected and foregrounded.

In her cognitive analysis of metonymy, Fangfang Ding distinguishes two essential characteristics: contiguity and prominence. Her theoretical argument may be expressed as follows: “The construction of metonymic meaning depends not only on conceptual contiguity but also on the cognitive prominence of one element within an associated conceptual structure” [2, p. 1836].

This perspective distinguishes metonymy from simple lexical substitution. The selection of a particular element in metonymic nomination depends on the speaker's intention and the semantic orientation of the discourse. For instance, in the expression The hall applauded, the spatial designation refers to the people occupying that space. By contrast, The hall emptied involves a more complex semantic relationship between the physical location and the movement of its occupants. Although both expressions involve a relationship between space and people, the direction of semantic foregrounding differs. In metonymic mapping, the selected element highlights a particular aspect of the overall situation. Consequently, the informational structure of the text is reorganized, directing attention toward a specific object, participant, or characteristic. Metonymy, therefore, functions not only as a means of nomination but also as a mechanism for organizing semantic focus.

The productivity of metonymic models is associated with their operation across different levels of language. This mechanism participates in lexical-semantic extension, the formation of phraseological units, syntactic condensation and the construction of discourse meaning. Accordingly, metonymy may be regarded as a cognitive mechanism connecting different components of the linguistic system.

The relationship between metonymy and synecdoche has remained a controversial issue throughout the history of linguistic scholarship. Although traditional rhetoric generally treats synecdoche as an independent figure of speech, contemporary cognitive approaches frequently regard it as a particular subtype of metonymy. This interpretation is based on the fact that both phenomena involve the redirection of meaning from one element to another within the same conceptual domain. Gunel Bayramova examines metonymy and synecdoche as figures of semantic focalization and emphasizes their underlying conceptual similarities. The author's position may be summarized as follows: “Metonymy and synecdoche represent different manifestations of the same conceptual association mechanism, with their distinctions primarily emerging from the direction of semantic relationships” [1, pp. 1–2].

The distinguishing feature of synecdoche lies in the use of part–whole, singular–plural, and genus–species relationships as the basis for semantic mapping. For example, in the expression fifty

head of cattle, the animals as complete entities are represented through a particular body part. Similarly, in the sentence All hands in the village were at work, the word hands represents individuals through an association with their labor. In these examples, the representation of the whole through one of its parts does not merely establish a quantitative relationship; it also foregrounds a particular semantic feature. In the first case, the emphasis falls on enumeration, whereas in the second, labor activity becomes semantically prominent. Thus, the function of synecdoche extends beyond the mechanical substitution of a whole by one of its constituent parts.

In her analysis of the stylistic characteristics of synecdoche in English and Azerbaijani, Madina Hasanova particularly emphasizes its relationship with metonymic mapping and the mechanism of ellipsis. Her argument may be summarized as follows: “Semantic transfers involving part–whole, singular–plural, and genus–species relationships in synecdoche are formed according to a metonymic model” [5, pp. 120–121].

This perspective demonstrates that synecdoche can be incorporated into the broader system of metonymy without denying its distinctive semantic characteristics. Whereas the direction of semantic mapping in synecdoche is primarily determined by quantitative and inclusion relationships, metonymy may activate a wider range of associations, including spatial, temporal, causal, author–work and producer–product relationships.

Nevertheless, not every instance of synecdoche can be adequately explained through a purely formal part–whole relationship. It is also necessary to consider which semantic characteristic is foregrounded within a particular context. Consequently, synecdoche should be examined at both the structural-semantic and cognitive-pragmatic levels.

Although the fundamental distinction between metaphor and metonymy concerns the direction of conceptual mapping, these mechanisms do not function in complete isolation in actual language use. In different types of discourse, a metonymic relationship may provide the foundation for metaphorical meaning, while a metaphorical model may be further specified through metonymic foregrounding.

An examination of theoretical studies devoted to the relationship between metaphor and metonymy indicates that the boundaries between these phenomena may intersect. “Metaphor and metonymy interact at different levels of linguistic and conceptual organization, contributing to the formation of complex semantic structures” [11, pp. 645].

