

# From Concept to Wording and Back Again

## Features of learners' production of figurative language

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### 1. Metaphor in language teaching

Although still somewhat in its infancy, metaphor awareness in the teaching and learning of foreign languages is attracting increasing importance. A working awareness of metaphor and the figurative extension of meaning is a valuable tool for learners, and studies have repeatedly shown that encouraging students to refer to macro-metaphors and conceptualisations in their attempts to comprehend new language items has a positive effect on their ability to interpret and store new vocabulary (Boers 2000a, 2000b; Charteris-Black 2002; Deignan et al. 1997; Holme 2004). Commercial teaching materials<sup>1</sup> are increasingly making reference to conceptual metaphor theory as a means of sensitising teachers and learners alike to metaphorical and figurative meanings, highlighting their utility of explicit both in terms of on-line comprehension and in the categorisation and classification of vocabulary items.

In explaining the rationale behind including metaphor study pages in the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced learners (Rundell 2002), Moon (2004:200) discusses the productive force that both metaphor and metonymy exert in the language. She goes on (ibid.):

...metaphor is common in academic writing, journalism, and other adult non-literary discourse, often as a means of conveying evaluation, and so a failure to understand the typically subliminal messages contained within such metaphors may lead to quite serious errors in understanding the text.

The ubiquity of metaphor in the written language makes its presence in the syllabus essential. This is especially true when we consider that concepts often do not translate from the students' L1 to the language under study; and even where there a correspondence exists, the linguistic expression of these may still appear opaque unless the metaphorical extensions in operation are recognised by the reader.

But there is a gulf between teaching metaphor for comprehension and teaching it for productive purposes. As Holme (2004:97) explains, "It is a principle of meaning extension whose destination cannot always be predicted". In other words, it is not possible to state with any certainty which lexicogrammatical structures will result in the coining of acceptable linguistic metaphors, and which will not, even when the semantics match the underlying concept (see below). In fact, the studies mentioned above focus primarily on the role of metaphor in comprehension; and although virtually all make passing claims its role in spoken and written production, these claims are not adequately substantiated. This paper seeks to address the issue by

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<sup>1</sup> See the downloadable lesson plans on OneStopEnglish.com, in addition to the metaphor study pages in the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced learners (Rundell 2002) and related products (Underhill 2002).

analysing figurative language produced by advanced students, and comparing the data with general reference corpora<sup>2</sup> in the students' native language (L1), Italian, and the target language (L2), English. This analysis aims to assess the conceptual overlaps and mis-matches holding between the two languages, and to ascertain to what extent *conceptual disfluency* (after Danesi 1994:454) can account for the errors and phraseological oddities that occur in non-native language production.

## 2. Conceptualisations from L1 to L2

Italian and English share a common linguistic and cultural heritage, which puts Italian learners of English in a relatively privileged position compared to speakers of more culturally remote languages. Both the Bible and the Classics have provided great swathes of the conventional figurative language used in both English and Italian linguistic expressions: in fact it is not at all uncommon to find word-for-word equivalents of metaphors and idioms in the two languages, and these equivalent wordings, resting as they do upon the same conceptualisations, evoke similar visual imagery and cultural connotations.

Despite the closeness of the languages, there are just as many conceptual mis-matches as there are correspondences, and one of the most revealing features of learner production can be found in the direct translation of L1 concepts into the L2. This results in the coining of opaque expressions which sometimes result in communicative breakdown. As Danesi (1994:454) observes:

While student-produced discourse texts often manifest a high degree of V[erbal] F[luency], they invariably seem to lack the conceptual appropriateness that characterizes the corresponding discourse texts of native speakers. To put it another way, students “speak” with the formal structures of the target language, but they “think” in terms of their native conceptual systems: i.e. students typically use target-language words and structures as “carriers” of their own native “concepts.”

He goes on to elaborate his concept of *conceptual fluency* (ibid.) and the ways in which the explicit knowledge of conventional source domains in the L2 enables students to produce language which is conceptually, as well as linguistically, accurate (in this case, native speakers of English who are learning Italian).

But although the acquisition of conceptual fluency leads students down the path to acquiring a more natural-sounding use of the L2, the problem of disfluency is far from resolved. Conceptual matches in L1 and L2 do not automatically lead to the production of utterances which a native speaker would find acceptable. In fact, the data analysed in the present study<sup>3</sup> demonstrates that even if students make use of appropriate concepts (either because they already exist in the L1 or because they have been signalled in the course of the L2 learning process), this in itself does not result in the production of language which would be considered acceptable to a native. This affirmation is corroborated by Charteris-Black, who also notes that the exploitation of

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<sup>2</sup> CORIS (Corpus di Italian Scritto) – University of Bologna, and the Bank of English Online (HarperCollins publishers)

<sup>3</sup> The data utilised is a 60 000 word corpus of advanced learner (C1) writing assignments compiled by the author during the academic year 2004-2005.

concept which is acceptable in the L2 “does not always lead to the correct L2 linguistic form” (2002:125).

