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The Semantic Structure of Gross National Happiness:
A view from conceptual metaphor theory

Abstract

In this study, I make several observations on how conventionalized metaphors used in public discourse regarding Gross National Happiness shape the semantics of development in Bhutan. On this basis, I propose ways in which the field of cognitive linguistics might contribute to planning and education for Gross National Happiness. The theoretical basis for this approach is Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as formulated by University of California Berkeley linguist George Lakoff and other cognitive linguists (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Fauconnier & Turner 2002, Langacker 2008). Conceptual Metaphor Theory analyzes the patterns of meaning reflected in idiomatic figurative language and predicts that these semantic patterns can influence patterns of non-linguistic conceptual structure, including patterns of moral reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).

Introduction

Broad concepts such as happiness are essentially contested, without clearly defined meanings shared by all speakers (Gallie 1956). This allows for multifaceted and variable understandings according to individual, cultural and historical circumstances. If we as individuals feel or understand happiness differently, how do we still manage to communicate about it? Or do individuals imagine that they experience the same emotion only inasmuch as they talk about it in similar terms? If so, how universal or distinct are expressions and understandings of happiness across cultures? I propose that the semantics of happiness can be understood in terms of the phrases that situate the emotion within the conceptual landscape of a given language. Often, these phrases are figurative. For example, Gross National Happiness has become a discourse

metaphor[2] for economic development, first in Bhutan English, and now emergent in Worldwide English.

Our encyclopedic understanding of the world expressed in language is, according to the view of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), ultimately rooted in the cumulative analogy of experience and meaning. Working as a cognitive shortcut, enabling communication by grounding new concepts onto conventionalized shared experiences, analogy becomes encoded in language as metaphor (Kövecses 2002). Abstract concepts including emotions are psychologically real conceptual mappings to sensory experiences, which are in turn encoded in the brain as perceptual symbols (Lakoff & Johnson 1999, Barsalou 1999). Since concepts are grounded in physical experience, language denoting concrete entities is more accessible – closer to the tip of the tongue – than is language denoting abstract ones. Conceptual Metaphor Theory predicts that, because sensory experiences precede abstract understanding, the conceptual mappings that reflect the structure of conventionalized metaphor in language will therefore be unidirectional from concrete to abstract. That is, abstract concepts are predicted as being understood *in terms of* concrete words, but not vice versa. For example:

(1)   *Conceptual Mappings for the Metaphor IDEAS ARE OBJECTS*

Concrete	→	Abstract
an object	→	an idea ("I get the idea.")
a container	→	a mind ("What do you have in mind?")
object manipulation	→	Thought ("She toyed with the suggestion.")
object transfer	→	communication ("It went right over his head.")
taking apart an object	→	Analysis ("He teased apart the concept.")
combining objects	→	Synthesis ("Her constructive approach set
a building	→	a theory ("the foundation for a new theory.")

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[2] Zinken (2007) defines "discourse metaphor" as a technical term for linguistic corpus analysis.

Conventional metaphors are so pervasive in language that speakers often are not conscious of the extent to which these mappings structure and filter their thought (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). And yet metaphor is nonetheless highly regular. By delineating the structure of metaphor, we can gain insight into the structure of thought for a given language community.

Emotions are expressed figuratively in common ways across different languages. For example, across languages and cultures, it is common for spatial predication to underlie language describing positive and negative emotions, whereby happiness is associated with upward directionality ("*He was in high spirits.*" "*They were on cloud nine.*" "*Things are really looking up for her these days.*"), while in contrast sadness is expressed in terms of downward directionality ("*Why so low today?*" "*He felt so down everyday.*"). This conflation of space and emotion is not unique to English or the Indo-European language family to which English belongs. Indeed, the upward/downward mapping is equally conventionalized in expressions for emotion in many other languages and language families. The universality of such mappings across unrelated languages implies that these semantic patterns reflect deeper structure of how we as humans think. As another example, figurative language regarding nations involves their conceptualization as a family or as a person ("*developing nation*" "*immature economy*": Lakoff & Johnson 1999:534) and, like people, nations are conceptualized as moving toward certain goals. As such, abstract concepts such as progress are understood in terms of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:190*ff*):

Conceptual Mappings for the Metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS

Concrete	➔	**Abstract**
a destination	➔	a purpose ("The goal is *a long way off.*")
path	➔	Means ("Do it *this way.*")
forward movement	➔	progress ("Let's keep *moving forward.*")
backward movement	➔	Failure ("We are *sliding backward.*")
distance moved	➔	amt. of progress ("We've *covered lots of ground.*")
lack of movement	➔	ack of progress ("We're *going nowhere.*")

Happiness as a Metaphorical Goal and Path

The Western concept of "the pursuit of happiness" situates wellbeing within the metaphorical framework of PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS, such that happiness is understood as a purpose for development within society. In Bhutan, however, the corresponding metaphors function as expressions of a strategy to increase Gross National Happiness, as introduced in 1972 by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Gross National Happiness establishes qualitatively different metaphorical mappings from those associated with "the pursuit of happiness," in that the former links wellbeing not only with the goal of development but also with its means and source. Thus, discussions of Gross National Happiness in Bhutan highlight social wellbeing in terms of a quantifiable national or social resource, a substance apparently *both within and outside* the bodies of individual citizens.

