

Meaningfulness of Religious Language in the Light of Conceptual Metaphorical Use of Image Schema: A Cognitive Semantic Approach

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According to modern religious studies, religions are rooted in certain metaphorical representations, so they are metaphorical in nature. This article aims to show, first, how conceptual metaphors employ image schemas to make our language meaningful, and then to assert that image-schematic structure of religious expressions, by which religious metaphors conceptualize abstract meanings, is the basis of meaningfulness of religious language. Authors benefit from cognitive theories of some eminent semanticists, such as Mark Johnson, Jean Mandler, George Lakoff, et al., on metaphors. There are, as described by cognitive semantics, many preconceptual patterns that constitute a network of meaningful image-schemata upon which our primary knowledge is grounded. It is argued that image-schemata are inherently meaningful, and conceptual metaphors by using these image-schemata transmit the meaningfulness to the religious representations.

Keywords: cognitive semantics, Image Schema, conceptual metaphor, meaningfulness of religious language

1. Introduction

Adopting a non-objectivist metaphorical approach to the nature of religions, this study attempts to provide a solution to the problem of meaninglessness arisen from an objectivist approach to religious

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representations. Our main claim here is that the pervasive metaphorical use of image-schemata in religious expressions provides a firm basis for their meaningfulness.

As one of the main branches of cognitive linguistics, cognitive semantics is formed in the context of a non-objectivist tradition. The following are the most important principles characterizing cognitive attitudes toward semantics (Evans, Bergen, and Zinken 2007, 9-13):

Conceptual structure is embodied. According to this principle (also known as *embodied cognition thesis*), we experience the world with our bodies; our understanding of the world is embodied; we have many concepts in our mind that stem from experience; and we just have those concepts that we can perceive and conceive.

Semantic structure is conceptual structure. This principle suggests that language units refer to the concepts in our mind, not directly to entities in the objective world. In this view, known as *representational view*, the meanings of the main units of our language have a conceptual structure.

Meaning construction is conceptualization. This principle supports the idea that language, by itself, does not encode meaning, because linguistic units are just “prompts” for the production of meaning. Meanings must be produced at the conceptual level; meaning construction is conceptualization.

The present paper firstly explains the two main ideas of cognitive semantics—namely, the image schemas as rudimentary elements of our bodily experience, and the conceptual metaphor as one of our cognitive structures—then employs the theories of some cognitive semanticists such as Mark Johnson, Jean Mandler, and George Lakoff to bring forward discussions. This helps us to achieve desired results with some theoretical methods of these scholars.

2. Statement of the Problem

According to the related literature, two main approaches toward meaning can be traced. The first is the tradition of *objectivism* in which the meaning is regarded as merely propositional. According to Johnson, the objectivist theory of meaning indicates that the meaning is an abstract relation between symbolic representations (either words or mental representations) as well as the concepts and the objective reality. In other words, the meanings of the representations are a function of the relation to the objective entities. On this ground, concepts are abstract and general and they represent the common character of particular objects. Concepts are different from images in

that images are embodied while concepts are disembodied. Disembodiment means not being tied to the particular mind. It is due to this characteristic of the concepts that our knowledge is possible. Semantic analysis should be done by virtue of literal, rather than metaphorical or figurative concepts, since the latter could not be mapped onto the objective world. (Johnson 1987, xxiv).

In the other tradition, known as *non-objectivism*, meanings belong to the realm of human understanding and are regarded as metaphorical extensions of pre-conceptual structures. On this ground, theories of meaning are theories of human understanding. Our understanding contains several image-schematic structures which are fundamental to metaphorical projections. In this view, these embodied schematic structures can be regarded as shared, public, and even objective (Johnson 1987, 174).

As stated by the tradition of objectivism, metaphor is a deviance from rules of our natural language. The objectivist approach to the nature of meaning, as literal, referential, and objective, raises the problem of the meaninglessness of religious representations. On the contrary, modern religious studies regard religious representations as metaphorical, an insight that leads us to give an account of the meaningfulness of religious language in the light of a non-objectivist theory of meaning.

