

Lexical and Cultural Semantics of the Idioms of Change¹

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1. BACKGROUND

In what follows ample reference is made to the lexico-conceptual domain of CHANGE verbs in English. For this reason one must consider the relation between such domains, cognitive models and cultural models (Holland & Quinn 1987, Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Shore 1996). Let us consider an appropriate statement in one of the best-known handbooks on Cognitive Linguistics, Ungerer and Schmid (1996): «Cognitive models for particular domains ultimately depend on so-called **cultural models**. In reverse, cultural models can be seen as cognitive models that are shared by people belonging to a social group or subgroup». Thus, a cognitive model is a conceptual structure - ultimately schematizing context- that underlies a domain and is always constrained by a cultural model, ie. a kind of cognitive model that is not merely individual but goes well beyond the limits of the individual to become nested in the historically governed mesh of interpersonal and societal relations. This is no surprise, as word meaning, insofar as it involves lexical knowledge, is not an individual affair. Far from it, it presupposes a more or less stable cognitive configuration shared by the community, very often in an unconscious, automatic way. Knowledge of it is not necessarily possessed by ordinary people, ie. is not readily available in a folk model, but only so in an expert cultural-cognitive model. Arguably, domains are not only domains of experience but should rather be taken to have a lexico-conceptual nature, ie. to be both manifest in and evoked by lexical forms on the symbolic level, especially if they are felt to include idioms. These are usually defined as peculiar to a given culture, and are thus lexico-conceptual clues (organised in domains) to a cultural model.

In Sánchez (1988) a study of the **change** English verbal domain from such a lexico-conceptual standpoint is reported. Here is a table supplying an overview of the dimensional structure of the whole domain:

¹ This article is part of the Research Project entitled *Developing a lexical logic for computer-assisted translation from a multifunctional and reusable lexical database English-Spanish-French-German*, subsidized by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, DGYCIT, code number: PB 94-0437.

The English verbal domain CHANGE (Sánchez, 1998)

SUPER-DIMENSIONS	GENERAL		QUANTITATIVE		QUALITATIVE		REGULATIVE	
ORIENTA-TIONAL/ SCALAR DIMENSIONS	0		↑	↓	↑	↓	↑ ↓	
CAUSATIVE SUB-DIMENSIONS	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+

The domain was found to be structured in four main superdimensions reflecting the main types of change in English: general, quantitative, qualitative and regulative, with the central ones of quantitative and qualitative change falling into two further divisions, corresponding to the positive and the negative orientational dimensions. Finally, a subdimension marked [-causative] and a [+causative] one were also established.

By way of conclusion, the functional, relational, distinguishing, parameters present in the definitional structure of **change** verbs, as found by adopting Martín Mingorance's (1990) Functional-Lexematic Model (FLM), showed that a number of major focal areas are codified by such parameters. Together they make up the skeleton of the change frame as derived from such verbs and are (in order of importance): Attribute (ie. type of change effected or characteristic in which change is said to be effected), manner (in which the change takes place), instrument (used for a given change), result (of change). Yet other attendant parameters were also ascertained (in order of importance): restriction of entity affected, place, cause, extent, quantity, degree, and inception of change.

2. CHANGE-RELEVANT IDIOMATIC PHRASES

In current research on the relations between language and the mind it is acknowledged that more and more studies are needed of systematic metaphorical connections between domains (in order to establish what complex cognitive networks are available in a given language and for a given linguistic community), since cognitive and psycholinguistic research has demonstrated that human cognition, and therefore language (the latter being motivated by the former), operates metaphorically.

Below some common idioms pertaining to **change** are listed and organised according to the domain dimensions in which they belong (superdimensions, dimensions and subdimensions are given), and for each dimension two examples are commented on in order to show the implicit cultural-cognitive metaphorical model associated with each idiom. Notice that in each example one or more dictionary definitions are given to facilitate comparison with the explanatory description in terms of the cultural-cognitive model. The latter is schematised in terms of up to four major kinds of conceptual phenomena evoked by the idiom or activated in on-line meaning recognition/construction in discourse comprehension via mental images or schemata² (Martín Morillas & Sánchez García 1997): (a) general conceptual mappings from a target (unknown) to a source (better known) domain; (b) specific conceptual metaphors inherent to such mappings and reflected in the idiom's lexical structure; (c) derived conceptual entailments that cast light on specific aspects (such as causes and consequences) of the states of affairs expressed by the idioms;

² Their close analysis serves to uncover people's tacit yet consistent knowledge of idioms (Gibbs, 1994).

and (d) image schemata. All four contribute to envisaging the kind of contextual information (actually world knowledge *qua* set of shared mental representations) relevant in the idiomaticity of the phrase under consideration.

