The study of metaphor involves at least three aspects: what is metaphor? What is the operational mechanism of metaphor? Why is metaphor possible? The definition and operational mechanism of metaphor have been studied a lot, such as Lakoff and Johnson’s projection of two cognitive domains (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) and Fauconnier’s conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 1998: 133-187). However, these theories have not explained what factors or processes enable the systematic projection of multiple features of source domain to target domain with some specific content projected or blended: namely, the medium of projection or blending. Therefore, this paper will attempt to expose some of the reasons why metaphor is possible. I intend to propose a frame, in the spirit of Frame Semantics (e.g. see Fillmore 1977a, b) to explain that the occurrence of metaphor relies on the inheritance of the denotation and/or connotation from one domain to another domain of the two concepts concerned. Such a frame is formed by the connotational items within which the concept in the source domain will be passed to that in the target domain, thus the inheritance taking place. The different situations of the inheritance may be shown as some patterns. On some occasions the metaphorical expression might have something to do with the application of possible world’s logic. This paper will serve as a new approach and a preliminary study.

The inheritance of the denotation and/or connotation from one domain to another domain of the two concepts concerned in metaphor involves type-hierarchy structure. Fundamentally, type-hierarchies are important structures used in knowledge stores to enumerate and classify the entities from a domain of interest and the hierarchical structure establishes de facto a “similarity space” in which the elements of a same class are considered close semantically, as they share the properties of their superclass (Barrière & Popowich 2000: 53-68).

In type-hierarchy structure, the entities in the subtype can be considered as denotations of their supertype and properties or connotations of supertype are inherited by the entities in its subtype like genus and species. In the case of metaphor “x is y”, x and y can be seen as entities which have inherited properties or connotations respectively from their supertypes X and Y as illustrated by Figure 1.

For example, in the metaphor “Black clouds are gray curtain,” “cloud” and “curtain” as two entities have inherited different connotations from two different supertypes (astronomical phenomena and textile) respectively. However, the entity y can still be considered similar to x as they share the connotations “being stretched and hung up” (β) which they have inherited from another supertype “something stretched and hung up” (W). This can be explained as “x and y have introduced the higher level or more abstract connections between them” (Way 1991:187). According to Xu Shenghuan’s Law of Proximity /Similarity inspired by Gestalt theory, x is an element in an utterance U, and if x is proximate/similar to y in a specific context, then possibly x inherently entails (x) y in U (Xu 2007: 2-9). Thus, x is y or the metaphor like “Black clouds are gray curtain” is possible.
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