3. Review of Related Literature

Cognitive linguistics is a new trend of linguistics that is concerned with studying the relationship between human language, mind, and socio-physical experience; its roots go back to the works of some scholars in the 1970s such as Fillmore, Lakoff, Thompson, and Rosch. Other cognitive sciences, like cognitive and Gestalt psychology, strongly affected cognitive linguistics' discussions from 1960s to 1970s. During the 1980s and 1990s, cognitive linguistic scholarship flourished in northern continental Europe (mainly in Belgium, Holland, and Germany) and then, gradually, became a common area of research interest throughout Europe and North America (Fillmore 1975, 123-31; Lakoff and Thompson 1975, 295-313; Rosch 1975, General 104, 192-233; Lakoff 1987, 68; Evans, Bergen, Zinken 2007, 9-13).

Cognitive semantics, as one subset of Cognitive linguistics, explores the relationship between experience, conceptual system, and semantic structure encoded by language. In other words, cognitive semantics explores knowledge representation (conceptual structure) and meaning construction (conceptualization) (Evans, Bergen, and Zinken 2007, 9).

In this paper, we are going to answer two questions: First, what an image schema is, and how it can be applied in a conceptual metaphor, as described in cognitive semantics. After that, we will go through the discussion about meaningfulness of religious language in the light of conceptual metaphorical use of image schema. In what follows, there is a brief overview of the literature related to these two important topics.

In his famous work *The Body in the Mind*, Mark Johnson, proposed the theory of image schema. According to Johnson, without imagination we cannot understand the world. The imagination both makes sense of our experiences and makes our world comprehensible. The way by which the embodied experience expresses itself at the cognitive level is that of image schemas; they are recurring structures of our perceptual interactions, bodily experiences, and cognitive operations (Johnson 1987, 79).

The significant place of the image schemas in our discussion on meaningfulness of language stems from their application in conceptual metaphors. The first steps in developing the theory of conceptual metaphor go back to the work of Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, whose basic principle is that the metaphor is not just a formal feature of language, but our understanding and thought is basically metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 4).

In formal linguistics, metaphors have been regarded as deviant expressions of language, so that their meaning should be referred to the literal territory. Metaphors should be understood just in terms of their ability to correspond to the objective reality. In contrast, cognitive linguistics' conceptual metaphor theory considers metaphors as imaginative structures of human understanding that cannot be reduced to the literal representations of an objective world.

4. The Metaphorical Nature of Religious Language

There are some reasons for saying that the language of religion needs to be regarded as metaphorical in nature.

4.1. Theoretical Reason

Religious language in a theoretical framework should be regarded as metaphorical so that we expect it to be a conceptual metaphorical language. Jäkel lists several hypotheses related to conceptual metaphor, two of which are related to our discussion here—namely, *necessity hypothesis* and *invariance hypothesis* (Jäkel 2002, 22).

Necessity Hypothesis suggests that metaphors have an explanatory function. Some matters such as abstract concepts and theoretical and

metaphysical matters are hardly understood without recourse to conceptual metaphors, because a conceptual metaphor relates the most abstract concepts to the sensual perception, by which it provides the embodied grounds of cognition. On the basis of necessity hypothesis, the function of the religious language is mostly dependent on metaphorical conceptualisation; its domain is an abstract one, free from sensual experience. Basic religious concepts, like God and soul, are metaphysical ideas that need to be understood metaphorically.

As it will be mentioned later, it is through the process of conceptual metaphoring that certain schematic elements get mapped from the source domain onto the target domain without any change in their schematic structure. This process provides a bodily grounding for cognition and understanding. According to the invariance hypothesis, image-schemas' structural elements of the concrete source domains are to be mapped onto the target domain of religious ideas.

4.2. Historical and Theological Evidence

Scholars, theologians, and religious commentators from early sixth century have agreed that religious expressions are grounded in basic, central, and root metaphors. With regard to this close relationship between metaphor and religion, the latter itself can be seen as metaphor. Consequently, the study of metaphor leads to a better understanding of religion (Erussard 1997, 197-212; Tracy 1978, 91-106; Jäkel 2002, 22).

There are many examples indicating the metaphorical character of different religions. For instance, consider Jewish understandings of the concept of *covenant* and Christian description of God using different metaphors such as *father*, *shepherd*, *lord*, *wisdom*, *truth*, *love*, and *light*. Consider, as well, the metaphorical language of the *parables* of Jesus and the metaphorical statement of John: "God is love." Also, in Buddhism, we can refer to metaphorical understandings of the religious concept of *compassion* (Tracy 1978, 91-106; Erussard 1997, 197-212).

