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Grammatical metaphor: Exploring the semogenic power of the language

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to elaborate on the notion of 'grammatical metaphor' intended by M. A. K. Halliday (1983) in his Functional Systemic Linguistics (FSL). 'Metaphor' in linguistic parlance is 'a process of mapping between two different conceptual domains - the source domain and the target domain'. Halliday draws on this definition of lexical metaphor and applies the concept to syntactical structures, a gimmick whereby a particular grammatical structure is converted into another structure while the original meaning is preserved. A good many examples are supplied to illustrate the points in case. Also, this paper deals with different kinds of metaphors. The key argument in this paper centers on the methodology of teaching writing to English majors in the author's English composition classes which we applied some years ago in the English program in the University of Tabriz. The claim we make is that the methodology of teaching writing which we used in our composition classes was indeed the practical realization of the tenets of grammatical metaphor intended by Halliday in his FSL.

Keywords: lexical metaphor; grammatical metaphor; functional systemic linguistics; conventional metaphor; conceptual metaphor; poetic metaphor; mixed metaphor

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Introduction

Engaged in reading a doctoral dissertation written by a student at the graduate program of teaching English as a foreign language, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, 2014, I came across a set of terminologies of recent linguistic fashion in applied linguistics in general and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in particular such as ‘grammatical metaphor, ‘congruent structures’ and ‘incongruent’ structures, ‘source domain’, ‘target domain,’ and so forth. For a person not inducted into the backdrop of new trends in language studies – discourse analysis, genre analysis, text linguistics, textual semantics, move types –, the notion of grammatical metaphor (GM) appears a bit fuzzy at first, but on second thought and poring over the various definitions of the term given by different authors in their studies of the issue one can eventually catch on to the meaning intended by the originator of the term, Michael Halliday (1985). It goes without saying that when a notion strikes the mind of a researcher or a writer for the first time, there is a halo of misty speculations around the new concept, but as time goes on, other thinkers jump on the bandwagon and look at the issue from different perspectives and later on the same very concept is developed beyond recognition. I will come back to this point when I explain a composition methodology I applied in my English classes at the University of Tabriz some thirty years ago. Well, when I came across the notion of *grammatical metaphor*, I should admit that I was a bit nonplused at my initial encounter with the term as to what it really meant. Already, I was fully cognizant of the traditional meaning of *metaphor* as it is realized in the following examples:

- 1) He has a **heart** of stone.
- 2) She is the **apple** of her parents’ eyes.
- 3) Management is holding out **the olive branch** to the strikers. (a gesture of making peace)
- 4) All the senior managers will be **swept out**. (dismissed)
- 5) The sky was **crying**. (it was raining)
- 6) The man’s remark was indeed **a stab in the back**. (a surreptitious sudden attack)
- 7) By his foolish acts, the boy was **kicking the pricks**. (hurting himself)
- 8) The noise **gave** me a headache. (hurting me)
- 9) His temper **rose** and his voice **fell**. (got upset; grew silent)

I assume a person with a modicum English knowledge can easily understand what is meant by the metaphoric expressions given above. Why? The answer lies in the definitions supplied by the authors in the field: The word *metaphor* is to perceive one thing in term of another; for instance, a person whose **heart** is a ‘stone’ is said to be unsympathetic, or to be ‘the **apple** of somebody’s eye’ implies a position of high value one has for the other person, to ‘**stab somebody in the back**’ is to do or say something vicious that is unexpected, to ‘**hold out the olive branch**’ is a gesture made for making peace and friendship. Thus a metaphor is a concept used to refer to another concept. This definition is borne out by the word ‘metaphor’ proper. Metaphor is derived from the Greek ‘meta’ meaning “beyond” and ‘phora’, derived from ‘pherein’, meaning to “carry”. According to Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, a metaphor is a concept that refers to another concept through a word.