Such interaction can be observed in expressions describing emotional states. For instance, in the phrase to explode with anger, emotional tension is conceptualized through the physical phenomenon of an explosion. Here, metaphorical mapping conveys the intensity of the emotional experience. At the same time, physiological tension and behavioral reactions associated with intense emotions may provide a metonymic foundation for the metaphorical interpretation.

A similar position is reflected in the work of Rixsitillayeva and Umirova, who associate the interaction of metaphor and metonymy with the flexibility and creativity of human cognition. Their argument may be summarized as follows: “Metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms may converge within a single expression, enabling meaning to emerge simultaneously at different cognitive levels” [7, p. 117]. Such interaction does not justify treating metaphor and metonymy as identical phenomena. Rather, it demonstrates that mechanisms operating according to different cognitive principles may participate in constructing the same semantic structure. Whereas

metaphor establishes new conceptual correspondences on the basis of perceived similarity, metonymy foregrounds a particular aspect of an existing conceptual relationship.

Therefore, an adequate analysis of figurative expressions cannot rely exclusively on their observable lexical form. It is necessary to identify the conceptual relationship underlying the construction of meaning, determine which element is foregrounded, and establish the communicative purpose served by the expression.

Within cognitive linguistics, physical, psychological, and social experience constitutes one of the fundamental conditions underlying meaning construction. The figurative meanings of linguistic units frequently emerge through the projection of human experiences associated with space, movement, direction, proximity, temperature, and other physical phenomena onto abstract concepts. In discussing the significance of metaphor in cognitive linguistics, Nigora Umarxanova emphasizes the role of embodied experience in the formation of primary and complex metaphors. Her position may be summarized as follows: “Primary metaphors reflect conceptual correspondences arising from direct bodily experience and provide the foundation for the development of more complex metaphorical structures” [10, p. 70].

This approach provides a cognitive explanation for expressions such as a warm relationship, a cold glance, a close friend, and a distant goal. Physical warmth is associated with positive emotional relationships, whereas coldness is linked to emotional distance. Similarly, spatial proximity becomes a means of expressing social and emotional closeness.

Although certain metaphorical correspondences occur in similar forms across different languages, their specific lexical realizations depend on national and cultural characteristics. For this reason, the analysis of conceptual metaphors requires a distinction between universal cognitive mechanisms and culturally specific patterns of conceptualization.

Experience also plays a significant role in metonymic models. However, the essential mechanism does not involve transferring one domain of experience onto another but rather activating associative relationships established within a particular experiential domain. For example, in the expression a person of the pen, the writing instrument is associated with the activity of writing and consequently becomes a representative designation for the individual engaged in that activity. Thus, metaphor and metonymy function as experience-based cognitive mechanisms that enable individuals not only to name reality but also to interpret it within a structured system of conceptual relationships.

The functional potential of metonymy is particularly evident in journalistic and informational discourse. Metonymic models are widely employed in news texts to designate events, institutions, and social actors. These models facilitate the concise presentation of information while simultaneously performing evaluative and persuasive functions.

In her examination of metonymy as a cognitive mechanism in news discourse, Fazila Guliyeva distinguishes its nominative and communicative functions. According to her theoretical position, “Metonymic nomination in news discourse facilitates the economical expression of information while potentially shifting the focus of attention and generating positive or negative evaluations” [3, p. 3001].

This characteristic is particularly significant for the semantic-pragmatic analysis of informational texts. For example, expressions such as Baku made a decision, Brussels issued a statement, and The university launched a new project employ the names of places or institutions

to represent specific decision-making agents. Although such expressions enable information to be communicated concisely and effectively, they may also background the individuals or institutional bodies actually responsible for the decisions.

The replacement of an individual agent with an institutional designation through metonymic nomination influences the representation of an event. Information is not merely condensed but also structured from a particular perspective. The selection of relationships among participants, causes, and consequences depends on the ideological orientation and communicative purpose of the text.

