

THE USAGE OF METAPHOR IN BUSINESS DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Metaphor is an important tool for developing business theories and communicating ideas in a business context. Linguistic research investigates the metaphors used in business English from various perspectives. This paper problematizes previous studies in terms of their applications of metaphor theories, the data and the methodological issues associated with metaphor identification and retrieval. These issues have profound influence on the findings and our knowledge of metaphors. It is argued that some of the studies employ a superficial view of metaphor and a more critical analysis and dynamic theories of metaphor is required. Furthermore, metaphor in multimodal communication needs more investigation. In addition, data are mainly written texts and thus spoken data require more attention in metaphor in business English research. What is more, clear criteria essential for identifying metaphorical expressions and methods for retrieving metaphors from large data sets are discussed. Only with more sophisticated use of metaphor theories, a wider range of data under investigation and suitable use of metaphor retrieval methods can we grasp a more thorough understanding of metaphor in business English. This knowledge can then be applied to language teaching, language description and critical studies of language and ideology.

Keywords: Business English, Cognitive Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Metaphor.

Introduction

In recent years, much research has demonstrated that metaphor plays an important role in business English. The example above illustrates how metaphor is used in business news. According to Charteris-Black and Ennis (2001: 254), here we see three metaphorical expressions ('attack', 'defence' and 'battered') that constitute a physical conflict metaphor which conceptualises trading as a fight. Furthermore, the metaphorical expressions 'haven' and 'float' show that market trading is conceptualised as a nautical domain. The importance of metaphor in business English has been confirmed by both economics and linguistics research. Studies have shown that metaphor is a crucial tool to develop theories in economics (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Khalil, 1998; McCloskey, 1995; Rindfleisch, 1996) and communicate ideas and business phenomena to the public (Silaški and Durovic, 2010a; Skorczynska and Deignan, 2006) Indeed, metaphor studies have made a substantial contribution to business English research. As such, this is a great opportunity to reflect on what has been done as well as to suggest a way forward.

This article reviews selected recent research on metaphor in business English. It aims to critically revisit the role of metaphor in business English. Essentially, this paper will problematize three issues concerning metaphor in business English: the applications of metaphor theories, the data and metaphor identification and retrieval. This paper will argue that in some studies the concept of metaphor has been applied. The attack on the Hong Kong dollar took on dangerous momentum after Taiwan abandoned its usual staunch defence of its currency late last week. Taiwan had been regarded as a haven of economic stability in the Far East, so badly battered by selling over the past two months, and its decision to allow the Taiwan dollar to float a powerfully negative message to investors in Hong Kong. [original emphasis] (Charteris-Black and Ennis, 2001: 254)

Text Types Used for Metaphor in Business English Research

Findings of studies on metaphor in business English are closely tied to the types of data under investigation. It could be argued that business genres are all related as Skorczynska & Deignan (2006) note that business magazines do use metaphorical expressions that originate from business science discourse such as business textbooks and research articles.

However, they also note that metaphors in business research articles are largely different from those in business media texts. Also, if we compare findings from Kheovichai's (2010) study which investigates business research articles and Koller's (2004) work which is based on business magazines, we can see the conceptualisation of merger and acquisition as a rape found in Koller's does not appear in Kheovichai. Differences in metaphor use across genres may not only be a matter of language but also different conceptualisation of reality. Different genres entail different contexts and different readerships. In consequence, if one does research based only one genre, one has to be cautious when making claims about the generalizability of his or her findings. Claims about metaphors in business English can be made in the local context of the data. As such, to achieve better insights into metaphor in business English, we need to investigate as many genres as possible. Although no one may be able to investigate every genre, future studies should undertake an investigation into the genres that have not yet been explored, which would then offer us a more thorough understanding of metaphor in business English.

So far a number of text types have been investigated, indicating that metaphor does indeed play an important role in business discourse. The genres that research has investigated. It should be noted that some studies appear in two categories, such as Skorczynska Sznajder (2010), because they use various sources of data.

This paper has discussed various types of research on metaphor use in business English and problematized issues related to the assumption of metaphors and the research methodology of these studies. Different strands of research look at different aspects of metaphor. This paper has also dealt with the types of data under investigation. From the discussion in Section 4, it is evident that the majority of the studies are based on written texts, mainly business news.

Recent work has expanded the scope by exploring various other genres, some of which are occluded genres such as business meetings. Two more points to note are metaphor identification and retrieval.

Conclusion

This paper argues that MIP (Pragglejaz 2007) should be used to ensure consistency in identifying metaphorical expressions. For metaphor retrieval, several corpus linguistic methods have been discussed in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Above all, none of these methods is perfect, but researchers can select the method that is most suitable to the purpose and design of their study.

The issues of metaphor theories, data, metaphor identification and retrieval certainly have an impact on the findings of metaphor in business English research. Thus, this paper has critically examined these issues and argued for a more rigorous approach to metaphor research both in terms of metaphor theory applications, data and other methodological considerations. With a firmer ground on these issues, research can shed further light on metaphor use in business English and offer implications for teaching, language description and critical studies of language and ideology in a well-grounded manner.

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