

Analysis of Taylor Swift's Commencement Address at New York University from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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Abstract: *As a kind of the types of public speaking, the purpose of the commencement address is to encourage and enhance the self-confidence of the graduating college students. In recent years, the research on speech discourse analysis has gradually aroused the interest of domestic scholars. Based on the theory of conceptual metaphor put forward by Lakoff, this thesis analyzes the conceptual metaphors of Taylor Swift's Commencement Address at New York University quantitatively and qualitatively, and aims to reveal how the speaker uses some language means to achieve her speech. This paper can further enrich the theory of public speaking, and provide some help for the improvement of the oral and appreciation skills of English learners at the same time.*

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor, commencement address, discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

Commencement address is a type of speech given by those of certain influence or social prestige, which has a very encouraging and educational effect on college students who are about to graduate. It has been a traditional and general activity during the graduation ceremony of a university. In the commencement address, the speaker will truthfully state his personal experience, by sharing his experience of success in a certain field, in order to encourage graduates to achieve their own choices and goals. In addition, for the speaker, being able to give an address at the graduation ceremony as a representative is also a kind of recognition and appreciation for his unremitting efforts, and can better play his role as an example. Generally, the commencement address is not only a recognition and support for all the efforts of the speaker, but more importantly, it is an inspiration for the graduates that can enhance people's confidence and courage.

In recent years, the research on commencement address analysis has gradually aroused the interest of scholars. But most scholars study the commencement address from the perspective of interpersonal function theory. This paper analyzes the commencement address delivered by Taylor Swift at New York University in 2022 from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Under the influence of COVID-19, as how to face the complex world after leaving the university, Taylor shared her life experience, and at the same time give some advice for the graduates on her own in her speech. The purpose of this paper is to find out the metaphorical discourse strategy in speech and applying the conceptual metaphor into commencement address.

2. Literature Review

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) mentioned that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."^[1] They think that "metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 117)^[1]. In other words, people experience and understand some abstract things, objects and thoughts based on some more concrete things, which causes the use of metaphors. In the book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980)^[1] put forward three types of metaphors, separately orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor and structural metaphor. The study of Lakoff and Johnson has aroused the interest of scholars. Nowadays, many scholars have applied the theory of conceptual metaphor into the study of

speech.

Some scholars study the political speeches. Kateryna Pilyarchuk and Alexander Onysko (2018)^[2] investigated the use of conceptual metaphors by Donald Trump in three important political speeches on his way to the US presidency: the acceptance speech of his candidacy, the victory speech on election night, and his inaugural address as president of the US. The consistent analysis of all the metaphors in the speeches shows that Trump relies almost exclusively on conventional conceptual metaphors that are expressed by conventionalized metaphorical expressions. Nevertheless, a range of metaphors appears as constitutive to his framing of political topics, such as immigration and the economy.

Isaiah I. Agbo, Goodluck C. Kadiri and Blessing Ugo Ijem (2018)^[3] adopted the framework of Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis to study political speeches of Brigadier Sani Abacha in 1984 and 1993, General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985 and 1993, M.K.O. Abiola in 1993 and 1994, and Goodluck Ebele Jonathan in 2013. The study reveals that the speakers use metaphors as tools to enact power and wield influence on their audience and to promote self-ideologies and power asymmetric.

Wu Jianguo, Gong Chun and Song Yue (2020)^[4] analyzed the political metaphors in Trump's 4 speeches in the framework of CMA with an aim to reveal the true meaning behind the discourse. It is found that Trump used a lot of sports metaphors in his speeches, and preferred to compare the international situation with competition instead of with war. In political discourses, politicians often use metaphor for the purpose of persuasion and expression.

Chen Chen (2021)^[5] studied main categories of conceptual metaphors and metaphor mapping mechanism in Xi Jinping's keynote address at the UN headquarters in Geneva from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. The study finds that there are a large number of conceptual metaphors in Xi Jinping's external speeches, which cover a wide range of fields in a down-to-earth way, and often quote Chinese and foreign allusions and proverbs.

Some other scholars analyze New Year's address or keynote address. Dong Jing and Duan Wujin (2020)^[6] analyzed and summarized the types, characteristics and roles of structural metaphors in President Xi's 2020 New Year's address through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Li Xue and Tian Liangbin (2020)^[7] studied the conceptual metaphors in President Xi's speeches from the cultural perspective, focusing on three conceptual metaphors to interpret the Chinese cultural values on which these conceptual metaphors are based, so that the international community can have a better understanding about the Chinese cultural values on which our Party's policies are constructed.

