

The Conceptual Metaphor TIME IS SPACE:

A cognitive interpretation of /nâa/ ‘front’ and /lǎŋ/ ‘back’ in Thai*

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Abstract

Traditionally, the view of Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another by saying that one is the other. The importance of metaphor studies in cognitive linguistics maybe the result of the nature of it. In Cognitive Linguistics’ view of Metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has challenged all these aspects of the traditional theory in a coherent and systematic way. They showed convincingly that metaphor is pervasive both in thoughts and everyday language. It is a property of concepts, not of words. Its function is to understand concepts and it is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning.

The objective of this paper is to present the conceptual metaphor of **TIME IS SPACE** in Thai language, which is different to other languages as they are often believed to code the future as being in front and the past as being behind. But Thai is contradictory and a very exceptional pattern. The evidence shows that Thai speakers allude to time on a horizontal axis, with the ego or events moving over the horizontal timeline. The future and past can be conceived of either in front or behind, depending on the two dimensions: (a) positions of times and (b) sequences of time units. The results provide the evidences that people use spatial metaphors in temporal reasoning and that the metaphorical relationship between space and time observed in language also exists in our mental representations.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor, Conceptual System

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อุปลักษณณ์มโนทัศน์ “เวลาเป็นพื้นที่”: การศึกษาตามแนวทาง ภาษาศาสตร์ปริชาน คำว่า “หน้า” และ “หลัง” ในภาษาไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาเรื่องอุปลักษณณ์ตามแนวเดิมที่ผ่านมาเป็นการศึกษาในเชิงความสละสลวยของภาษาเพื่อให้ผู้อ่าน ผู้ฟังเกิดภาพพจน์โดยเป็นการเปรียบเทียบสิ่งหนึ่งให้เป็นอีกสิ่งหนึ่ง แต่หลังจากที่เลคอฟฟ์และจอห์นสัน (1980) ได้เสนอแนวความคิดใหม่เกี่ยวกับการศึกษาอุปลักษณณ์ที่สัมพันธ์กับระบบความคิดของมนุษย์ท่าทางการอธิบายอุปลักษณณ์ตามแนวเดิม เขาได้เสนอว่าการเปรียบเทียบสิ่งหนึ่งให้เป็นอีกสิ่งหนึ่งเกิดเป็นอุปลักษณณ์นั้นไม่ได้เป็นเรื่องเกี่ยวกับการใช้ภาษาเท่านั้น แต่สัมพันธ์กับระบบความคิดหรือมโนทัศน์ของผู้ใช้ภาษา อีกทั้งยังแสดงกระบวนการคิด การให้เหตุผลของมนุษย์ด้วย ซึ่งจากแนวคิดดังกล่าวนี้ มโนทัศน์ที่สำคัญระบบหนึ่ง คือ มโนทัศน์เวลาเป็น **เวลาเป็นพื้นที่**

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาเรื่องระบบมโนทัศน์**เวลาเป็นพื้นที่**ในภาษาไทย โดยจะเป็นกรณีศึกษาคำบอกตำแหน่งสองคำ ได้แก่ “หน้า” และ “หลัง” ในภาษาไทยตามแนวคิดของทฤษฎีภาษาศาสตร์ปริชาน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การใช้คำบอกตำแหน่ง “หน้า” และ “หลัง” ดังกล่าว เป็นอุปลักษณณ์แสดงเวลา ทั้งสองคำนี้สามารถบอกเวลาในอดีตและปัจจุบันได้ ขึ้นอยู่กับตำแหน่งการเกิดของเวลาที่สัมพันธ์กับตัวผู้พูดหรือผู้สังเกตการณ์ ตลอดจนขึ้นอยู่กับการเรียงลำดับของเหตุการณ์ในเวลาที่เกิดเหตุการณ์นั้นๆ ซึ่งจะเป็นหลักฐานยืนยันได้ว่า ผู้ใช้ภาษาจะใช้อุปลักษณณ์พื้นที่เพื่อบอกมโนทัศน์เวลา นอกจากนั้น ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างพื้นที่กับเวลานั้นเป็นส่วนที่เกื้อหนุนในระบบความคิดของมนุษย์อีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาศาสตร์ปริชาน อุปลักษณณ์มโนทัศน์ ระบบมโนทัศน์

1. Introduction

How is the domain of time learned, represented, and reasoned about? Certainly some elements of time are apparent in our experience with the world. From experience, we know that each moment in time only happens once, that we can only be in one place at one time, that we can never go back, and that many aspects of our experience are not permanent.