Part One

In recent linguistic parlance, metaphor is a 'mapping of the structure of a source model onto a target model (Ungerer & Schmid, 1999, p. 120). Simpson's definition (2004) of metaphor is almost similar to the definition given above: 'A metaphor is a process of mapping between two different conceptual domains – the *source domain* and the *target domain* (p. 108). In the examples given above (1-9), the source domains are typed in bold type and the target domains are either mentioned as in or implied by the linguistic context in which they are used. Metaphor has also been defined as "a figure of speech in which a term is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance" (Grice, 1965, p. 248). Unterecker (1959) has pointed out a distinction between a metaphor and a symbol, saying 'a metaphor always has at least two assigned meanings: its own sign value and the sign value of the object or idea it stands for. But a symbol stands on one leg only, the other kicks at the stars.' (cited in Grice, 1959, p. 248). In Persian literature, for instance, the owl is the symbol of a bad omen, but in British culture it is the symbol of wisdom.

Different kinds of metaphor have been recognized. Very briefly they are:

A conventional metaphor is one that forms a part of our everyday understanding. It is processed without effort, e. g. *to lose the thread of an argument; to thread one's way through the tables in someplace; to eat one's words, to have one's ear to the ground; to eat out of somebody's hand; to handle someone with kid gloves; to have a low boiling point, to give someone a cold shoulder; to have one's heart in one's mouth*, and so forth.

A poetic metaphor abounds in literary texts (Grice, 1965, p. 34)

Gather therefore the Rose, whilst yet is prime

For soone comes age, that will ber pride deflower. (The Faerie Queene, II, xii, LXXV-LXXXVI)

I hear the far-off Curfew sound,

Over wide-water'd shore,

Singing slow with sullen roar. ("II Penseroso," 74-76)

At last a soft and solemn breathing sound

Rose like a stream of rich distil'd perfume,

And stole upon the air, that even Silence

Was took ere she was ware, and wish't she might

Deny her nature, and be never more,

Still to be so displac't, I was all ear,

And took in strains that might create a soul

Under the ribs of Death. (Comus, 555-562).

A conceptual metaphor is that functions in speaker's mind and implicitly conditions his/her thought process; for example, *to attack somebody's view; to pull the rug out from under somebody* (make somebody ineffective); *to pull someone's teeth* (reduce the power of someone); *to pull someone's leg* (to kid); *to give the bride away* (accompany the bride to the groom in a wedding ceremony); *to ruffle*

somebody's feathers (make him angry); *to use a trick in somebody's book* (use the tactics mentioned in the book); *to keep something under one's hat* (keep it a secret), and so forth. In *What We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identify three overlapping categories of conceptual metaphors: *oriental metaphor*, *ontological metaphor*, and *structural metaphor*. The authors, Lakoff and Johnson, mention the following variations as the examples of conceptual metaphor of TIME IS MONEY:

- You are *wasting* my time.
- This gadget will *save* you hours.
- I don't *have* the time to give you.
- How do you *spend* your time these days?
- That flat tire *cost* me an hour.
- I've *invested* a lot of time in her.
- You're *running out* of time.
- Is that *worth* your while?
- How is he living on *borrowed* time?

Systemic functional theory rejects the notion that metaphor is a decorative device, peripheral to language and thought. Instead, the theory holds that metaphor is central to thought, and therefore to language. From this theoretical positional several tenets are derived (Deignan, 2005). These tenets are:

- Metaphors structure thinking;
- Metaphors structure knowledge;
- Metaphor is central to abstract language;
- Metaphors are grounded in physical experience;
- Metaphor is ideological.

A mixed metaphor is used for a combination of unrelated and incompatible metaphors in a single sentence:

- 11) This is a *virgin field, pregnant with* possibilities.
- 12) We were sitting in the bar, my friend and I, he was *shooting the breeze, keeping me in stitches*. (He was talking nonsense, making me laugh heartily.)

Metaphor is a very common feature in human verbal activity. It is ubiquitous in spoken and written forms of language; it represents the *centrifugal force* of language; it reflects what we perceive. People perceive reality with different perspectives, i.e. sees the 'heart' as the 'pump' in the body, the 'sun' as the source of 'vitality', 'shedding tears' as the 'drops of rain dripping from clouds'. In this vein of argument, it is said that human language is analogous, not digital, and that metaphor is an image-reflecting mirror; therefore, it goes deeper into memory and communicates ideas faster and more conveniently, and often more delightfully. It is a truism to claim that communication through language will be monotonous, drab and insipid should it be stripped of metaphorical expressions. While the *centripetal force* of language - sentences with propositional meaning- is good for writing

contracts, bills of the parliament, rules of the business, the centrifugal force underlying metaphorical expressions is good for writing poetry, literary works – dramas, novels, short stories which allow the creator’s mind to take flight to express mental images.