The idea that habits of language reflect habits of thought is not new in psychology and linguistics (Whorf 1956). However, in the past several decades, experimental work in cognitive psychology has confirmed in behavioral studies how language influences non-linguistic thought patterns (Gonzalez-Marquez *et al.* 2006, Evans *et al.* 2007). Thus, I would suggest, Conceptual Metaphor Theory can contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of Gross National Happiness as it is used in current discourse. For example, by measuring the statistical frequency of key terms and analyzing their collocations – that is, frequently used words and phrases

associated with "happiness" and "Gross National Happiness" in texts – we can begin to chart a semantic network for the concept of Gross National Happiness.

The table below lists the collocations for happiness and Gross National Happiness that are found in several recent Five-Year Plans of the Royal Government of Bhutan:

Sample Measurements of "Happiness" in Select Five-Year Plans of Bhutan

Plan	Dates	Freq. of "*Happiness*"	Freq. of "*GNH*"
6th	1987-1992	28.25 words per million (wpm)	0 wpm
Words in context (1 token): "*a comfortable house is a source of security, <u>happiness</u> and contentment*"			
7th	1992-1997	0 wpm	0 wpm
8th	1997-2002	0 wpm	13.30 wpm
Words in context (1 token): "*Income expansion and increased commodity production are only means that have the potential for enhancing human capabilities. They are useful only to the extent that they can contribute to [<u>GNH</u>]*"			
9th	2002-2007	134.08 wpm	134.08 wpm
Words in context (14 tokens, 7 each): "*[<u>GNH</u>] is the overarching development philosophy of Bhutan.*" "*[<u>GNH</u>] is more important than [GNP]*" "*All development efforts must seek to contribute to both the material and spiritual well-being of the person to enhance [<u>GNH</u>].*" "*the maximization of [<u>GNH</u>] is a philosophy and objective*" "*a wide range of factors contribute to human well-being and <u>happiness</u>*" "*the country has identified four major areas as the main pillars of [<u>GNH</u>]*" "*breadth and quality of social relations also lie at the root of <u>happiness</u>*" "*an individual's quest for <u>happiness</u>*" "*a system of governance that promotes well-being and <u>happiness</u>*" "*A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and <u>Happiness</u>*" "*contribute to the well-being and <u>happiness</u> of the people*" "*impact of development efforts towards achieving the indices of [<u>GNH</u>]*" "*[<u>GNH</u>] as the key development philosophy and planning objective*" "*way of life based on the principle of achieving human <u>happiness</u>*"			

These data reflect how happiness and Gross National Happiness emerged as discourse elements of Bhutan's 6th and 8th Five-Year Plans in the 1980s and '90s, and then rose to prominence in the 9th Five-Year Plan, written largely the early 2000's. The figurative language expressed in the collocations for happiness and Gross National Happiness in these documents revolves around two main metaphors, namely:

(4) Metaphors for Happiness as Expressed in Bhutan's Five-Year Plans

1. HAPPINESS IS A GOAL
        "*quest* for happiness"
        "*achieving* human happiness"
2. HAPPINESS IS A NATURAL RESOURCE
        "*source* of … happiness"
        "*contribute* to Gross National Happiness"
        "*maximization* of Gross National Happiness"
        "*root* of happiness"

Common metaphorical expressions recruited from other political and rhetorical discourse, such as A THEORY IS A BUILDING ("*Gross National Happiness is the overarching philosophy*" "*pillars of Gross National Happiness*"), also play a role in shaping how it is conceptualized.

In certain aspects, the construal of happiness as a type of goal and resource may appear at first glance to be quite similar to the Moral Accounting metaphor that underlies much of Western philosophy and ethics. Under the Moral Accounting metaphor, social and personal wellbeing is conceptualized as a form of wealth, such that "we understand an increase in wellbeing as a *gain* and a decrease of wellbeing as a *loss* or a *cost*. We speak of *profiting* from an experience, of having a *rich* life, of *investing* in happiness, and of *wasting* our lives" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:292). Current economic models in the West, and the philosophical standpoints in which such models are grounded, apply this metaphorical conceptualization of wellbeing as wealth in how both markets and political decision-making are institutionalized. For example,

corporations are taken as "rational actors" that are established for the express purpose of the maximization and accumulation of wealth (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:530). Thus, the creation of monetary wealth by "rational actors" is seen as a goal in and of itself.