In other words, our experience dictates that time is a phenomenon in which we, the observer, experience continuous unidirectional change that may be marked by appearance and disappearance of objects and events.

We may, however, consider a third reason why the metaphor TIME AS SPACE is so pervasive. In *Metaphors We Live by*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) draw attention to the power of metaphor to create new meaning. Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the mapping between source and target domains has been used in cognitive linguistics as an analytical tool to account for abstract concepts such as time. Temporal language is often couched in spatial metaphors. The conceptual metaphor **TIME IS SPACE** maintains that time is understood in terms of motion in space, where motion refers either to the observer who moves through time or to time that moves past the stationary observer. The most important metaphorical source domain is that of space, and the conceptual metaphor **TIME IS SPACE** is conceptually well-motivated.

The contributions on linguistic expression of time all shed new light on pertinent questions regarding this cognitive domain, such as the hotly debated relationship between cross-linguistic differences in talking about time and universal principles of utterance interpretation, modelling temporal inference through aspectual interactions, as well as the complexity of the acquisition of tense-aspect relations in a second language.

The topic of space and time in language and culture is also represented, from a different point of view, in the sister volume *Space and Time in Languages and Cultures: language, culture, and cognition*, which discusses spatial and temporal constructs in human language, cognition, and culture in order to come closer to a better understanding of the interaction between shared and individual characteristics of language and culture that shape the way people interact with each other and exchange information about the spatio-temporal constructs that underlie their cognitive, social, and linguistic foundations.

Does temporal language depend on spatial language? This predominant view is intuitively appealing since spatial and temporal expressions are often similar or identical. Also, metaphors consistently express temporal phenomena in terms of spatial language, pointing to a close semantic and conceptual relationship. As a result, the concepts of space and time are represented in language usage in various systematic ways, reflecting how we understand the world - and at the same time reflecting how our concepts of space and time basically differ.

The question of how people in different languages and cultures conceptualise time is part of a broader set of questions about how humans come to embody and reason about abstract entities – things we cannot see or touch. Across cultures, people use spatial representations for time: graphs, time-lines, clocks, sundials, hourglasses, calendars, etc. In

language, time is also closely tied to space, with spatial terms often used to describe the order and duration of events.

The use of spatial expressions for notions of time has been attested in many of the world's languages. This phenomenon may be motivated by our common experience of space and time. Radden (2003: 226) explained that in our everyday life, there is no experience of space without time or an experience of time without space. An indication of the merging of space and time can be seen in the ways the distance between two places can be measured.

It is to be expected that those characteristics of space which best conform to our everyday experience in the spatial world are typically found across languages. But, in lexicalizing notions of time, different languages may also utilise the cognitive topology of space in different ways. This paper will be concerned with the ways Thai language conventionally make use of the spatial meanings /nâa/ 'front' and /lǎŋ/ 'back, behind' in conceptualizing and expressing notions of time. Consequently, it is quite captivating to be conscious of time in Thai language to explore if **TIME IS SPACE** or spatial words can be conceptualized as **TIME**. The results provide converging evidence that people use spatial metaphors in temporal reasoning. Implications for the status of metaphoric systems are discussed.

2. Objectives of the study

The present study explores the correspondences between space and time in the conceptualizations of conceptual metaphor **TIME IS SPACE** particularly with respect to spatial reference frames, literacy and other cultural factors in Thai language. It is based on topological properties of space and their metaphorical mappings on properties of time: position of times relative to the observer and the sequences of time units, focusing on the front and back orientation of time, which is denoted by the words /nâa/ 'front' and /lǎŋ/ 'back, behind'.

3. Theoretical framework

Traditionally, metaphors have been characterized by some features: first, it has been considered a linguistic phenomenon; second, it has been used for rhetorical purposes; third, it is based on a resemblance between two different entities; fourth, metaphor is a figure of speech used for special effects and it is not inevitable part of everyday human

communication. However, a more recent view of metaphor was designed firstly by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, in their book **Metaphors We Live By**. This new cognitive linguistic view of metaphor challenges the traditional view by claiming that (1) metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words; (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts; (3) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, (4) metaphor is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning. Two examples are given below:

- (a) You're the sunshine of my life .
- (b) Life's a journey, not a destination.