Kovecses (2010) has posited to view that understanding one domain in terms of another involves a set of fixed correspondences, called *mappings*, between a source and a target domain. It is these mappings that provide much of the meaning of the metaphorical linguistic expressions or linguistic metaphors that make a particular conceptual metaphor manifest.

In earlier schooling, literal or ‘congruent’ construction of experience, i. e. using lexical metaphors, is common (Christie & Derewianke, 2008). As the speaker turns into late childhood and adolescence, grammatical metaphor or ‘incongruent’ structural forms start to emerge in their language, i.e. they tend to use more complex grammatical structures. We will return to this topic and treat it fully in the second part of this paper. It is worth noting that both literal/lexical and grammatical metaphors mean the same, but they serve different functions. The literal instance portrays a sequence of concrete experiences such as observation, and narrates it as a matter of fact. The grammatical metaphor, on the other hand, is the concentrated experience into a general notion of abstraction; for example, converting subordinate clauses into nominalizations:

When the man was leaving the building, ... *On leaving the building, the man..*

(changing adverb clause of time to phrase)

Although he refuses the offer, *Despite his refusal of the offer, ...*

(changing clause of contrast into noun phrase)

He took a cab so that he would catch his flight *..... in order to catch his flight.*

(changing clause of purpose into infinitive)

The examples given above are instances of grammatical metaphors. As the reader may realize, it often happens that new trends in linguistic studies are indeed the rehashes of the old notions prevalent in the traditional schools of language studies – New wines in old bottles.

Before I address myself to the main topic, grammatical metaphor, in this paper, I may give a brief account of the composition methodology which I used with my English majors in my classes in the University of Tabriz some 30 years ago (Refer to Azabdaftari, *A Collection of English Papers by the Author*, forthcoming). The sentence-combining practice, the hallmark of my reading-based composition methodology, allowed the students to learn the skill of manipulating English sentence structures in order to express the intended meaning in the text. I was fully aware that my students, being adult and cognitively mature, had problems in putting their English language grammar to proper uses in the process of expressing their feelings and ideas. To say it differently, the students were not short of thoughts; their Achilles’ heel was insufficiency of linguistic means. To ameliorate the situation, I required the students to first read the assigned reading text, then I provided them with a set of linking words such as coordinators (*and, but, so, for or, nor, yet*), subordinators (*because, since, although while, if ...*), conjunctive adverbs/discourse markers (*moreover, however, nevertheless, consequently, in addition to, ...*) and also provided them with the rules of *participle construction*. The students, having finished reading a short reading text, were supposed to follow the few given guidelines to express the same semantic feature in the reading text with different words and structural patterns (cf. Appendix). Having practiced the skill of sentence manipulation for a couple of sessions, the students ventured to write short, simple English composition with confidence and with few gross grammatical errors. Today in my reflection over this methodology in my English composition classes, I realize that I was indeed acting up to the tenets of Halliday’s Functional

Systemic Linguistics (FSL). How and why? The reader may wish to wait until I have finished with the discussion of grammatical metaphor in the second part of this paper.

Part Two

Michael Halliday introduced the concept of grammatical metaphor (GM) in the early years of 1985. The concept, as it is conceived in the systemic functional model of language, exploits the grammatical resources of language. The notion shares the same metaphorical movement with lexical metaphor. While the lexical metaphor is concerned with words, grammatical metaphor is rooted in the grammar of language. Halliday (1985) has distinguished between *ideational metaphors* which are concerned with alternative ways of construing reality, and *interpersonal metaphors* which offer alternative possibilities of expressing modal meaning (metaphors of modality), or exchanging commands and making requests.

