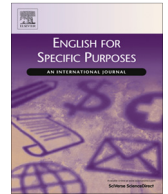




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# Metaphor use in Chinese and US corporate mission statements: A cognitive sociolinguistic analysis



Ya Sun\*, Jinlin Jiang

Research Center for Business English and Cross-cultural Studies, School of International Studies, University of International Business and Economics,  
No. 10 Huixin Dongjie, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100029, China

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## ABSTRACT

Corpus-based approaches to researching metaphor use in business English have become increasingly prevalent, but metaphor use in the genre of mission statements has received little attention. Using a self-built corpus with the help of the corpus tool Wmatrix, we compared metaphor use as a discursive and cognitive strategy in the mission statements of Chinese and US companies from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on three conventional conceptual metaphors in business discourse: BRANDS ARE PEOPLE, BUSINESS IS COOPERATION, and BUSINESS IS COMPETITION. The use of the source domains of these conceptual metaphors was found to differ significantly in the mission statements of Chinese and US companies, thus revealing differences in the underlying corporate identities and ideologies. Chinese corporations, which tend to describe themselves as energetic leaders and strong competitors, are more competition-oriented, whereas US corporations, which tend to project themselves as ethical and responsible community members, are more cooperation-oriented. The findings of this comparative study can shed light on how Chinese companies build their brand images and thus lead to a better understanding of changing national image of China.

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## 1. Introduction

Until 2007, the national brand “Made in China” symbolized low cost and good value. However, a series of highly publicized quality scandals and product recalls in the late 2000s undermined this brand image. Beset with the quality and safety problems of some Chinese products, including pet food, toys, and milk, the Chinese government and some manufacturers have begun implementing certain measures to improve the corporate images of these manufacturers and the image of China in general. In 2009, for instance, China’s Ministry of Commerce launched an advertising campaign featuring a 30-s TV commercial “Made in China” abroad. During this process of reestablishing China’s corporate images and its national image in the eyes of Westerners, the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for business in China has become increasingly important.

Research on ELF in international business contexts has experienced two shifts: (1) from a focus on language proficiency to a concern with effective strategies in business communication, and (2) from a linguistic analysis of isolated speech events to a contextualized investigation of organizational and/or cultural factors (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007; Nickerson, 2005; Trosborg & Jørgensen, 2005). Accompanying these shifts in the analytic focus is the development of a multi-method and multidisciplinary approach to business discourse, which encompasses pragmatics, corpus linguistics, critical studies, discourse analysis, organizational analysis, multimodal analysis, and genre analysis, among others

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 13810452557; fax: +86 (10)64493201.

E-mail address: [sawyersun@126.com](mailto:sawyersun@126.com) (Y. Sun).

(Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009). However, one methodology that has yet to be fully explored in business discourse is cognitive linguistics, as illustrated, for example, by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

To date, the above multi-methods have been extensively employed to research ELF in business genres such as advertisements, negotiations, meetings, correspondences, and media discourse (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007; Trosborg & Jørgensen, 2005). In contrast, the mission statement as a genre of business discourse has yet to receive the same degree of attention. Indeed, Swales and Rogers (1995) expressed the need to account for the socio-cognitive factors that affect the production and interpretation of mission statements, but their call has yet to be answered.

Therefore, the study reported in this paper aimed to examine metaphor use in mission statements as a discursive and cognitive strategy from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics by comparing the mission statements of Chinese and US corporations.