1A. CHANGE IN GENERAL [-causat.]: To experience a change in general / to become different

1B. CHANGE IN GENERAL [+causat.]: To cause a change in general / to cause to become different³

Idiomatic Phrases:

sing / dance to a different tune, change one's tune, turn upside down, ring the changes, turn the tide, turn the tables, turn the scale / balance, shift the scene, shuffle the cards, turn one's coat, turn back the clock, change sides, go through phases, take a new turn, turn the corner.

Examples (cultural-cognitive metaphorical model):

- (1) **turn over a new leaf:** *He has been in jail several times, but now he seems to have turned over a new leaf* (CI) [decide you will change the way you behave and become a better person (LDCE); begin a new and improved course of behaviour (CED)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (BOOKS) --> TARGET DOMAIN (LIFE).

-Conceptual metaphors:

LIFE IS A BOOK

DEEDS ARE PAGES

DOING THINGS IS WRITING ON PAGES

-Conceptual entailments:

(A new chance for) doing new (different -better-) things is (to turn over) a new leaf in the book.

- (2) **blow hot and cold (on so. or sth.):** *I can't tell what he wants --he keeps blowing hot and cold.* [keep changing your attitude towards so. or sth. (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (BREATH/AIR) --> TARGET DOMAIN (BEHAVIOUR)

-Conceptual metaphors:

SOMEONE'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THINGS IS AIR EXPELLED FROM SOMEONE'S MOUTH

STRIKING AN ATTITUDE IS BLOWING AIR

-Attributes (opposite): -hot / -cold

mapped onto: -favourable / -unfavourable

- Conceptual entailments (syllogistic):

If you warm your hands by blowing on them (hot) and

If you cool your food by blowing on them (cold) -->

Your (same) attitude will have opposite effects (both favourable and unfavourable)

[naïve or folk model: Aesop's fable].

2A. POSITIVE QUANTITATIVE CHANGE [-causat.] : to experience a positive change (of value +0) along a quantitative scale (to become larger / more intense, etc.).

2B. POSITIVE QUANTITATIVE CHANGE [+causat.] : to cause to experience a positive change (of value +0) along a quantitative scale (to cause to become larger, more intense, etc.)

Idiomatic Phrases: hold one's ground, dig in one's heels, stick to one's guns, put one's foot down, weather the storm, get home free build one's house upon a rock [group: *increase in strength or firmness*].

Examples (cultural-cognitive metaphorical model):

- (1) **add fuel to the flame / fire:** *Just as the discussion seemed to be becoming more rational, Mary added fuel to the fire by saying that people should only talk about things they understood* (CI) [to make a situation a lot worse than it was already (LDCE)] [increase in intensity]

³ The number shows the dimension, the letter (A or B) the subdimension, the label the superdimension, and after the colon a specification of the label is given.

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (FIRE) --> TARGET DOMAIN (DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR / CONFLICT)

-Conceptual metaphors:

AN IRRATIONAL CONFLICT (AN ARGUMENT) IS FIRE

-Entailments (syllogistic):

If you add fuel to fire, you increase (intensify) conflict.

- (2) be dyed in the wool: *Even dyed-in-the-wool republicans admitted he had talent.* [having strong beliefs or opinions that will never change (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (FABRIC / WOOL) --> TARGET DOMAIN (PERSONAL POSITIONS / VIEWS).

-Conceptual metaphors:

FIRM (ENTRENCHED) POSITIONS ARE (FIXED) COLOURS ON WOOL

-Conceptual entailments:

A colour dyed in the wool will not come off easily --> A strong / firm view will not change easily.

3A. NEGATIVE QUANTITATIVE CHANGE [-causat.]: to experience a negative change (of value -0) along a quantitative scale (to become smaller, less intense, etc.).

3B. NEGATIVE QUANTITATIVE CHANGE [+causat.]: to cause to experience a negative change (of value -0) along a quantitative scale (to cause to become smaller, less intense, etc.).

Examples (cultural-cognitive metaphorical model):

- (1) take a nosedive: *The pound took a nosedive on the foreign exchange market today* [sudden drop (made by a plane with front end pointing towards the ground (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (NOSEDIVE BY PLANE) --> TARGET DOMAIN (SHARP DECREASE)

-Conceptual metaphors:

A SHARP DECREASE IN VALUE IS A NOSEDIVE

-Conceptual entailments:

A sudden drop (downturn) is not likely to be stopped.

-Image schema: VERTICALLY DOWNWARDS

- (2) fall to / be at a low ebb: *By March 1933, the economy was at its lowest ebb.* [acquire a bad state or condition (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (SEA WATERS) --> TARGET DOMAIN (ECONOMIC SITUATION)

-Conceptual metaphors:

A BAD ECONOMIC SITUATION (CRISIS / RECESSION) IS RECEDING SEA WATER (EBB)

-Conceptual entailments:

After a time waters will flow again --> the situation will improve.

-Image schema: CYCLE -- (STAGES IN THE CYCLE = PHASES OF ECONOMIC SITUATION)

4A. POSITIVE QUALITATIVE CHANGE [-causat.]: to experience a positive change (of value +0) along a qualitative scale (to become better).

