

Teaching English metaphors using cross-linguistic awareness-raising activities

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Now that metaphor is recognized as being pervasive in language, it is argued that more attention should be given to the teaching of strategies for comprehending and generating metaphors in L2. In this article we report on a translation exercise undertaken by advanced Polish learners of English which revealed ways in which metaphorical expressions vary between the two languages, and the problems this raises for learners. It is suggested that awareness-raising through discussion and comparison of metaphors in L1 and L2 is a useful approach to helping learners to understand and appropriately produce metaphors. This is followed by some sample teaching materials which have been designed to encourage learners to investigate and compare metaphors in L1 and L2.

Metaphor and ELT

There has been increased interest in metaphor within linguistics since the publication of *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), in which it is claimed that metaphors are fundamental to the structuring of our thought and language, and that we frequently use the concepts and lexis from one semantic area to think and talk about other areas. Two levels of metaphor are distinguished: conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors. The term 'conceptual metaphor' is used to refer to a connection between two semantic areas at the level of thought, such as the metaphorical connection that seems to exist between anger and fire for speakers of many languages (Lakoff 1987). When conceptual metaphors are referred to in writing they are usually represented in upper case, for example, ANGER IS HEAT. Linguistic metaphors are the spoken or written realizations of a conceptual metaphor. In the case of ANGER IS HEAT, examples of linguistic metaphors include 'I grew hot under the collar' and 'She's got a fiery temper'.

Interest in vocabulary acquisition within ELT has increased in recent years, partly as a result of work such as that of Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), which has demonstrated the complexity and importance of lexical phenomena such as collocations and fixed expressions. If, as writers such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, a great deal of language is motivated by metaphor, then an examination of metaphors from the learner's point of view might also offer valuable insights into a large and important area of vocabulary. Some implications have been discussed in other articles: Low (1988) discusses the pervasiveness and centrality of metaphor, and argues that students need to develop

'metaphoric competence': awareness of metaphor, and strategies for comprehending and creating metaphors; MacLennan (1994) also advocates explicit classroom attention to metaphor, on the grounds that it is an integral part of language and so should not be ignored, and that learning about common metaphorical patterns can simplify the acquisition of vocabulary and facilitate learning grammar; Lazar (1996) has recently argued for more teaching of figurative language, and suggested some activities designed to help students develop strategies for comprehending and generating metaphor. A common theme running through these articles is that awareness on an intellectual level is desirable; while students may learn to use some frequent metaphors without reflection, they are likely to achieve more if they are encouraged to consciously reflect on the metaphorical nature of language.

***Understanding
English
metaphors***

While metaphor is almost certainly a feature of all natural languages, and some conceptual metaphors are common across several cultures and languages, not all linguistic or conceptual metaphors will be shared by any two languages. To find out more about the difficulties which one group of learners might have with metaphors in English, we asked a group of advanced Polish college students to look at a small set of English metaphors; we then developed materials to help students by encouraging conscious reflection on metaphor in both L1 and L2.

The exercise

In order to establish to what extent a small set of metaphorical expressions have equivalents across two languages, and whether metaphorical expressions might create difficulties for students, an exercise designed to test comprehension of English metaphors was set up in a Polish teacher training college. A group of 143 Polish students of English as a university subject were asked to translate 68 English sentences containing metaphors into Polish and to discuss their thoughts on the exercise with the researchers.¹ The students worked in small groups, each of which was asked to translate a set of five sentences into Polish, each sentence being translated by several different groups. The metaphorical expressions were not mentioned in the instructions or highlighted on paper in any way, and in the explanation of the task it was stressed that students should aim for natural Polish rather than a word for word translation. The students' level of proficiency in English was comparable with the requirements for the Cambridge Proficiency in English Examination. There were two aims: firstly to explore the correspondences between the two languages by seeing how closely translation equivalents (checked for acceptability by the researchers) corresponded to the metaphor used in English, and secondly to find out whether students had problems understanding and translating the metaphors, and, if so, to see whether certain types of metaphor had proved more difficult to understand and translate.

