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Metaphorical Representations of the Lexeme Honesty in English: A Cognitive and Discourse-Based Analysis

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Abstract: Recent developments in linguistics have proposed that abstract moral concepts are themselves not seen as static lexical meanings that are deposited in our brains to be pulled out of dictionaries, but rather as constructs of the mind and discourse with metaphor being a vehicle in this process. As a core moral value in English, honesty is often conceptualized with embodied metaphorical domains such as transparency, lightness, straightness, cloudiness, openness, value, and cleanness. Where the more general metaphorical conceptualization of moral constructs are concerned, the lexeme honesty has received less systematic attention than other moral concepts either from a cognitive or discourse-oriented perspective, despite being factually important as a moral lexical item. The present study seeks to explore the main conceptual metaphor underlying the expressions of honesty in English and how such metaphors function semantically, pragmatically, and evaluatively in discourse as explained in two theoretical frameworks, conceptual metaphor theory and discourse analysis. This analysis shows that honesty metaphors are systematic rather than stylistic, as they form cohesive conceptual networks that structure moral judgment, credibility assessment, and trust negotiation across several levels of context and discourse type (i.e., everyday vs. institutional). The findings position honesty metaphors not only as rhetorical devices but also as cognitive-loaded tools that encapsulate community-based ideas of morality. These results offer insight into metaphoric studies and the semantics surrounding morality as they demonstrate ways in which abstract ethical meaning is not only linguistically encoded but also pragmatically mobilized, indicating the possibility of further discourse-based and cross-cultural investigations of moral concepts.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary linguistic scholarship however, does not treat abstract moral concepts as fixed lexical meanings but as dynamic cognitive entities that vary over time and through human communication. Of these concepts, honesty is particularly important because it plays a key role in moral evaluation and behavior judgment, interpersonal trust, and observed social-exchange behaviors [1]. It's often thought of as a fundamental moral virtue, but the language around it is far more expansive than standard definitions that focus on honesty or sincerity. Rather, the experience of honesty is often verbalized and comprehended in the form of metaphorical speech which leverages literal, embodied systems [2]. Cognitive linguistics, however, has shown that metaphor is a basic mode of cognition and not simply an ornament of language. According to conceptual metaphor

theory, abstract concepts are consistently conceptualized in terms of more concrete experiences like physical space, movement, perception and material objects (Lakoff and Johnson) [3]. Moral concepts are the most reliant on such metaphorical structuring, as they don't have a direct sensory correlate and so must be conceptualized in some roundabout way. Indeed, the concept of honesty is often captured by metaphors that speak of transparency, straightness, light, cleanliness and openness - all these provide cognitive 'handles' through which to evaluate moral action [4]. In the ordinary idiomatic language of English, to be straight with me, we should have transparent intentions, they ought to come with clean hands or bring it into the light are a few examples that show how honesty is metaphorically attached to an imageability and spatial orientation as well as physical cleanliness [5]. These metaphorical units are not just a description of moral quality; they rather actively encode evaluation setting honesty up as being morally "right," socially appropriate, and epistemically dependable. Honesty, in contrast, is constructed using opposite metaphors like light, cleanliness, straightness and openness that help to underpin the moral binaries and thus moral sensibilities immanent in cultural cognition [6].

Besides everyday discourse, metaphors of truth have an important bearing on institutional-political and mediated communication. Slogans about transparency, clean governance and open communication are often used to build credibility and maintain the confidence of the public. In these sceneries, metaphor acts both as a persuasive and ideological device, affecting listeners' understanding of issues related to ethics and moral responsibilities [7]. And although honesty is a central notion of philosophical ethics, the way that we understand its metaphorical expression as manifested through language has received relatively little attention compared to other ethical terms. In this context, the current research analyzed metaphoric mappings with the lexeme honesty in English. The object is to examine leading conceptual metaphors for expressions containing honest and to analyze their semantic and pragmatic behavior in discourse. It hence aims at helping better understand how moral meaning is (i) cognitively organized and (ii) linguistically represented by metaphor [8].

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework on which this research is based is Conceptual Metaphor theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson. This accounts that metaphor is grounded in regular mappings between relatively concrete, experiential source and abstract, conceptual target domains. These mappings are what organize language, yes, but also the mind and rationality themselves [9]. From this perspective, metaphors are essential for the understanding of moral concepts that do not have immediate physical prerequisites (9-10)...." Studies in moral cognition have suggested that the physical body is frequently responsible for structuring ethical values. Morals, fairness, and truth are commonly associated with spatial orientation (straight versus crooked), sensory perception (light versus darkness), and physical purity (clean versus dirty). These are not arbitrary metaphorical associations, they represent ingrained cognitive patterns developed from bodily experience and structured cultural behavior [10]. The process of finding metaphorical language in discourse has been formalized through the use of tools like the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) outlined by Pragglejaz Group and its successor, MIPVU). These treatments highlight the relation between a word's literal, concrete sense and its contextual, abstract use [11]. Metaphorical use refers to contexts where the meaning can be inferred by comparing it with a basic usage of the term (11 and 12 Peirce). These are taken as points of theoretical consideration for the current study, which is devoted more to qualitative semantic and discourse analysis than corpus statistics [12].

