Book Review

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Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication.

During the past 20 years, metonymy, besides metaphor, has been a central concern of scholars from various areas, especially Cognitive Linguistics (CL). It has been generally accepted that metonymy is not only a rhetorical device but also a cognitive and communicative process through which one entity can provide access to another in comprehension.

Overall, metonymy is an indispensable necessity in the interpretative process without which it is unimaginably inadequate for the information-senders to encode all the intended meanings into language or for the information-receivers to decode meanings from the surface language.

Quite large numbers of papers and collected articles have addressed this phenomenon. Some of them illustrate the proposed taxonomies with artificial examples; some only involve two or three issues about metonymy; some merely conduct a comparatively rough description. There has been no monograph like this book, Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication, to make a full-fledged and elaborate depiction of metonymy from all major aspects in details with numerous real-world instances.

Metonymy has been rethought of as a form of hidden shortcuts in human thinking. It is a shortcut which renders thinking more effective and cohesive. It is also somewhat hidden because most metonymies are used repeatedly and unconsciously.

Littlemore defines metonymy as “a figure of language and thought in which one entity is used to refer to, or in cognitive linguistic terms ‘provide access to,’ another entity to which it is somehow related” (p. 4). She mainly focuses on metonymy in the form of language but also includes its variation in different modes: art, music, film and advertising, etc.
Chapter 1 opens with looking at what metonymy is, how it performs and what it does. It provides a definition of metonymy and takes a brief survey of two broad approaches to the study of metonymy: the cognitive approach and the linguistic approach. The chapter proceeds to compare and contrast metonymy with metaphor in two aspects: domain and similarity.

Chapter 2 outlines the taxonomies of main metonymy-producing relationships that have been mentioned in the cognitive linguistic literature. The taxonomy is highlighted in depth, and the components of this taxonomy are illustrated by authentic instances. This chapter provides a foundation to the book by drawing a general picture of metonymy with a systematic categorization. There are two key findings in this chapter. Firstly, cognitive linguistic taxonomies are prone to neglect metonymy’s strong dependence on context, its pragmatic functions, and its complex relationship with metaphor. Secondly, the meanings of metonymic expressions are determined by both context and their linguistic forms.

Chapter 3 investigates a lot of identified models in order to tackle the problems of metonymy. In an earlier stage, metonymy was classified into two or three discrete categories in some traditional approaches. Afterwards the author presents three models which regard metonymy as an interactive and dynamic phenomenon whose meanings are shaped according to its context. Finally, this chapter closes with some suggestions to account for metonymy in real-world contexts with the aid of these models.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the functions of metonymy. It supplements the discussion of the metonymy-producing relationships in Chapter 2 with exploration of semantic and pragmatic meanings. Chapter 4 strives to detect some functions of metonymy that have been identified and well-attested, mainly in the linguistics literature, such as referential functions and illocutionary functions. These functions are analyzed in depth with the question “What do people use metonymy for?” or “What purposes can metonymy enforce?” in mind. The author displays how the cognitive linguistic approach can help to explain metonymy’s functions in real-world examples, and, in turn how the real-world data can prompt to optimize models of metonymy.

Chapter 5 mainly surveys these creative, evaluative and attitudinal functions of metonymy, and extends the discussion to other forms of representation and communication, such as art and music. In particular, it analyzes the contributions of metonymy to euphemism, dysphemism and hyperbole, irony and vagueness. It also probes into the way metonymy conveys evaluation, ideology and positioning, and demonstrates metonymy’s creative functions in language, art, music, film and advertising.

Chapter 6 calculates the difficulties when we identify metonymy in all forms of expressions. Sometimes it is rather a dilemma to differentiate where