The discursive function of metonymy is therefore not restricted to reference. It also serves as a mechanism for selecting information, establishing semantic emphasis, and directing the interpretative activity of readers. In this respect, metonymic mapping demonstrates the interdependence of the cognitive and pragmatic dimensions of language.

One of the shared functional characteristics of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche is their capacity to express complex content through a limited number of linguistic units. Through figurative mapping, a single word or expression may activate an extensive conceptual structure. This process is associated with the principle of linguistic economy and simultaneously creates conditions for the emergence of implicit meaning.

Implicit meaning refers to semantic content that is not explicitly encoded in a linguistic expression but can be reconstructed through contextual information and shared knowledge. Such meaning is particularly prominent in metonymic and synecdochic expressions because one element assumes the semantic function of another, while the omitted component is recovered through contextual interpretation.

In examining implicit economy within the phraseological structures of poetry, Konul Hasanova analyzes the capacity of fixed expressions to produce conciseness and linguistic compression. Her findings may be summarized as follows: “Economy between the components of phraseological units allows expressions to become more concise while preserving semantic integrity and facilitating the implicit transmission of meaning” [4, p. 17].

This observation is also relevant to understanding the functional nature of metonymy and synecdoche. For example, in the expression All eyes were fixed on him, the word eyes represents the individuals observing the person concerned. Although the observers are not explicitly designated in the surface structure, their presence is semantically implied. Thus, a single lexical unit performs both nominative and descriptive functions.

A comparable mechanism can be observed in the expression to respect grey hair. Here, grey hair refers not merely to a physical characteristic but also activates social associations connected with old age and life experience. Through synecdochic mapping, a part represents the whole, while the selection of that particular part introduces an additional evaluative dimension. In metaphor, however, implicitness emerges through a different mechanism. Expressions such as the light of hope, the path of life, and the burden of memories represent certain characteristics of abstract concepts through concrete domains of experience. Since the entire semantic content of these expressions is not explicitly stated, the listener or reader must independently reconstruct the underlying conceptual correspondence. This characteristic demonstrates that figurative mappings contribute not only to linguistic economy but also to semantic condensation. Linguistic economy concerns the formal conciseness of an expression, whereas semantic condensation refers to the

concentration of extensive meaning potential within a limited linguistic structure. Although these processes are closely related, they should not be regarded as identical phenomena.

The capacity of figurative mappings to generate implicit meaning explains their particular prominence in literary texts. In poetic discourse, metaphor intensifies emotional and figurative conceptualization, metonymy foregrounds particular semantic elements, and synecdoche performs functions of generalization and specification through part–whole relationships. The combined operation of these mechanisms contributes to the multilayered semantic organization of literary discourse.

Conclusion. A comparative examination of the cognitive-semantic characteristics of metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche demonstrates that these phenomena are not confined to the figurative resources of language but play an essential role in human cognitive activity. Metaphor facilitates the understanding of abstract concepts by establishing correspondences between distinct conceptual domains; metonymy foregrounds associated elements within a single conceptual structure; and synecdoche redirects semantic focus through part–whole relationships. The analysis of the relationship between metonymy and synecdoche indicates that they share a common cognitive foundation while differing in their semantic scope and the nature of the relationships they foreground. Considering synecdoche within the broader framework of metonymy does not eliminate its distinctive stylistic potential. On the contrary, it provides a more comprehensive conceptual explanation of its functional characteristics.

The interaction between metaphor and metonymy confirms that the construction of figurative meaning constitutes a complex, multilevel process. Although these mechanisms operate according to different cognitive principles, they may complement one another within the semantic structure of a particular expression. Such interaction is especially evident in linguistic representations of emotional states, social relationships, and abstract concepts. The relationship between figurative mapping, linguistic economy and implicit meaning further expands the communicative functions of these phenomena. In metonymic and synecdochic models, the representation of one element through another contributes to the condensation of information, whereas metaphorical models enrich semantic potential through correspondences established between different conceptual domains.

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