The studies of the above scholars show that the conceptual metaphor can be applied in speech discourse analysis. And the research from the perspective of conceptual metaphor has a great influence on guiding about speech discourse analysis. However, scholars mainly focus their studies on political speech. Few of them study the commencement address from the conceptual metaphor. Therefore, by applying theory of conceptual metaphor, this paper studies Taylor Swift's Commencement Address at New York University in 2022, hoping to enrich the relevant research.

3. Methodology

After Taylor Swift delivered her speech, her speech was uploaded and played on major domestic and foreign media websites. The text of this paper was compiled based on the original video of Taylor Swift's speech and was reviewed several times with the help of other scholars.

This paper adopted the quantitative and qualitative research method to analyze the speech text. With quantitative research method, the author counts the frequency and collocation of certain metaphorical expressions in the speech text, which can help us to have an overall understanding about the speaker's use of metaphors.

With qualitative research method, this paper mainly uses text analysis method to study the text based on the categorization put forward by Lakoff and Johnson (1980)^[1] and the metaphorical discourse strategy will be analyzed. In order to identify the metaphors in the text, Pragglejaz Group provided the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP for short). According to Pragglejaz Group (2007:3)^[8], there are four steps to identify metaphorical words and phrases. The first step is to read the entire text-discourse to establish a general understanding of meaning. The second step is to determine the lexical units within the text-discourse. The third one is to take into account the meaning of the lexical unit in the context of the whole in detailed. And the last step is to mark the lexical unit as

metaphorical if there exists. This paper applied Metaphor Identification Procedure VU University Amsterdam (MIPVU for short) to identify metaphors in Taylor Swift's speech text. It is an expanded and refined version of the MIP.

In this paper, the following two questions are to be discussed: 1. What is the distribution of conceptual metaphors in Taylor Swift's commencement address? 2. How does Taylor Swift apply the conceptual metaphors in her commencement address?

4. Discourse Analysis

In Taylor Swift's commencement address at New York University, she used a number of metaphors to talk about her life experience and to give advice for the graduates. The use of metaphors in a speech can help audiences to establish the understanding of speaker's intention. The distribution of conceptual metaphors is shown as follows:

Table 1: The Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors

Conceptual Metaphors	Number	Percentage
Object Metaphors	31	26.27%
Person Metaphors	24	20.34%
Oriental Metaphors	23	19.49%
Container Metaphors	18	15.25%
Sports Metaphors	6	5.08%
Economy Metaphors	5	4.24%
Journey Metaphors	4	3.39%
Building Metaphors	2	1.69%
Animal Metaphor	1	0.85%
Family Metaphor	1	0.85%
Motion Metaphor	1	0.85%
Plant Metaphor	1	0.85%
Sports Metaphor	1	0.85%
Total	118	100%

From Table 1, it can be found that the ontological metaphors are of a high percentage. It shows that the speakers usually use the ontological metaphors in addresses. The orientational and the structural metaphors are less respectively. In this section, how the conceptual metaphors are realized in the speech will be discussed.

4.1 Object Metaphors

From Table 1, there are 31 object metaphor expressions in Taylor Swift's commencement address, which is accounted the most.

Example 1: The first of which is...life can be heavy, especially if you try to carry it all at once.

Example 2: You can't carry all things, all grudges, all updates on your ex, all enviable promotions your school bully got at the hedge fund his uncle started.

Example 3: One toxic relationship can outweigh so many wonderful, simple joys.

Example 4: That's a gift.

In Taylor Swift's speech, object metaphors are used the most when she gave the suggestions in life for the students who was about to graduate. In the first and the third examples, Taylor objectified life and relationship as an object which can be weighed with the words "heavy" and "outweigh". In the second example, Taylor talked about things in life as an object which can be carried. And in Example 4, "that" refers to the past experience, and Taylor objectified it as a gift.

In commencement address, speaker would give advice for the students unavoidably. Therefore, how to give advice and how to make the advice accepted by the audiences is important for the speaker. Metaphors are one of the rhetorical devices used in the speech, and so as Taylor Swift's. From Example 1 to Example 3, Taylor was giving her first suggestion that is knowing what to keep and release. The use of object metaphors can make the audiences better understand the wisdom in life with the existed knowledge about concrete object. In Example 4, by saying past experience as gift, Taylor carried a

message that even with the hard past, it could be something that is good for ourselves in the future. This saying can make the audiences' confidence and optimism about the unknown future.

