An Analysis of the Relations Between the Meanings of the Subjunctive Mood and Its Past Tense Form for Facilitation of ESL

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Abstract: This paper will tentatively offer an explanation on the relationship between the meaning of the subjunctive mood and its past-tense form, under the framework of conceptual metaphor theory. It is hoped that this anaylsis could manage to offer a better elaboration on the tense of the subjunctive mood with a cognitive interpretation, with a view to helping ESL teachers and learners better understand the subjunctive mood in English teaching/learning process and opening a new gate for further studies on relationship between mood and tense.

Keywords: Subjunctive mood; Past tense; Conceptual metaphor; ESL

Many Chinese learners of English admit that the subjunctive mood is very difficult to acquire and many teachers find it uneasy to explain all its complicated verb forms clearly to their classes, because in the Chinese language there is no confusing verb inflections. Among scholars of English linguistics, there is still no universal agreement on the classification of verb forms in the subjunctive mood. No matter which method of classification is adopted, almost all the verb forms of the subjunctive mood belong to the past tense. To interpret the verb forms of the subjunctive mood, tense must be discussed.

With the development of cognitive linguistics in recent years, some scholars have begun to study the English tense from cognitive/metaphorical perspective. For example, Langacker (2004)[2] uses mental experiences of "proximity" and "distance" to interpret tenses and Taylor (2001)[3] uses the prototype theory to study tenses. This paper will mainly explore the past tense of the subjunctive mood with the theoretical guidance of the conceptual metaphor theory. Since for most Chinese students/learners, the subjunctive mood is one of the most complex and difficult parts in English grammar system, this paper also hopes to help better elaborate on the tense of subjunctive mood with a cognitive interpretation, with a view to helping English language teachers and learners understand better the subjunctive mood in English teaching/learning.

1. Relation between the Meaning of Unreality and the Past Tense Form

From the metaphorical perspective, the abstract unreality meaning is a metaphorical extension of the prototypical meaning of the past tense. According to the conceptual metaphor theory and the image schema theory, metaphorical extensions are realized by metaphorical mappings. Normally, the past time cannot be directly associated with unreality, so the spatial metaphor needs to be introduced here again to interpret such metaphorical extension.

Spatial metaphor is a very basic concept that people use to understand many unfamiliar or abstract things. We conceptualize linguistic forms in spatial terms so "it is possible for certain spatial metaphors to apply directly to the form of a sentence, as we conceive of it spatially…linguistic forms are themselves endowed with content by virtue of spatialization metaphors" (Lakoff & Johnson 93)[1]. This provides an automatic direct links between linguistic forms and meanings. Besides the spatial metaphors of time, people also use forms in space domain to express meanings in the reality domain. It's common to hear expressions like It's far from true or You are to the point. The phrases far from and to the point are originally used to describe spatial locations, but here they have the meanings with regard to the relevance to reality/truth. Another mapping from space domain to reality domain can be structured and since the time domain and the reality domain can both have the space domain as the source domain, the two target domains can be associated together. See Figure 1 (A_1 and A_2 are counterparts of A, and O_1 and O_2 are counterparts of O).
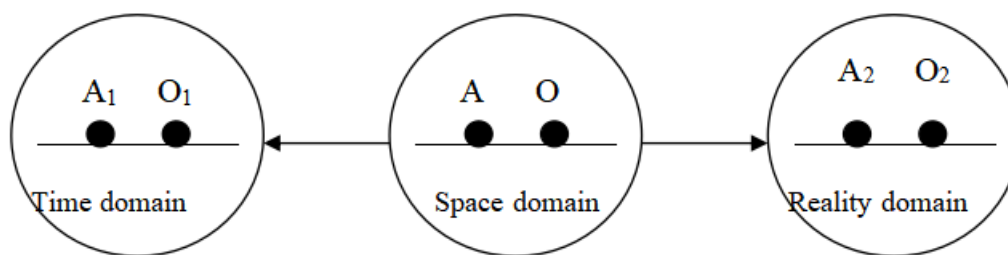
Figure 1. The metaphorical mappings from space domain to time domain and reality domain