As a typical instance of grammatical metaphor, Halliday (1985) considers various kinds of nominalizations such as the following examples:

- 10) John wrote a letter to his sister.
- 11) John's writing a letter to his sister surprised me.

The nominalized structure in (12) is regarded a 'grammatical metaphor' because it, as the meaning of metaphor indicates, refers to a process taking place at a particular time in reality. Thus grammatical metaphor involves a type of metaphorical movement, i.e. the meaning of the clause is preserved in the nominalized form. Further examples of grammatical metaphor:

From adverb to adjective

- 12) He writes well.
He is a good writer.

From prepositional phrase to noun

- 13) The dust of the surface of the table ...
The surface-dust of the table ...

From clause to adjective

- 14) Snow had covered the fields.
The snow-covered fields

From participle construction to adverb clause (and vice versa)

- 16a) While/On/After/Before getting off the taxi, the man paid the fare.
- b) The man, getting off the taxi, paid the fare.
- c) The man paid the fare, getting off the taxi.

From passive participle to clause of result (and vice versa)

- 17a) The road, (having been) blocked, we took the detour.
 b) Because/As/Since the road was blocked, we took the detour

From adjective to gerund

- 18a) We are used to hot weather.
 b) We are used to living in hot weather.

From infinitive to subjunctive

- 19a) He wants to/had better try out the device.
 b) I suggest/have suggested/had suggested/will suggest (that) he try out the device.

From auxiliary verb to regular verb

- 20a) You needn't finish your soup if you do not like it.
 b) You do not need to finish your soup if you do not like it.

From infinitive to adverb clause of purpose

- 21a) He hurried so as not to miss his flight.
 b) He hurried lest he should miss his flight.

From phrase to clause (and vice versa)

- 22a) To my surprise, he was given the prize.
 b) I was surprised when I learnt/found out that he was given the prize.

From clause to phrase

- 23a) As I was arriving at my destination, I felt happy in heart.
 b) On my arrival at the destination, I felt happy in heart.

I think these few examples will drive home the point in case: various grammatical structures can be used to imply almost the same semantic feature, each structure having a subtle shade of meaning which is often called the *sense* in literary parlance.

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a functional theory of language; it views language in terms of its functioning in our daily lives. Halliday (1985) interprets the functioning of language in terms of three metafunctions: The *ideational metafunction* which focuses on the role of language in representing and shaping reality. Language fulfils this function by dividing reality into processes that take place and entities that can take part in these processes. The examples below illustrate the point:

- 24) John admired the play.
- 25) The play was very admirable.

Example (24) refers to the process *admired*, which has two entities/participants – *John* and *the play*. Example (25) illustrates a quality *very admirable* by which the entity *the play* is described.

The *interpersonal metafunction* focuses on interpersonal relations between people by means of evaluative word(s)

- 26) You *bully!* Stop teasing the little girl.

Interpersonal metafunctions are enacted through a) modal verbs, and b) moods:

- 27) It *will/can/could/may/might* rain tonight.

A modal meaning such as hesitation, certainty, probability can also be conveyed through the use of modal adverbs – *perhaps, surely, by all means, without doubt, interestingly enough* ...

The three *moods* in English language grammar are: indicatives, imperatives, and subjunctives (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The indicative mood is used in declarative sentences or questions:

- 28) The book is on the top shelf.
- 29) Where is the key to this door?

Examples of imperatives and subjunctives are:

- 30) *Put* it on the table.
- 31) *Be* quiet. *Be* waiting for me at the bus-station.
- 32) It is required that she *be* present. (subjunctive)
- 33) I demand he *come* at once. (subjunctive)
- 34) If I *were* you, I'd go there. (if-clause)
- 35) *Be that it may. So be it.* (some fixed expressions)

The textual metafunction deals with the textual organization:

- 36a) I saw a bus turning round the corner.
 - b) Round the corner came a bus into sight.
- 37a) I do not care what he did with the money.
 - b) What he did with the money is beyond my concern.
- 38a) The old woman threw an egg at the policeman.
 - b) It was the old woman that threw an egg at the policeman.