4.2 Person Metaphors

From the Table 1, it can be seen that person metaphors are used 24 times. It is found that the person metaphors occupy the second largest percentage in commencement address. Person metaphors are vivid in speech, which can attract audiences' attention fast^[6](Wu Jianguo, Gong Chun and Song Yue, 2020).

Example 5: (Welcome to New York.) It's been waiting for you.

Example 6: I'd like to thank NYU for making me technically, on paper at least, a doctor.

In these two examples, Taylor Swift personified New York and New York University by using words "wait" and "make". With the use of metaphors, these two places are described as human beings with thoughts, kindness, enthusiasm as well as intelligence.

In the fifth example, "it" refers to New York. At the beginning of Taylor Swift's speech, she presented a great welcome to the people who support the students in New York University. With New York city personified, people can have a deeper feeling of the enthusiasm of the whole city, which can ignite the interest of audiences. In the sixth example, Taylor expressed her gratitude for awarding the doctor diploma. Instead of saying academic board of NYU who made the decision in fact, Taylor used person metaphor to express her thanks to not only professors, but also all staffs and students in the university. This expression can show the humility of the speaker.

Example 7: I guess I have been officially solicited in this situation, to impart whatever wisdom I might have and tell you the things that helped me in my life so far.

Example 8: Secondly, learn to live alongside cringe.

Example 9: See, I was a teenager in the public eye at a time when our society was absolutely obsessed with the idea of having perfect young female role models.

In these three examples, Taylor personified some abstract things as common people in her commencement address with the expressions such as "helped", "live alongside" and "was absolutely obsessed with". With the help of person metaphors, Taylor can make her speech much more vivid and interesting. Besides, these metaphors can help the audiences understand Taylor's suggestions and story better.

Example 10: Having journalists write in-depth, oftentimes critical, pieces about who they perceive me to be made me feel like I was living in some weird simulation, but it also made me look inward to learn about who I actually am.

Example 11: Having the world treat my love life like a spectator sport in which I lose every single game was not a great way to date in my teens and twenties, but it taught me to protect my private life fiercely.

Example 12: Getting canceled on the internet and nearly losing my career gave me an excellent knowledge of all the types of wine.

In these three examples, Taylor talked about her experience as a singer. Before giving advice to the students who are about to graduate, Taylor shared her bad experiences first. In her address, Taylor personified her past experience as teacher who have given knowledge in her life. The use of these metaphors can on one hand focus the audiences' attention on the result instead of the unhappy process. On the other hand, it can pave the way for Taylor's next advice thus make the advice more acceptable.

Example 13: I really do think we are all writers.

Example 14: And I know that I'm talking to a group of perfectionists because you are here today graduating from NYU.

In these two examples, Taylor described audiences as another kind of person. In Example 13, Taylor expressed her opinion about audiences and herself. In this example, the "writer" means "people who write things" as well as the "author". By saying "we are all writers", Taylor can transfer the idea that we are responsible for our lives to the audience. And in Example 14, Taylor described the students in NYU as perfectionists. However, no one can be perfectionist. Therefore, the metaphor "perfectionists" shows the speaker's intention of giving confidence to the audiences which can arise the resonance of

the audiences.

From the above analysis, in Taylor Swift's commencement address, person metaphors are used to describe experience, abstract and concrete things, as well as people, which can achieve the purpose of arising the resonance of the audiences.

4.3 Orientational Metaphors

It can be seen that orientational metaphors are used 23 times in Taylor Swift's speech. Lakoff and Johnson mentioned that orientational metaphors "have a basis in our physical and cultural experience" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1978: 14). Therefore, sometimes people will borrow the spatial concept in explaining things.

Example 15: ... but on top of that you also had to pass like 1,000 COVID tests.

Example 16: ... looking back, it really feels like those moments were as important,

Example 17: Times when the right thing is to back down and apologize.

In Example 15, Taylor talked about the current students' situation under the influence of COVID-19. In human's experience, status is correlated with power and importance. As a result, the more important the things are, the higher the status is. In Example 16, the orientational metaphor represents that future is ahead because our eyes mainly focus on the direction we move ahead. By saying "looking back", Taylor meant "recalling the past experience" which borrows the concept that future is ahead. Example 17 is same with Example 18, in which status with less power are viewed as back and down.

With the help of orientational metaphors, speakers can transfer their thoughts and ideas by borrowing the spatial concepts and experience intuitively. The orientational metaphors can make the audiences understand speakers' words more directly since the people in the same culture share the same knowledge of space.