## 2. Metaphor in business discourse

In their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3) claim that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” Within this cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain, usually described with a formula such as LIFE IS JOURNEY. In this conceptual metaphor, JOURNEY is the source domain and serves as the conceptual domain from which metaphorical expressions are used to understand another conceptual domain called the target domain, LIFE. Typically, source domains are less abstract or less complex than target domains, which are typically more abstract and subjective (Kövecses, 2010). In addition, the new contemporary theory of metaphor argues that metaphor is not only a matter of language and thought, but also a matter of communication (Steen, 2011). According to Cameron and Maslen (2010, p. vii), “by investigating people’s use of metaphors, we can better understand their emotions, attitudes, and conceptualizations, as individuals and as participants in social life.” Hence, metaphor analysis has become a widespread research tool in the social sciences and the humanities, enabling cognitive conceptualization to be grounded in social context. Metaphor analysis has been applied to studying various types of discourse, such as political discourse (Ahrens, 2009), science discourse (Koteyko, Brown, & Crawford, 2008), education discourse (Cameron, 2003), and business discourse (Charteris-Black, 2004; Koller, 2004).

In the words of Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2007, p. 3), “business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done.” A number of metaphor studies, focusing on media discourse from leading business journals such as *The Economist*, *Business Weekly*, and *Fortune*, have aimed to observe how the concepts BUSINESS and ECONOMY are metaphorically conceptualized. Some studies have been concerned with the general topics of business and economics (Bratož, 2004; Skorczynska, 2001; Skorczynska & Deignan, 2006; Soler, 2008), whereas other studies have investigated specific concepts in business and the economy, such as “economic growth” (White, 2003), “market” (Chung, 2008), “mergers and acquisitions” (Koller, 2004, 2005), “globalization” (Eubanks, 2005), “economic situation” (Fukuda, 2009), and “Euro trading” (Charteris-Black & Ennis, 2001; Charteris-Black & Musolff, 2003; Semino, 2002). Another focus of metaphor research is advertising, including printed advertisements and TV commercials (Forceville, 2007; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Van Mulken, le Pair, & Forceville, 2010). Advertised products range from dating (Marley, 2007) to drug prevention (Ruiz, 2006) and cosmetics (Velasco-Sacristán, 2005, 2010; Velasco-Sacristán & Fuertes-Olivera, 2006). Moreover, several metaphor studies have investigated such genres as business meetings (Hanford & Koester, 2010), business interviews (Ghafele, 2004), and business textbooks (Alejo, 2010; Sznajder, 2010).

Generally, previous research on metaphor use in business discourse has centered on two topics: the source domains that are used to conceptualize BUSINESS and ECONOMY and the extent to which the corresponding conceptual metaphors are universal. It was found that the most frequently used source domains are ANIMALS and PLANTS, HEALTH and FITNESS, WAR and FIGHTING, SHIPS and SAILING, SPORTS and GAMES, ORGANISMS, and CONTAINER, and that some conventional conceptual metaphors in business discourse are ECONOMY IS LIVING ORGANISM, BUSINESS IS WAR, BUSINESS IS JOURNEY, and MARKET IS CONTAINER (Alejo, 2010; Charteris-Black, 2004; Koller, 2004). These conceptual metaphors are found to be universal across English and other languages even though linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphors are somehow culturally and/or linguistically conditioned (Chung, 2008; Fukuda, 2009). Researchers have also noted that metaphors identified in languages other than English are largely influenced by the Anglo-US tradition (Bratož, 2004; Chung, 2008; Fukuda, 2009).

Furthermore, previous studies have examined the contributing factors of metaphor choice and the functions of metaphor use in business discourse. The factors influencing metaphor choice are gender, politics, intended readership, and cultural stereotypes (Ahrens, 2009; Semino, 2002; Skorczynska & Deignan, 2006; Velasco-Sacristán, 2010). Metaphor use in business discourse fulfills two chief functions: the interpersonal function of constructing ideology (Charteris-Black, 2004; Chung, 2008; Velasco-Sacristán, 2010) and the ideational function of coining technical vocabulary for reference and illustration (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2009; Fukuda, 2009).

Methodologically, metaphor use in business discourse is typically approached in three ways: multimodal metaphor analysis, critical metaphor analysis, and corpus-based metaphor analysis. When studying multimodal metaphor, researchers look at how the source and the target are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes, including verbal signs, pictorial signs, gestures, and sounds (Forceville, 2007). For example, researchers doing multimodal analysis of

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