- c) It was an egg that the old woman threw at the policeman.
- d) It was the policeman that the old woman threw an egg at.

Grammatical metaphor is of great significance in ideational and interpersonal metafunctions in Halliday's SFL. Consider once more the following examples of grammatical metaphor in the following ideational and interpersonal metafunctions:

Ideational metafunction:

- a) *From verb form to noun phrase*
 - 39) The workers persuaded the manager to change his decision.
 - 40) The workers' persuasion made the manager change his decision.
- b) *From adjective to noun phrase*
 - 41) He was courageous in seeking justice.
 - 42) We cannot count on his courage in seeking justice.

Interpersonal metafunction concerns the areas of A) modality and B) mood

A) Examples of modality:

- 43a) John will take his final examination next month.
- b) John will have taken his final examination by the end of the next month.

The meaning of certainty or likelihood, according to Halliday (1985), can be expressed by some phrases at the beginning of the clause:

- 44a) *I think that* John has already taken his final examination.
- b) *It is likely that* John has already taken his final examination.
- c) *Everyone believed that* John had already taken his final examination.
- d) *It is clear that* John has taken his final examination.

B) Examples of mood: Three major types of interactive functions in communication, as we mentioned earlier, are statements, questions, and requests/commands. While the expressions of statements and questions are fairly straightforward, the statements of requests and commands can be enacted through a large variety of structures:

- 45a) Post this letter for me, please.
- b) Can/Could/Will/ Would you post this letter for me?
- c) Do me a favor and post this letter for me.
- d) Could you be kind enough to post this letter for me? Or pragmatically:
- e) - I have a letter to post, but I am very busy today.
- I will/can post it for you.

Before I end with this paper, I think two points are worthy of note. Halliday (1985) describes the lexical metaphor as a view ‘from below’ i.e. a lexeme with a *literal* meaning can have a transferred meaning. In this case the change involved in metaphor is *paradigmatic* and the resulting change is termed ‘congruent sequence’. Grammatical metaphor, however, involves *syntagmatic* changes as evidenced when a phrase is changed into the corresponding clause or vice versa. Halliday regards this as a view ‘from above’, which is labeled ‘incongruent’ or grammatical metaphor.

Conclusion

The word metaphor is used when we perceive something in terms of another as when we say *the heart is the pump of the body*. This is called ‘lexical metaphor’, and the relation between words, *heart* and *pump* in the above example is paradigmatic. Grammatical metaphor is used when a certain type of meaning is expressed through different yet relevant grammatical structures; the relation between the structures involved are syntagmatic. It is in light of this argument that Halliday (1985) uses ‘grammatical metaphor’; namely, the same semantic component is conveyed through different but relevant structures. Personally, I do not feel convenient with this terminology, and I should admit that the impetus for surveying various sources of information and writing this paper comes from my initial failure to make sense of this terminology. It is a new linguistic coinage, not introduced in the traditional grammar books of old schools. I am not alone in my initial failure to grasp the implied meaning of this caption that is given to various grammatical structures used to express a certain semantic feature in the process of language production. The new coinage seems to have set some other research workers in linguistic studies scratching their heads as well. Romero and Soria (2005), having discussed the notion of grammatical metaphor, have sounded a sour note, saying ‘The expression of “grammatical metaphor” does not seem to be a good name for the notion that Halliday (1985) has introduced in his works. Indeed, we prefer to call it *marked morphosyntactic variation*.’

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Appendix

Bellow follows some samples of the writing practices which I used in my classes of English composition with college freshmen in the English language program in the University of Tabriz in the years past. The purpose was to help the students gain the skill of manipulating various language structures in an attempt to express freely their intentional meaning.

COMPOSITION PRACTICE (1)

SOS

When a light passenger plane flew off course some time ago, it crashed in the mountains and its pilot was killed. The only passengers, a young woman and her two baby daughters, were unhurt. It was the middle of winter. Snow lay thick on the ground. The woman knew that the nearest village was miles away. When it grew dark, she turned a suit-case into a bed and put the children inside it, covering them with all the clothes she could find. During the night, it got terribly cold. The woman kept as near as she could to the children and even tried to get into the case herself, but it was too small. Early next morning, she heard planes passing overhead and wondered how she could send a signal. Then she had an idea. She stamped out the letters 'SOS' in the snow. Fortunately, a pilot saw the signal and sent a message by radio to the nearest town. It was not long before a helicopter arrived at the scene to rescue the survivors of the plane crash.