***A cross-linguistic
comparison***

Students' translations and subsequent interviews with the researchers suggested that some, but by no means all, of the English metaphors studied are used in a similar way in other languages. The following types of variation were noted:

Same conceptual metaphor and equivalent linguistic expression

In some cases there was little or no difficulty finding an acceptable translation equivalent because the metaphorical transfer seemed identical in the two languages. For example, the conceptual metaphor **RELATIONSHIPS ARE BUILDINGS** seems to work for both languages, and *cement* is translated as *cementować*, its literal translation equivalent, in expressions such as *cement a personal/business relationship*.

Same conceptual metaphor but different linguistic expression

In some cases there was obviously a very similar metaphorical transfer in terms of concepts, but not a close correspondence between all the actual words and expressions used. Although the conceptual metaphor **IDEAS ARE FOOD** exists for both languages, the words used to express this are different. For example, Polish uses an expression (*niedojrzałe*) which is literally translated as unripe in English to talk about an idea which is not well thought-out. *Unripe* is not used metaphorically in English; the notion expressed by the Polish word is rendered by *half-baked* in English. Similarly, the literal equivalent of English *polish* is not used metaphorically in Polish, but near synonyms of it can be used in translations of sentences such as 'As they refine their service, supermarkets are also busy polishing their image.' Students were not faced with great difficulties in decoding metaphors of this type, as the conceptual metaphor is already in place through their L1. However, the exact words and phrases which express this conceptual link in L2 cannot be guessed by reference to L1, so these need to be discussed and learned for encoding purposes.

Different conceptual metaphors used

In some cases a different conceptual metaphor was preferred; for example, while the metaphor **RATIONAL IS UP**, expressed by *sweep off one's feet* in the sentence 'It may be that you have simply been swept off your feet by an office romance that has no place in the real world', was translated by some groups using the same conceptual metaphor in expressions such as *rzucić na kolana* (*knock down on one's knees*), other groups decided to use expressions of the conceptual metaphor **LOVE IS MAGIC**, in *zauroczyć* (*charm, cast a spell*). Where different conceptual metaphors are preferred in different languages, it seems likely that the learner would benefit from being aware of his or her L1's preferences at a conscious level, so that he or she can then compare this with the preferred conceptual metaphors of L2. This exercise may help to make the study of linguistic metaphors in L2 meaningful and memorable. This seems preferable to the rote learning of apparently unconnected words that can take place in vocabulary classes.

Words and expressions with similar literal meanings but different metaphorical meanings

The English *grill* in the sense of interrogate was translated as *maglować* (*mangle*), suggesting an image of squeezing someone for information. This is comprehensible to an English speaker, but does not seem to generate many linguistic expressions. The usual metaphorical meaning

of mangle in English is that of 'not speaking or writing clearly', in 'There is no phrase so simple that he cannot mangle it' (Sinclair, Fox, and Bullon 1995: 1012). If students are unaware of the metaphorical nature of their L1, there may be a tendency to translate such items literally into L2, which may produce a marked effect, or even be unintelligible to native L2 speakers.

**Areas of difficulty
for the Polish
students**

The researchers examined the translations suggested by students and discussed their choices with them, in an attempt to determine whether any one type of metaphor presented particular difficulties. Expressions which caused difficulty included *bring something (a fact, situation) home to someone* and *drive a message/idea home*, neither of which have direct or even semantically similar equivalents in the students' L1. Several students attempted to translate *home* literally, producing the equivalent of 'At home he kept thinking about his main theme' for 'He repeatedly drove home his central theme'. However, the expression *sweeping (changes)*, which has no metaphorical equivalent in Polish, was translated reasonably acceptably using literal paraphrases such as *znaczące (significant)*. This might suggest that students looked for a literal interpretation first, and in the case of *drive home a theme*, found one which was conceivable, but where no possible literal interpretation could be found, as in the case of *sweeping (changes)*, they tried to infer meaning from context, or simply that *sweeping changes* is a relatively frequent fixed collocation which is already known to many students. Not all the problems were caused by the lack of a similar metaphor in L1; another expression which caused difficulty was *enter through the back door*, even though a similar expression involving *kitchen door* exists in Polish. It seems possible that longer, more fixed expressions are more difficult to decode; *offer a window on something*, and *give someone a roasting* also caused problems.