In an article dealing with metaphor in the Quran, Abdulmoneim concentrates on the conceptual metaphor "Life is a journey." He shows that within the same scope, we can find some related metaphors, like "the Straight Way," "the way of Hell" and "companions of the Fire." Referring to prophetic metaphors, El-Sharif states that these metaphors can be categorized in terms of four major metaphoric schemas: "container metaphors; metaphors of location, direction, and motion; the great chain of being schema; and metaphors involving natural phenomena" (Abdulmoneim 2006, 94; El-Sharif 2011, 106).

5. Image Schema Theory

On the word of Johnson, image schemas are basic concepts derived from human embodied (sensory) pre-conceptual experience of the world. These concepts are skeletal patterns that have their own roots in our sensory and motor experience. *Motion along a path*, *bounded interior*, and *symmetry* are some types of image schemas (Johnson 1987, 205; Turner 1996, 16-18).

These rudimentary embodied concepts provide the conceptual basis of more complex concepts, and they can construct more abstract concepts and conceptual domains. Consider, for instance, *Container* schema, by using which we can talk about being in states like love: He's in love, we're out of trouble now, and He's coming out of the coma, and so forth. Therefore, *Container* schema underlies all specific lexical concepts, including prepositions in, into, out, and out of (Evans, Bergen, and Zinken 2007, 9-13; Lakoff 1990, 39-74; Lakoff 1987, 272).

One of the grounds of the conceptualizing capacity is the image schema, by which spatial structure can be mapped onto conceptual structure. As Mandler says, "Basic, recurrent experiences of a child make its semantic architecture, before the child begins producing language" (Mandler 1992, 567-604).

5.1. The Most Common Types of Image Schemas

The image schema *space* and its sub-categories (such as up-down, front-back, left-right, near-far, center-periphery, contact, straight, and verticality) can be found not only in the structure of human perceptual field but also in the structure of human cultural spaces, like economy, politics, and philosophy, to mention a few. For example, center-periphery schema can manifests itself as a structure of religious territory (Evans 2007, 108; Johnson 1987, 125).

Container, in-out, surface, full-empty, and content are some sub-categories of image schema *containment*. Containment, to which we will return later, is said to have three parts: an interior, an exterior, and a boundary. We have acquaintance with many containers, like a bag, a car, a cup, rooms, houses, boxes, and drawers; our heads and our bodies are two most important containers we know well (Turner 1996, 16-18).

Image schema *locomotion*, and particularly its sub-category *source-path-goal* schema, have many uses in our daily experiences. People use the image schema *Motion along a path* to identify, for instance, locomotion by objects, such as their own hand reaching out, milk pouring into a cup, and a ball rolling (Turner 1996, 16-18; Evans 2007, 108).

Another common schema is *balance*, with such subcategories as axis balance, twin-pan balance, point balance, equilibrium. We learn balancing with our bodies, not by means of some rules or concepts. The meaning of this image schema might be known through the closely related experience of bodily equilibrium. Many dimensions of our character, including psychic dimensions like emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and moral activities, as well as some religious matters, can be experienced in terms of balance (Johnson 1987, 74, 75, 89).

We have knowledge of *force* schema depending on our experience of compulsion, blockage, counterforce, diversion, removal of restraint, enablement, attraction, and the like. Some image schemas such as pushing, pulling, resisting, yielding, dipping, rising, climbing, pouring, falling, and releasing are known as *force dynamics*. The combination of simple image schemas can form complex image schemas; for example, the goal of the path can be the interior of a container and the source of the path can be the exterior of a container (Evans 2007, 108; Turner 1996, 16-18). Such a combination can help us find some proper ways of using the language. In the following sentences, we can see the simultaneous usage of force-dynamic and container schemas as illustrated by the meaning of the preposition *in*:

- (a) The light bulb is in the socket.
- (b) The bottle is in the cap.

In (a), the preposition *in* describes the usual relation between the light bulb (as trajector) and the socket (as landmark), while the using of the preposition *in* to describe the relation between a bottle and its cap is semantically *odd*. Force-dynamics schema determines in which sentence the application of the preposition *in* is usual. However, the spatial relation between the trajector and landmark in (a) and (b) is identical (i.e., the bulb contained by the socket and bottle contained by cap), but the socket prevents the bulb from succumbing to the force of gravity and falling while this relation in (b) is reverse (Evans and Green 2006, 179-87).