4B. POSITIVE QUALITATIVE CHANGE [+causat.]: to cause to experience a positive change (of value +0) along a qualitative scale (to cause to become better).

Idiomatic Phrases:

make headway, gain ground, go ahead, make strides, make up for lost time [*progress*]; mend one's ways [*reform*], set on one's feet, snatch from the jaws of death [*cure*]; stir the embers [*revive*]; come up smiling, get one's second wind [*recover*]; come into one's own [*develop*]; feel like a new person, give a twist to, get one's act together [*renew*].

Examples (cultural-cognitive metaphorical model):**(1) give a new / fresh lease of / on life:**

- (1) (of so.): *The vacation has given me a new lease of life.* [become healthy, active or happy again after being weak, ill or tired (LDCE)];
 (2) (of sth.): *Give dirty rugs a new lease of life with our super steam cleaner!* [improvements are made that mean sth will last longer (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (CONTRACT) --> TARGET DOMAIN (PHASE / PERIOD)

-Conceptual metaphors:

A NEW / BETTER PHASE IN LIFE / STH'S FUNCTION IS A RENEWED CONTRACT

-Conceptual entailments:

If contract is renewed, moods are better / function is improved.

(2) be out of the woods: *It's been going well lately, but we're not totally out of the woods yet.*
 [not any more difficulties (LDCE; paraphrase)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (FOREST) --> TARGET DOMAIN (DIFFICULTIES)

-Conceptual metaphors:

DIFFICULTIES ARE FORESTS

-Conceptual entailments:

Many difficulties make one be at a loss in an enclosed space.

-Image schema: OUTWARDS (IN-OUT).

5A. NEGATIVE QUALITATIVE CHANGE [-causat.]: to experience a negative change (of value -0) along a qualitative scale (to become worse).

5B. NEGATIVE QUALITATIVE CHANGE [+causat.]: to cause to experience a negative change (of value -0) along a qualitative scale (to cause to become worse).

Idiomatic Phrases:

add insult to injury, rub salt in the wound [harm], rain on one's picnic, upset the apple cart, shoot down in flames [*mess up*]; have seen better days [*degenerate*]; hit bottom, reach the nadir / the depths [*decline*]

Examples (cultural-cognitive metaphorical model):

(1) jump out of the frying pan into the fire: [to go from a bad situation to one that is even worse (LDCE)]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (FIRE) --> TARGET DOMAIN (PROBLEMS / BAD SITUATION)

-Conceptual metaphors: (Metonymy: part (frying-pan) for whole (fire)).

PROBLEMS ARE HOT SITUATIONS

-Conceptual entailments:

*The various levels of conflict / problems are degrees of heat.

*The degrees of heat are degrees of suffering.

*A maximum degree of heat is worse (more suffering) than a close degree in the scale.

-Image schema: HEAT SCALE

(2) drag (sb's name) in / through the mud: [to tell people about the bad things that so. has done, so that they will have a bad opinion of them (LDCE)] [devalue, disgrace, defame] [NB: *mud*: insult]

-Mapping: SOURCE DOMAIN (MUD)--> TARGET DOMAIN (INSULT)

-Conceptual metaphors:

INSULT IS MUD.

-Conceptual entailments:

*To be (have one's name) insulted is to be covered in mud.

*To be publically insulted is to be dragged in mud.

-Image schema: IN(SIDE) / COVERED

3. CONCLUSION

In a lexico-conceptual approach such as the one advocated in our research, lexically composite expressions such as idioms should be included if we want our semantic study to be a reflection of underlying conceptualisation. On such a view, non-compositional (Gibbs 1994), idioms become all the more necessary in domain structurings, since they are usually thought to retain their original metaphoricity (ie. are not arbitrary but motivated by people's conceptual metaphorical knowledge). They are not equivalent to literal phrases in actual meaning, but they may be seen as sharing with lexical units (inasmuch as they correspond to units of the mental lexicon) their ultimate cognitive (lexico-conceptual, experiential, not frozen) status.

One possible practical advantage in including such phrases is that by so doing we can bridge intra-dimension lexical gaps (those occurring between causative and non-causative subdimensions) as well as intra-domain gaps (those occurring between positive and negative dimensions). Each dimension could then be supplied with a set of idiomatic expressions that would enrich the lexical dimensional structure as provided by the FLM, thus offering a much more truthful view of the actual lexical knowledge that a natural language user is purportedly able to access in ordinary communication. And in the case of idioms, and by virtue of their analyticity in terms of component parts with literal *or* figurative meaning, such (eg. CHANGE-relevant) knowledge is not only a function of its correlated lexical semantics but, component parts contributing to the idiom's overall non-literal interpretation, it is also enriched so as to reflect and cue the variety of underlying cultural meanings involved.

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