**Materials for
raising awareness
of metaphor in L1
and L2**

Conducting the research discussed above made us more aware of the differences in conceptual and linguistic metaphors that exist between different languages, and also convinced us that many students could benefit from a conscious exploration of these points. As MacLennan (1994) argues, students should be encouraged to note where correspondences exist between the L1 and L2, and differences between the L1 and L2 systems should be highlighted. With the aim of encouraging students to explore and discuss metaphors in L1 and L2 in class, we have designed a series of awareness exercises, some of which are reproduced here. Both Lazar (1996) and Bowers (1992) note that there is often a cultural dimension of metaphors which students need to be aware of if they are to make sense of many expressions, and in designing the attached tasks we have tried to allow for discussion of the cultural aspects of metaphor.

The tasks have been graded by the amount of awareness of metaphor that each one assumes. In task 1a, the researchers chose an L1 text to encourage discussion of metaphor.

Task 1a

Read the following text. What is special about the words in bold type?

KOZIOROŻEC Zmiany zachodzące w twoim życiu mogą **przynieść nowe ciekawe wrażenia**. **Zadania**, które **staną** przed Tobą, będą wymagały skupienia. Niczego nie próbuj wygrywać forsowaniem spraw na siłę. Nikogo nie staraj się **przeciwną na swoją stronę** za pomocą żądań. Działaj dyplomatycznie. **Nie zagniesz się, nie wyjdiesz na ludzi**.

Wiadomości Gliwickie, 16 June 1992

English translation of the text, showing metaphorical expressions in bold type:

CAPRICORN Changes that are taking place in your life may **bring interesting new sensations**. The **tasks** you will **face** (literally: the tasks that will stand in front of you) will require concentration. Don't try to gain anything using force. Don't try to **win anyone over** (literally: pull over to your side) by making demands. Be diplomatic. **You won't get on in life, unless you're flexible** (literally: You won't come out human unless you bend).

Task 1b

What is special about the words in bold type in this newspaper article?

CHANCELLOR WARNS TORIES OF PAINFUL PUBLIC SPENDING CUTS

By Philip Webster, Political Editor

Kenneth Clarke yesterday gave an outspoken warning to the Conservative party and the country that he will **unveil** painful **spending cuts** next month. The Chancellor said in an unusual disclosure that there was **'blood all over the floor'** in the cabinet committee considering what he called the toughest public spending round since 1979. As cabinet ministers rallied behind John Major on the eve of the Conservative conference to **kill off** any **lingering** suggestion of a leadership challenge, Mr Clarke sought to pre-empt critics such as Norman Lamont, who have launched a week-long campaign for spending **cuts** rather than tax increases.

The Times, 4 October 1993

The aim is that students should think about frequent metaphors in their L1 at a conscious level, and become aware that, although some expressions operate in a similar way in L2, the existence of similar metaphors in L2 cannot be taken for granted. In task 1b, an English text is used to draw students' attention to the existence of English

metaphors. Students can be encouraged to consider which of these have corresponding expressions in L1, and whether exact or only approximate translation equivalents are used. It can also be pointed out that some of the expressions, such as *cuts*, are so conventional that they are not usually thought of as metaphorical by many speakers, while others, such as *blood all over the floor* are inventive extensions of a conventional metaphor. For students from other language backgrounds, an L1 text containing examples of conventional and other metaphors could be found by bilingual teachers of any monolingual group in order to replicate the first part of task 1. Using L1 texts would probably be impractical with a multilingual group, but the discussion of the English text in the second part is possible with multilingual classes.