4.4 Container Metaphors

According to Table 1, there are 18 container metaphors in Taylor Swift's commencement address. Container metaphors refer to a process of defining of a territory or putting a boundary around it, which means that "it is an act of quantification", allowing people to quantified them in terms of the amount of substance they contain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 29-30). The container metaphor is particularly persuasive because it blends the concepts of time and space when we talk about something abstract^[2] (Kateryna Pilyarchuk and Alexander Onysko, 2018).

Example 18: we realize we had been in love in our past lives.

Example 19: I'll go into this more later.

Example 20: See, I was a teenager in the public eye at a time...

With the help of container metaphors, speaker can objectify some abstract things and audiences can understand those abstract things better based on our existed experience and knowledge.

In Example 18, Taylor described love as a concrete container with the preposition "in". It is a common expression that most people would like to use to describe the condition of a couple. In Example 19, "this" refers to the reasons that Taylor would not give unsolicited advice unless it was asked, so here reasons were described as a container. Instead of using words such as "explain", the metaphor of "go into this" becomes a vivid expression. Since the audiences are young university students, this expression can be better understood by the audiences. In Example 20, public eye was described as a container with the word "in". This container metaphor is used when Taylor talked about her past story, and the use of container metaphor can leave a deeper impression on the audiences.

It can be known that container metaphors are used the third most in this commencement address. With those metaphors, people can borrow the knowledge of length and depth to understand the degree of the abstract things and situations, thus creating a more profound influence.

4.5 Other Metaphors

Besides object metaphors, person metaphors, container metaphors and orientational metaphors, Taylor Swift also used other metaphors such as war metaphors, animal metaphors and plant metaphors.

Because these metaphors are used less, this paper analyzes them altogether.

Example 21: You've worked and struggled and sacrificed and studied and dreamed your way here today and so.

Example 22: Being publicly humiliated over and over again at a young age was excruciatingly painful but it forced me to devalue the ridiculous notion of minute by minute, ever fluctuating social relevance and likability.

Example 23: Times when the right thing is to fight, times when the right thing is to turn and run.

Example 21, 22 and 23 belong to war metaphors. In Example 21, Taylor described the way of life and study as war with the words "struggled" and "sacrificed" where the students are soldiers in the battlefield. In Example 22, the experience at young age is described as war by being used the words "forced" and "fluctuating" in which this experience is the enemy of the speaker. In Example 23, the right thing is viewed as the goal in the war with the word "fight". In a speech, speaker sometimes would use the war metaphors in order to create an image where the speaker and the audiences are in the united front and to arise the resonance of audiences.

Example 24: I will, however, give you some life hacks I wish I knew when I was starting out my dreams of a career, and navigating life, love, pressure, choices, shame, hope and friendship.

In this example, life, love, pressure, choices and so on are described as journey metaphorically in which Taylor herself is the traveler. In Taylor's address, she was about to give advice for the students in New York University, and the advice was concluded from her life experience. It is known that Taylor has experienced a relatively tough time but makes some achievement now. The word "navigate" means to plan and direct the course of ship, plane, car and so on. In this address, "navigating" is used to show that Taylor has a good control of her life and other aspects, and she could make good life suggestions for the students therefore. Besides, this metaphor presents a charming image and makes the address interesting.

Example 25: We are all literary chameleons

Example 25 is an animal metaphor where people are described as chameleons metaphorically. In the address, Taylor talks about the literature creation and she mentions that people will create different styles of literature based on different situations. By using animal metaphor, Taylor can express her thoughts better since chameleon would change its color of body based on the conditions.

These metaphors occur less than other four metaphors, but they also have great importance in this commencement address and create a good effect on this speech.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes conceptual metaphors in Taylor Swift's commencement address at New York University from quantitative and qualitative aspects, trying to explain how the speaker chooses the appropriate interpersonal expression according to the content she wants to express, so as to have a better interaction with the listeners and express her views. The study finds that in Taylor Swift's commencement address, there are 118 metaphors are used, and object metaphors, person metaphors and orientational metaphors are used the most frequently. In her address, conceptual metaphors are used mostly when she talks about her experiences and gives suggestions in order to help audiences to understand her views better.

The research can enrich the theory of public speaking, and it is also very helpful for English learners to improve their oral and appreciation skills. The current research in this paper also has limitations, and there is still much room for improvement. For example, framing metaphorical model is an important field for analyzing conceptual metaphor. As the main subsystem of the evaluation system, it is worthy of in-depth analysis in future research.

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