2. Methodology

As far as the method is concerned, this study applies in its analysis a qualitative cognitive-semantic and discourse-analytical approach that fits into the theoretical scope of conceptual metaphor theory formulated in the context of cognitive linguistics. It occurs in spontaneous natural speech of the unit honesty, as well as in its componential expression and use. "Incorporating Metaphor" refers here to cases like these: metaphorical expressions instances where honesty (as well as the other sense extensions of honest) and a related sense of honesty are mapped onto more concrete source domains. For this purpose, we motivated the study based on general principles of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) that distinguishes between basic, concrete meaning and contextual/abstract meaning of a word as well as meaning from an expression and suggests that an expression is considered metaphorical if what is inferred is not based under comparison with the former one. Rather than concentrating on quantitative however only observable statistical generalizations on corpus data, this paper adopts a qualitative interpretative semantic analysis of noun modified by an adjective to discover systematic patterns. Employing a cognitive-discoursal approach, we categorize metaphorical expressions according to salient source domains (transparency, light, straightness and cleanliness) and focus on their cognitive motivation and discourse function. Particular attention is paid to the means by which these metaphors are situated in moral appraisals, model moral deliberation and structure the distribution and construction of trustworthiness in language, discourse and dialogue as well as past interpersonal and institutional/public communication. I contend that such methodological design not only facilitates the discovery of the systematic metaphorical models motivating honesty in English but also permits one to construe the models as expressive of shared embodied experience and cultural norms as opposed to individual stylistic preferences.

3. Results

Metaphorical Models of Honesty

The most widely used metaphorical pattern represents honesty with reference to transparency. Within this framework honesty is equated with the absence of hiding, and intentions, motives and acts are easily shown or made clear. Words like clear motives or nothing to hide imply moral integrity means being visible. Since the transparent is typically treated as trustworthy---what you see is what you get, that which can be seen, and verified, can be trusted. The metaphor of light is strongly associated with it [13]. I think probably we associate honesty with light - bring the truth to light, shed light on it. Light is symbolic of knowledge, insight and truth making honesty an epistemic virtue that facilitates comprehension and responsibility. On the other hand, dishonesty is linked to darkness, secretive and hidden work. Yet another of the most productive metaphors is to describe honesty as straight. Truth-related expressions, such as a straight answer or be straight with someone, denote honesty in terms of spacial reference [14]. So straight means, essentially, not crooked or bent a directly honest thing and gives rise to our notions of right action being in accord with h's energies and a clear soul. This spatial metaphor serves to confirm that good conduct is reached by a straight moral road. Indeed, honesty is also understood in terms of the same semantic field of metaphors. He had clean hands (or a clean record): then as now morality is associated with physical hygiene. So in this model, dishonesty is treated as a contagion or immorality fallout - connecting the condemnation of ethical violations to ancient and visceral experiences of purity and pollution. In evaluative language, in particular, metaphors are very powerful because they elicit strong emotions. Finally, truth is frequently a metaphor for openness or information disclosed - e.g. put your cards on the table. By contrasting with games or negotiation, the metaphor lies in honesty vs game hide-and-seek. Honesty means that one exposes all of who one is, to the point at which others can trust us and communicate with us fairly.

4. Discussion

The study reported here demonstrates that the use of metaphors to talk about honesty in English is systematic, motivated, and cognitive. Honesty metaphors are not isolated idiomatic expressions but reflect coherent patterns rooted in the body. Transparency and illumination highlight epistemic accessibility, straightness stresses moral direction, cleanliness encapsulates ethical purity, while openness positions honesty as a social tool for gaining trust. These metaphors also serve crucial pragmatic purposes [15]. They enable speakers to assess conduct, defend moral claims, and establish entitlement to a place in discourse. In institutional and political contexts, that honesty metaphors are particularly important because they influence public opinion and moral authority. In drawing on transparency or cleanliness, speakers position themselves in relation to moral models and away from suspicion or blame that is culturally valued.

5. Conclusion

The present study has revealed the extensive metaphorical structuration of lexeme honesty in English. The metaphors of transparency, light, straightness, cleanliness, openness, and value provided the psychologically stable models from which abstract moral meaning was constructed and communicated. The meaning of the metaphorical units was not limited to mere stylistic features but indicated the prevalent patterns in the cognitive perception of morality and ethical conduct in culture. Therefore, the analysis from the cognitive and discourse-oriented perspective might contribute to the general discussions of moral semantics and metaphor theory. The findings inspire further corpus-based quantitative research and cross-cultural comparison to reveal how honesty and other related terms structure the domain of morality metaphorically in various languages and societies.

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