Precis

In not more than 80 words, describe what happened. Write two different paragraphs using the points and the connections given below:

CONNECTIONS	POINTS	CONNECTIONS
but	1. Plane crashed – mountains.	When
and	2. Only passengers – woman, baby daughters not hurt.	
so	3. Mid-winter – extremely cold.	However, and
and	4. Put children in case	After putting
When	5. Covered them – clothes.	and
This	6. Kept close all night.	the woman
who	7. Plane – next morning.	On seeing
and	8. Stamped 'SOS' – in the snow.	the woman
	9. Seen by pilot.	which
	10. Message sent.	
	11. Rescued – helicopter.	and

This composition practice was followed by another practice; it had the points but the student learner had to provide the relevant connections himself as illustrated below – Composition Practice (2):

COMPOSITION PRACTICE (2)

Write two paragraphs in about 150 words, using the ideas given below:

1. A light aeroplane with a heavy cargo – sudden storm – high winds – the pilot made a crash landing in the snow.

2. The pilot was unhurt – roped the plane to a rock – spent the night in a tent – next morning – found that the plane had been swept away by the wind – smashed to pieces – cargo and wreckage in the snow.

Using the CONNECTIONS on the left and the POINTS given

A plane crashed in the mountains, but the only passengers - a woman and her two baby daughters were unhurt. It was mid-winter and the weather was extremely cold, so the woman put her children into a suit-case, covered them with clothes, and kept close to them all night. When she heard a plane flying next morning, the woman stamped 'SOS' in the snow, which was seen by a pilot, who sent a message to the nearest town and they were rescued by the a helicopter.

Using the CONNECTIONS on the right and the POINTS given

When a plane crashed in the mountains, its only passengers - a woman and her two baby daughters were not hurt. However, it was the middle of winter and extremely cold. After putting the children into a suit-case, the woman kept close to the children. On seeing a plane flying overheads, she stamped 'SOS' in the snow, which was seen by a pilot. The pilot sent a message to the nearest town and they were rescued by a helicopter.

The students, having written the two paragraphs (while using two different sets of CONNECTIONS and the same POINTS) were expected to notice, on comparison, the various sentence structures in their own compositions and the ones in the original reading text. The students' rehearsal with versatile sentence structures, as is evidenced in the above example, is indeed acting up to the tenets of 'grammatical metaphor intended by Halliday in his Functional Systemic Grammar

COMPOSITION PRACTICE (3)

The students were required to read a text, for example, "Life on a desert Island" in the book *Developing Skills*, by L. G. Alexander, Volume 3, page 34, and then answer the questions following the text, while joining their answers in the way shown. For the sake of space limitation the reading text is not given here.

In not more than 80 words explain how the two men came to spend five days on a desert island and say what they did there. Do not include anything that is not in the last paragraph.

Answer these questions to get your points:

1. Was the men's boat damaged or not?
2. Where were they taking it?
3. What happened to it on the way?
4. What did the men load on their rubber dinghy?
5. Where did they row?
6. Where did they arrive?
7. Where did the men collect water during their stay there?
8. How did they catch fish and lobster?
9. Did they eat 'like Kings' for five days or not?
10. How were they rescued?

COMPOSITION PRACTICE (4)

At this stage of composition writing the students, having read a longer reading text, were required to write a continuation of the passage in not more than 250 words. The students were to expand the ideas given below into a plan and provide a suitable title. The reading text is entitled 'One Man's Meat is Another Man's Poison,' in the book *Developing Skills*, by L. G. Alexander, Volume 3, page 64. The composition was supposed to be developed in three or four paragraphs. For space limitation the reading text is excluded.

Ideas: Snails – walls, ceiling – coat pockets – effort to collect them – ladders etc. marks everywhere
– Robert amused - cooked the snails – a meal for one.