Task 2

Underline the words in the following sentences which are associated with plants:

- 1 One more aspect of Hong Kong's financial success is the flowering of architecture, art, and culture.
- 2 Many young people, my daughter included, worked hard, joined school bands, teams, and clubs. Last week their labour bore fruit, and most achieved good exam results.
- 3 Massage isn't a long-term cure for stress because it doesn't get to the root of the problem.
- 4 As her career blossomed, she kept her personal and professional lives totally separated.
- 5 The new chairman has taken the company back to its American roots.
- 6 I had planted the seeds of doubt in their minds.

What do the plant words mean in these sentences? Use a dictionary to check your answers.

Can you use any words for plants in your language with these meanings?

Are words for plants used with any other meanings in your first language?

In tasks 2 and 3, students are encouraged to discuss metaphors from particular semantic fields. The teacher will probably point out that not every literal expression from each semantic field can be used metaphorically. Students are encouraged to compare these patterns with their L1; they may find that some expressions translate very closely; *roots*, for example has equivalents in many languages and *IDEAS ARE PLANTS* is a common conceptual metaphor. Tasks 2 and 3 encourage students to discuss their L1 but do not refer specifically to a particular

Task 3

Many different verbs are used to talk about increases and decreases in things such as prices, inflation, and unemployment. Underline them in the following sentences:

- 1 Share prices also plunged for the second day running.
- 2 His support has plunged closer to ten per cent.
- 3 The birth rate is currently soaring.
- 4 His popularity has soared.
- 5 Car sales have plummeted.
- 6 World exports of coffee have slumped.

Check these words in your dictionary and find the part of the entry which describes their literal (physical) meaning. Compare this to the meaning the word has in the above sentences.

Is the increase or decrease described by each of these words fast or slow? Are there words which are used in a similar way in your first language?

language, and could be used with advanced multilingual groups as well as with monolingual groups. Task 4 draws students' attention to the collocational restrictions of this group of metaphors, and to the connotations which some have.

Conclusion In this article we have discussed some of the ways in which metaphoric use varies across two languages, and have suggested that students may find it easier to learn English metaphors if they are encouraged to think about metaphors in L1 and compare them to use in English. We acknowledge that the approach described here is intellectually demanding, and might not be suitable for less motivated students, or students below mid-intermediate level who might not be equipped with the necessary metalanguage for discussion. However, our own experience of working with intermediate and advanced students in Poland has led us to believe that this can be an enjoyable and motivating exercise, and that the increased awareness developed can help learners to become more autonomous in this area of vocabulary learning.

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Task 4

The words on the left can all be used to talk about moving water. They can also be used to talk about some of the things in the column on the right.

- a. Try to match words from each column to form English expressions; for example, *a stream of traffic*.
- b. You can use some of these water words to suggest that you have a positive or a negative view of something. Which do you think might be negative? Which might be positive?

flood	cars
flow	refugees
torrent	memories
wave	abuse
stream	laughter
trickle	criticism
ripple	traffic
deluge	customers

Some suggested answers to task 4:

a.

- 1 a flood of refugees, memories
- 2 flow of traffic
- 3 a torrent of abuse
- 4 a wave of criticism
- 5 a stream/ trickle of cars, traffic, customers, refugees
- 6 a ripple of laughter
- 7 a deluge of criticism

- b. *Torrent* and *deluge* are used to talk about disasters with their literal meanings, and often have negative connotations when used metaphorically. *Flood* does not have negative connotations when it is used to talk about memories, but some people think that it is negative when used to talk about people, as it seems to suggest that they can be compared with a natural disaster. *Ripple* has mildly pleasant connotations; the other terms are generally neutral in themselves, although they may take on positive or negative values from the following noun.

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Note

1 The sentences used for this test were all taken from The Bank of English, a corpus of contemporary English texts (of 323 million words at the time of writing), owned by Collins Cobuild, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, and held at the University of Birmingham. The metaphors were selected from those identified during the compilation of a learners' guide to metaphors in English (Deignan 1995). Unless otherwise indicated, the sentences used in the tasks are from the same source.

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