Some other common types of Image Schemas are *unity/iteration* (merging, splitting), *multiplicity* (part-whole, linkage), *identity* (matching), *existence* (removal, cycle, object, process) (Evans 2007, 108).

5.2. Properties of Image Schemas

Turner points out that the image schemata arise from sensory and embodied experience in the early times of human development. Deriving from embodied experience means deriving from the way in

which one interacts with the world: We perceive water pouring into a glass; we interact with the flower that we touch (Turner 1996, 16-18).

Consider, for example, the force schema which arises from transfer of motion energy in our experience of acting upon other entities, or being acted upon by other entities. This shows that image schemas are pre-conceptual in origin. As said by Evans and Green, we can merely experience image schemas. Using words for describing them is possible only through the analogous way of representation (Johnson 1987, 13; Mandler 2004, 61; Evans and Green 2006, 179-87).

Image schemas are multi-modal in the sense that they derive from experiences across different types of sensory experience (different modalities) and hence are not specific to a certain sense. (Evans and Green 2006, 179-87).

Regarding to properties like embodiment, interaction, and multi-modality, it can be said that image schemas are inherently meaningful, in the sense that they can provide predictable consequences for our experiences. For more illustration, consider the application of two image schemas containment and force-dynamics in the following example. Suppose you have a cup of coffee in your hand. If you move the cup up and down, then you expect the coffee to move with it or pour out. These are consequences of containment. The cup has a force-dynamic control over the coffee. We know these consequences through our interaction with the physical environment. This kind of expectation enables us to make some predictions: if we shake the cup sharply, the coffee will pour out (Evans and Green 2006, 179-187).

6. Meaningfulness of Conceptual Metaphor

There are two domains in a conceptual metaphor: the target domain, which uses abstract meaning, and the source domain, which uses literal meaning. Metaphorical language applies metaphoric mappings from one domain to another so that two or more elements will be mapped onto two or more other elements (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 265).

According to the conceptual metaphorical theory, these cross domain mappings, some of which occur in pre-conceptual embodied experiences and the others in complex forms, organize the conceptual structure.

Lakoff and Johnson state that the image-schema structure of the source domain, in a conceptual metaphor, is used in reasoning about the target domain. Metaphors preserve the image-schema structure and image-schematic inferences. For instance, in the case of container, the source domain containers are mapped onto target domain

containers so that interiors are mapped to interiors and exteriors are mapped to exteriors. This, also, can be seen when those conceptual metaphors applied to a path schema, with goals mapped to goals, and origins to origins (Lakoff and Johnson 1982, 253).

Metaphoric image-schematic structure of human beings affects their understanding of the most abstract, nonphysical domains. Linguistic meaning is a specification of general capacity to experience the world. What we perceive as meaningful within our experimental context is the basis of meaningfulness of our language. Then, the language, itself, provides even more possibilities for the conceptualization and richer experience of the world (Johnson 1989, 116).

In sum, the inherently meaningful image schemata can be used in the source domain of primary metaphors. Conceptual metaphors derive from these primary metaphors as more rudimentary *super-schematic* aspects of conceptual structure. An integration process by which primary metaphors give rise to complex or compound metaphors is called by Grady and others as conceptual blending (Grady, Oakley, and Coulson 1999, 101-124). Schematic structure of conceptual metaphors is preserved in metaphoric mappings. As a result, it can be said that conceptual metaphors by using image schemas make, at least our metaphoric language, meaningful.

7. Conclusion

Modern religious studies regard religious language as metaphorical. Based on *theoretical reason* and *historical and scriptural evidences* provided by Jäkel (2002), religious language must be regarded as a metaphorical language. Considering properties like embodiment, interaction, and multi-modality, listed by Turner, Johnson, Mandler, Evans, and Green, it can be said that image schemas are inherently meaningful in the sense that they provide predictable consequences for our experiences.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 66) pointed out that the inherently meaningful image-schemata can be used in the source domain of primary metaphors and the other conceptual metaphors derive from these primary super-schematic aspects of conceptual structure.

On this ground, it would be concluded that conceptual metaphors, by using the image schemas, make metaphoric representations of our language, meaningful. Taking everything into account, we are eligible to claim that the presence of image schemas in religious expressions, by which conceptual metaphors can conceptualize meanings by mapping the schematic elements of source domain onto the elements of target domain, make religious language meaningful.

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