Both sentences (a) and (b) are examples of metaphors that many people may use in common speech. In the first one, the speaker might have used the term sunshine to refer to someone they love, whereas in the second, journey is used to categorise life as a process of travelling.

For a long time, people have tried to understand literal and figurative language in the same way, just paying attention to the meaning of certain expressions. In addition, it is claimed that there is a group of metaphors which instead of being metaphorical expressions with rhetorical purposes, they are really simple and used in everyday speech. They are called “dead” metaphors (Kövecses, 2002: ix). The “dead” metaphors are metaphors that may have been alive and vigorous at some point but have become so conventional and commonplace with constant use that by now they have lost their vigour and have ceased to be metaphors at all.

Looking at the examples above, we can assume that those metaphors are really conventional and automatised in our brain, so people use them effortlessly in everyday speech. In other words, this does not mean that they have lost their vigour in thought and they are “dead”, on the contrary, they are “alive” in the most important sense –they govern our thought- they are “metaphors we live by” (Kövecses, 2002).

According to the cognitive view, metaphor is not only a literary device for the use of poetry and rhetoric, but instead it has become something conventional. As Kövecses says, “it has become a valuable cognitive tool without which neither poets nor you and I as ordinary people could live.” (2002: xi).

Cognitive linguistics has gained much importance. Linguistic structure is studied as a reflection of cognitive processing and hence as a source of information about cognitive abilities and mental phenomena in general. Metaphor is an important part in human thought and in the construction of our reality, trying to understand metaphor means attempting to

understand a vital part of who we are and what kind of world we live in (Kövecses, 2002: xi). Thus, the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood this way is the target domain.

How does language and culture conceptualise time? This question is part of an expansive set of questions about how humans come to represent and reason about abstract entities or things we cannot see or touch. For example, how do we come to represent and reason about abstract domains like love, ideas, emotions, or politics? In conceptualising time as space, the values richness in the spatial domain conceptual attributes may derive and in mapping its structural elements onto time, bestow new meanings onto temporal notions.

The motivation for the study was the finding by Boroditsky and Gaby (2010) that speakers of Australian languages with absolute spatial reference systems represent time along an east-west axis rather than using a relative spatial axis provided by their bodies. This was surprising because all previous studies in other cultures had found spatial representations of time that were relative to the body. Both space and time are complex domains of considerable salience and frequency in conversation. They are almost always grammaticized in languages. Boroditsky and Gaby's studies provide new information about how time and space are expressed in little-known languages, and thus provide an important resource for scholars interested in linguistic mappings.

In order to further explore this issue, many of the papers explicitly tested how speakers organise temporal sequences in space when language was not invoked. Speakers were presented with a set of cards depicting a temporal sequence unfolding and were asked to put them in order. This task requires people to choose a spatial layout for time. Across communities, we see that speakers' spatial layouts conform to the writing direction prominent in the community. So, for example, English speakers display virtually 100% left-to-right ordering, consistent with the communities' orthographic conventions. This confirms earlier studies but with a much broader sample of cultures than has previously been studied.

According to the two basic types of temporal metaphor, which are “time is the mover” (Time moving metaphor) and “time is the container” (ego moving metaphor) (Lakoff, 1993: 98), the linear movement at the spatial horizontal level produces the temporal cognition of “back” and “front”. Because “back” and “front” observe the principle of structural invariance while being projected from the spatial domain to the temporal domain, we would observe the cognitive tactics of “back” and “front” in spatial perspective naturally

when we make a choice to the tactics of temporal cognition. Such cognition has two reference systems, which are subject reference and object reference, consequently the denotations of “back” and “front” of time are different. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999)

In terms of the property of unremittance of time, time is compared with mobile object at a finite speed permanently. The observer is comparatively static and the future is moving towards us, which refers “time moving”. In this temporal spatial mode, the observer stands still and faces the coming time; time travels to the observer in the direction from the future to the past. There are back and front positions around the observer along the movement line.

4. Methodology

The present study is conducted to explore how Thai people process ego moving metaphors, under **TIME IS SPACE** Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), focussing on two spatial words: /nâa/ ‘front’ and /lǎŋ/ ‘back/behind’

5. Data Collection

The data is collected from the Thai National Corpus. Of all the distributions from 48,242 sentences, there are 5,248 of /nâa/ ‘front’ and 2,634 of /lǎŋ/ ‘back, behind’ co-occur only with time markers.