It is through the role of space domain that time domain and reality domain are connected. It is the transferring medium that works to build the relation between the two meanings—past time and unreality. That's why we in our cognition tend to associate proximity with reality/truth as well as with present/now, while we subconsciously associate distance or remoteness with unreality/imaginariness and non-present time. So we experience something in common in the time world and the reality world because we experience similar feeling of proximity/remoteness in both worlds. Next, it can be supposed that the space domain as a medium can be gradually left out through a long time of development of human cognition. Compared with the time concept, the reality/truth concept is more abstract in human cognition, so a mapping can be structured from the time domain to the reality domain, as is shown in Figure 2.
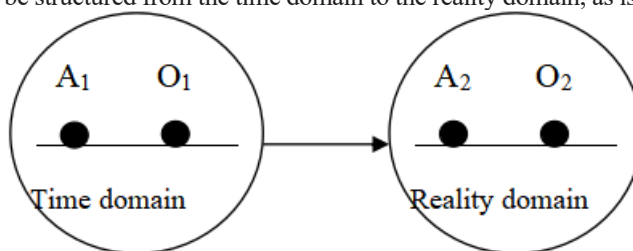

Figure 2. The metaphorical mapping from time domain to reality domain

In Figure 2, we regard point O_1 in the time domain as the present-moment point in real experience and any time point (such as point A_1) happening on the left side of O_1 is seen as a past-time point. Through the cross-domain mapping, O_1 as the present moment in the time domain is mapped onto O_2 as the reality/truth state in the reality domain, and A_1 as a past time moment is mapped onto A_2 as a state with some distance from the reality. So when people want to express something real they tend to use the present tense, and to use the past tense to express something unreal or with which they are uncertain. For example:

Present tense → realness	Past tense → unrealness
I *know* the answer.	I wish I *knew* the answer.
I *am* an English teacher.	Suppose I *were* an English teacher.
This *is* true.	This *might be* true.

Since conceptual metaphorization is a cognitive activity of human being to help to understand the world, it's the inner metaphorical thinking that makes human beings build the relation between the time domain and the reality domain. Therefore, the past tense verb forms in the subjunctive sentences do not serve as markers to refer to the past time. What the speaker wants to emphasize is not the time occurrence of the event/action, but a state of unreality of the event/action. People can use the past tense form to indicate the unreality or remoteness from the reality of an event/action that occurs in any time, past, present or future.

2. Relation between the Meaning of Pragmatic Softening and the Past Tense Form

The pragmatic softening function of some subjunctive sentences has to be put in the immediate context involving the speaker and hearer. In many daily conversations in English, pragmatic softening expressions are very common. For example:

(1) A: Excuse me, could you help me?　　　B: Of course.

(2) A: Would you like a cup of tea?　　　B: Yes, please.

(3) I wonder if you could lend me your dictionary.

The past tense in such sentences is also called the attitudinal past, which is related to the subjective attitudes of the speaker. They do not refer to the past time, or to indicate a kind of unreality or supposition. The speaker just wants to show politeness to the hearer and to soften the possible tensions resulted from the speech event between the speaker and the hearer. According to Yi (1999)[4], such use of the past tense is to cause mental/psychological distance so as to relieve the interpersonal psychological tension.