This contrasts with the conceptualization of Gross National Happiness, through which happiness can be construed not only as a goal but also as a resource, a pool of cultural, environmental and social capital that contributes to the creation of further prosperity. His Excellency Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, in his keynote speech at the Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific in 1998, has articulated this disconnection between monetary income and social wellbeing, as confirmed by the fact that "happiness depends on relative income, not on absolute income. In a world where everyone who has less is trying to catch up with everyone who has more, we may become richer but happiness becomes elusive" (Thinley 1999:20). Indeed, as Thakur S. Powdyel has succinctly stated, Gross National Happiness allows for the measurement of social progress and people's worth "not by what they have, but by what they are" (Powdyel 1999:64). Thus, Gross National Happiness epitomizes a cyclical view of progress, with happiness as a type of wealth and both goal and source, in contrast to a linear view of happiness as primarily just a purpose reached via the accumulation of wealth.

Indeed, in some respects, conceptualizing happiness in terms of being only a goal could entail significant social and economic risks. Peter Hershock has argued that advancements in communications, transportation and manufacturing in the late 20th century have led to the widespread commoditization of most of the material goods and services that are required for basic subsistence. In a world of plenty, this has caused media consumption to cross over from being an intrinsic force for market development to becoming, rather, a channel for "the mass export of attention from local environments" (Hershock 2006:75). Gross National Happiness provides a basis for mitigating these risks by

enabling a rethinking of the usefulness of media services and luxury goods in terms of how much they actually contribute to the advancement of social wellbeing.

Aside from the Five-Year Plans, the figurative phrases associated with Gross National Happiness in other planning documents and policy statements of the Royal Government of Bhutan also reflect the source-path-goal mapping introduced above. The view of Gross National Happiness as drawing on a shared pool of wealth, and the fundamental underlying metaphor IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, can for example be seen in statements of how Bhutan's development strategy relates to its environmental policies:

> The process of <u>communal enrichment</u> [in Bhutan] was based on a dynamic in which those who <u>possess</u> superior knowledge <u>imparted</u> that knowledge to others. In the Buddhist religion, this concept of personal development was refined even further to entail overcoming the delusions <u>arising from</u> ignorance, aggression, and the desire for consumption and acquisition. … The notion that gross national happiness is more important than gross domestic product is thus inherent to the Bhutanese value system (National Environment Commission 1998:19).

In a very real sense, this notion of happiness as capital for development, rather than just a goal toward which development is directed, stems from Bhutan's religious philosophy:

> Firmly <u>rooted in</u> our rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, the approach [of Bhutan toward development] stresses, not material rewards, but individual development, sanctity of life, compassion for others, respect for nature, social harmony, and the importance of compromise. Our approach to development has sought to both <u>draw upon</u> and <u>conserve</u> this <u>rich fund</u> of social and cultural philosophy and to achieve a balance between the spiritual and material aspects of life, between peljor gongphel (economic development) and gakid (happiness and peace) (Planning Commission 1999:21).

The ubiquitous availability of Gross National Happiness as a pool of resources and as a specific type of path is perhaps best reflected in the statement that it "is a habit of thought that <u>infuses</u> development and the day-to-day business of government. Gross

National Happiness is Bhutan's <u>bridge over the gap</u> between values and development" (Royal Government of Bhutan 2000:23).

Conclusion

From the data discussed above regarding the use of Gross National Happiness in conjunction with metaphorical phrases in Bhutan's Five-Year Plans and other planning documents, we can thus see that, for example, the notion of "the pursuit of happiness" was not an explicit element of Gross National Happiness when it first emerged in the discourse. Instead, Gross National Happiness was conceptualized as a goal to be achieved *and* a resource to be cultivated. In other words, Gross National Happiness is formulated as both a future goal and a present resource, so as to balance a forward-looking stance for policy planning with a view grounded in the recognition of present circumstances. There are many other figurative phrases which could likewise express how happiness should be harnessed as a resource existing in the present, for example, describing Gross National Happiness as something to be "recognized," "legitimized," "nurtured", "grown" and "protected."

I propose that further research of the type that I have attempted on a very small scale with the Five-Year Plans and other governmental texts, but involving large-scale analysis of texts from a variety of media in Bhutan, could shed further light on the structural nature of how Gross National Happiness is conceptualized in the national discourse, including the degree to which is construed as a goal versus as a resource. More importantly, such a program of research could also shed light on how the discourse of Gross National Happiness has changed and is changing in real time.

A research approach based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory could also have implications for education, from elementary school through college. Given that each person understands happiness uniquely as an individual, and that each person has the capacity to conceptualize happiness and Gross National Happiness creatively

through novel metaphorical language, by integrating metaphor into language education via guided elicitation methods (Li 2008), English classes and other language classes in Bhutan could play a role in fostering creative conceptualizations of happiness at the individual and societal levels, while also teaching youth how to be mindful in the ways that they view social wellbeing.

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