6. Results and discussion

Time is conceptualized as the general metaphor “Time Passing is Motion”. In the linear mode, time is only in one dimension, moving from the past to the present and towards the future, or vice versa. In the Thai language, the concepts of TIME which is conceived of as one-dimensional will of necessity have an orientation in space and in horizontal level.

Thai is different to other languages and cultures as many languages are often believed to code the future as being in front and the past as being behind. But Thai is contradictory and a very exceptional pattern. In Thai, time-space metaphors are always on the horizontal axis: things in the past or future are either behind or ahead, but never above or below. The evidence shows that time is mentioned by Thai speakers on a horizontal axis where the past is behind and future can be either in front or back. In Thai, the two nominals: หน้า /nâa/ ‘front’ and หลัง /lǎŋ/ ‘back, behind’ are assigned for time. It is perceptible that

these two words function either nouns or prepositions. This article will focus on the function of preposition, on the following dimensions of space and their metaphorical mappings on time: Position of times relative to the observer (6.1) and the sequences of time units (6.2)

6.1 Positions of times relative to the speaker/observer

Time is conceptualized metaphorically through mappings onto space, in relations to the speaker or observer. Canonically to Radden (2011: 230), he has explained that time-line allows a distinction between three deictic times: present, past and future, which coincides metaphorically with the moment of speaking as the temporal reference point. The speaker is an observer whose position on the time-line is the present. The advantage concepts of time-line provides opposite poles for specifying the past and the future.

Commonly, the time model of Thai has been claimed to code the future as lying in front and the past as lying behind of the observer. This alignment indicates our general model of time, according to which we move towards the future and leave the past behind us. Here, the future is metaphorized as lying in front and the past as lying behind the observer, as shown in examples (1) - (4)

(1) เดือน หน้า เรา จะ ไป เชียงใหม่

duan nâa raw cà pay chianṅ-màỳ

month-front-we-will-go-Chiangmai

“Next month, we will go to Chiangmai”.

(2) ลูกชาย จะ กลับ มา ไทย ปี หน้า

lúuk-chaay cà klàp maa thay pii nâa

son - will- return-come-Thailand-year-front

“(My) son will be back home next year”.

(3) ป้า คิดถึง อดีต แต่ หน หลัง

pâa khít-thuṅ ṽa-diiit tɛ'ɛ ho'n lǎṅ

aunt- miss- past- but- time marker-behind

“Aunt missed her past story”.

(4) คุณปู่ ยัง จำ ภาพ อดีต ใน ครั้ง หลัง ได้

khun-pùu yanṅ cam phàp ṽa-diiit nay khráṅ lǎṅ dâay

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grandpa- still-remember - picture- past -but -time marker. - behind -able
 “Grandfather still remembers his past story”.

The future may, however, also be seen as lying behind the observer on the logic of that we cannot “see” or “know” the future. for example:

(5) พบ กัน ใหม่ วัน หลัง
 phóp kan mày wan lǎng
 see - together – new - day- behind
 “See you again, next time”.

(6) คราว หลัง อย่า ทำ อีก
 khraaw lǎng yàa tham ?iik
 time marker-behind-not-do-again
 “Next time, don’t do it again”.

In (5) วันหลัง /wan lǎng/“the day after, the later day” and in (6) คราวหลัง /khraaw lǎng/“the time after, next time” mean some day in the future. Using /lǎng/ after the time, showing that something would happen in the future, as in (5) or would not happen as in (6). To understand this kind of logic of why future is behind, it is necessary to be conscious about times they metaphorically describe as being part of a sequence of time units on the time-line.

6.2 Sequences of time units

Sequences of time units are the ordering of time which corresponds metaphorically to their spatial sequencing and particularly relevant for the ways notions of time are conceived of and expressed when they involve the speaker/observe.