When we talk about the term "mental distance", we are actually using a spatial metaphor since "distance" itself originally refers to a spatial location. Like the relation between past time and unreality, the relation between past time and pragmatic softening is also interpreted with the involvement of spatial metaphor. The relation of the three domains is illustrated in Figure 3.
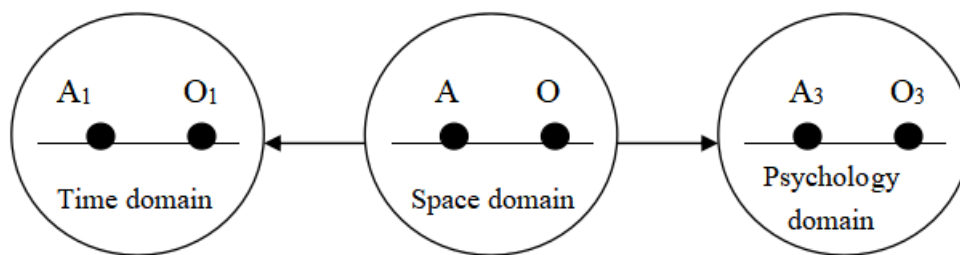
Figure 3. The metaphorical mappings from space domain to time domain and psychology domain

People tend to associate the space world with the psychology world because it's a common experience that spatial distance would lead to the feeling of psychological distance. Take the relationship between human beings as an example: in natural cases, if the interlocutors are not that familiar with each other, they will unconsciously keep certain distance between them and vice versa.

Likewise, when the space domain as a medium to connect the time domain and the psychology domain is left out, a direct metaphorical mapping from the time domain to the psychology domain is gradually established in human's cognition. See Figure 4.
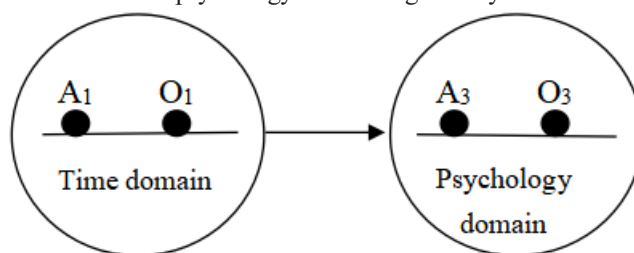

Figure 4. The metaphorical mapping from time domain onto psychology domain

If we see O_1 as the temporal proximity point (and it's also a reference point), then its counterpart O_3 stands for psychological intimacy and closeness. The point A_1 is a distant point relative to O_1 and the counterpart point A_3 is distant relative to its reference point O_3. Through metaphorical thinking, we map the temporal distance O_1A_1 onto the psychological distance O_3A_3. A psychological distance can relieve tensions and increase indirectness, which would evade discomfort through conversation. For example, the request in sentence (1) and (3) is softened by the psychological distance caused by the past tense form could, which imposes less pressure on the hearer's choice. In sentence (2), Would you like a cup of tea expresses the speaker's indirect suggestion, instead of direct imposition. Contrasts between the pragmatic-softening past tense and the direct present tense are shown as follows:

Present tense → directness	Past tense → pragmatic softening
*Can you please open the door for me?	Could you please open the door for me?
*Will you like another cup of tea?	Would you like another cup of tea?
Excuse me but I want to ask you a question.	Excuse me but I wanted to ask you a question.

Just as humans have moods, a verb also has a mood. While a person expresses his/her mood mainly through the face, a verb expresses its mood through its form. Through the metaphorical mapping models, it can be clearly interpreted how the two major meanings of the subjunctive mood are demonstrated by the tense forms of verbs and how human cognition works behind the superficial linguistic forms.

Conclusion

This paper provides a cognitive rationale for the interpretation of relationship between the verb tense of the subjunctive mood and its mood meanings, that is, the universal metaphorical mechanism in human's cognition.

The paper holds that it is through the common spatial metaphor that the time domain is associated with the reality domain and the psychology domain in human mind. The past time, unreality and pragmatic softening are all originally mapped from the spatial distance, so the past tense with a prototypical past-time meaning can extend to the meanings of unreality and pragmatic softening.

It is hoped that this paper will help Chinese students and teachers to better understand and use the past tense of the subjunctive mood in English teaching/learning classes and help develop further future studies on the subjunctive mood and the relationship between the two grammar categories mood and tense.

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