In Thai, the sequences of time units are divided by the position of the speaker/observer. The ego-opposed perspective is the selective viewing arrangement for Thai speakers. The logic model of this perspective is designed by the further and the nearer of the two objects. If two objects of comparable size are in line with the observer, the nearer object is seen as facing the observer and the more distant one as lying behind the first object. Similarly in temporal space, in any sentence with two or more situations, หน้า /nâa/ ‘front’ is seen as facing the speaker/observer means the time in the near future, close to the

speaker. While หลัง /lǎŋ/ ‘back/behind’ is seen as lying behind, means the later time after the first one. (See figure 1), as in examples (7) and (8) below:

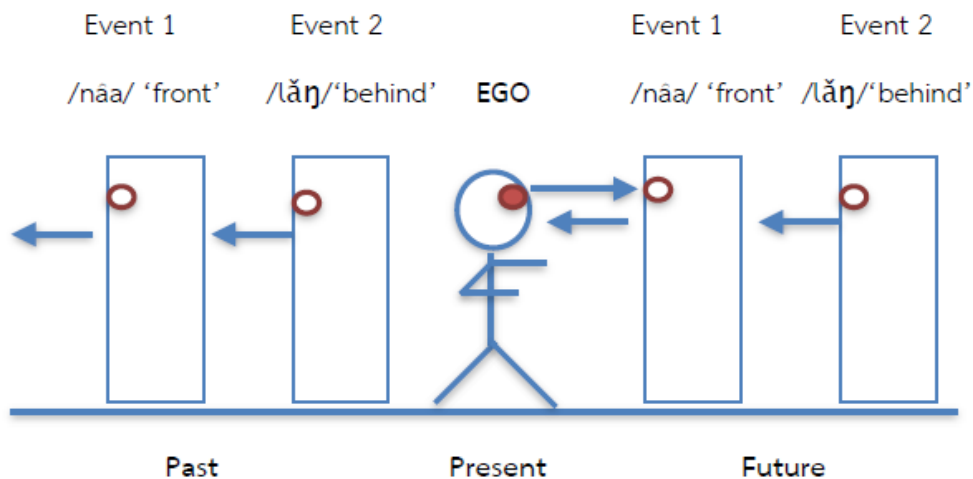


Figure 1: Ego-opposed Perspective

- (7) เดือน หน้า เขา จะ อยู่ ลาว อีก ห้า เดือน หลัง เขา จะ อยู่ ไทย
 duan nǎa khǎw cà yùu Laaw, ʔiik hâa duan lǎŋ khǎw cà yùu Thai
 month- front-he -will -be- Lao- more-five- month-back- he- will-be-Thailand
 “Next month, he will be in Laos, five months later he will be in Thailand”.

From (7) เดือนหน้า /duan nǎa/ ‘month front’ commonly means ‘next month’, and lying in front of the speaker in the first event in the future, whereas อีกห้าเดือนหลัง /ʔiik hâa duan lǎŋ/ ‘more - 5-month behind’ naturally means ‘five months later’, in the second event. The same reason applies to the sequences of time in the past, following the logic of the ego-opposed perspective Figure 1, as in (8)

(8) ช่วง หลัง เขา ทำงาน หนัก มาก แต่ ก่อน หน้า นี้ เขา ไม่ ทำ อะไร เลย
 chûaŋ-lǎŋ kháw tham-ŋaan nàk mâak, tɛ̀ɛ kɔ̀wɔn nâa nii kháw mây tham ʔa-ray looy
 time-behind-he- work -heavy-much, but-previous-front-this-he- not- work- what- at all
 “(After that) He worked very hard, but earlier he had done nothing at all”.

in (8) ช่วงหลัง /chûaŋ-lǎŋ/ literally translates as ‘time behind’ or ‘after time’, lying closer to the observer in the second event in the past, while ก่อนหน้า /kɔ̀wɔn nâa/ literally means ‘previous front’ or ‘before time, earlier’, is the first event in the past. The observer may be positioned outside the sequence of time units. This is the case in an expression which forms the end of a sequence of time in the past and is the one that is closest to the observer, lying behind the observer.

7. Summary

The impact of spatial orientation on human thought and, in particular, our understanding of time has often been noted. The **TIME IS SPACE** conceptual metaphor is an important way of making sense of the abstract concept of time. It has been attested in many languages all over the world, though with significant variation, which means it is culturally determined and varies from culture to culture.

Actually, the **TIME IS SPACE** conceptual metaphor in Thai is mainly organised on the horizontal axis with the ego or events moving over the horizontal timeline. This study investigated two nominals หน้า /nâa/ ‘front’ and หลัง /lǎŋ/ ‘back/behind/ as prepositions, which can be typically explained by (a) the position of times relative to the speaker/observer and (b) sequences of time units. These findings provide evidence that the metaphorical relationship between space and time observed in language also exists in our more basic representations of distance. Results suggest that our mental representations of things we can never see or touch may be built, out of representations of physical experiences in perception.

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