Preliminary analysis of figurative language occurring in L2 writing indicates that students are reluctant to utilise expressions which correspond to unfamiliar L2 conceptualisation patterns, preferring to stick with L2 concepts that exist in the conventional repertoire of their L1. However, operating exclusively within this apparently safe area is as much a hindrance as it is a help, because the familiar (L1) concepts are closely bound to equally-familiar word patterns, which may or may not be acceptable when translated into the L2. Furthermore, the mere awareness of concepts is not sufficient for recall and reproduction of language items, even if these have been explicitly taught and learned (Boers 2000b; Charteris-Black 2002; Deignan et al. 1997). So to what extent is conceptual fluency overridden by linguistic factors such as translation and interlanguage? Is the meaning conveyed by the concept or by the wording? The next section seeks to address some of the causes – and some of the effects – of unnaturalness in the figurative language produced by advanced learners of English.

### 3. Conceptual and linguistic mismatches in L2 production

#### 3.1 Conventional formulaic language

Much of Italian-English interlanguage is characterised by word-for-word renderings of native-tongue expressions which share the same basic conceptual structure, but differ in terms of lexicogrammatical patterning – the structure that makes them recognisable and acceptable in the target language. As a case in point, consider the use of *in front of* in example 1<sup>4</sup>: this student has not formulated the phraseology which would have made her intended meaning come across, opting instead for a familiar-sounding ‘direct’ equivalent.

1. I am perplexed and bewildered **in front of** the two different versions that Sgrena and US soldiers gave of that day.

The sentence can be back-translated into Italian, where it becomes obvious that it is a transliteration of *di fronte a* (=opposite), which only bears a passing similarity to *in front of*. A more acceptable form might be *when confronted/faced with*, which expresses the same sense as the Italian phrase as well as maintaining the metaphorical image of coming face to face with something.

More complex is the case of example 2:

2. ...the only thing that matters is that another man died in consequence of war events whose motivations are **very distant to be clear**.

There is no doubt that the expression *very distant to be clear* is related conceptually to *to be far from clear*, but grammatical and lexical interference prevent it from sounding natural. This phrase has not been transliterated from the Italian, making it an example of imperfect recall of a conventional expression. The displacement of the copula stems from Italian syntactic patterns, and can therefore be explained away as a typical learner error. The use of the synonym *distant* in place of *far*, however, is less easily dismissed. It is, after all, a synonym, and the meanings expressed by the two

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<sup>4</sup> Any errors in the examples are original; all emphasis (underlining, bold) is editorial.

words differs very little. There is no conceptual problem evident here, nor is there any apparent semantic problem, and yet still the phrase is unacceptable to the ears of a native. By means of verification, the Bank of English Online yielded no relevant concordance lines for the query ‘distant+clear’ separated by up to five words, compared to 24 occurrences of ‘far+from+clear’. The problem seems purely phraseological; but if so, what role does conceptualisation play in L2 production?

### 3.2 Conventional metaphor and its linguistic rendering

Apart from the ubiquitous notion that LIFE IS A JOURNEY, *life* is also, and primarily, something which we hold dear; it has value, and thus shares collocational features with other valuable commodities, most obviously *money*. This knowledge, common to Italian, is made explicit in learner dictionaries such as Rundell (2002), which includes the following set phrases under *life*: *spend your life*; *claim lives*; *risk your life*; *put your/sb’s life at risk*; *lay down your life*; *lose your life*; *risk/sacrifice life and limb*; *save sb’s life*.

In the same assignments that produced examples 1 and 2, four of the students expressed the concept of LIFE AS VALUABLE COMMODITY (see Table 1):

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..intelligence, Nicola Calipari, lost his life. I don't want to discuss here Italian hostage, at the high price of his life. American were the soldiers..  
 ..fact that Mr. Nicola Calipari saved her life at the cost of his own. I....  
 because it's not worthwhile a human being life. .//-----i02AB-----Australia:

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Table 1: expressing the concept of *the loss of life*

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The first and third concordance lines use conventional phrases which are phraseologically correct; line four contains grammatical inaccuracies which render it unacceptable, but it is line 2 which merits specific attention. The student who wrote ...*at the high price of his life* is clearly trying to express the concept of paying for something with one’s life, but she has coined a novel expression (almost certainly based on the Italian collocation *il prezzo della vita*) which sounds stilted and unnatural. The Bank of English informs us that *the high price of* tends to be used in trade and business contexts, followed by collocates such as *oil* or the *low-wage economy*. But this knowledge is linguistic, rather than conceptual. With the phraseology being apparently more powerful than the underlying metaphor, how is a learner to know which words do not collocate both with *money* and with *life* when so many others do? The answer presumably lies in an increased familiarity with collocations and formulaic phrases; but if this is true, at what stage does the importance of conceptual fluency yield to that of lexicogrammatical fluency?

### 3.3 Using key-word prompts to elicit figurative language

As part of a language awareness exercise, 10 advanced students followed a 2 hour lesson focusing on the use of idioms, metaphors and puns in newspaper headlines. By means of follow-up, a specific exercise was added to their usual homework assignment (a written commentary on a newspaper article): namely, to think up possible titles for two articles<sup>5</sup> with the aid of a corpus and/or a dictionary. As the articles discussed recent advances in the field of medicine, the expectation was that they would resort to the phrases *a bitter pill to swallow* and *sweeten/sugar the pill*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Researchers hail obesity pill trials* and *Australians to make suicide pill* (The Guardian, 10/xi/2004)

None of them did, despite the fact that equivalents exist in Italian (*inghiottire la pillola* and *indorare la pillola* respectively), and that these are the only set phrases listed under *pill* in their learner dictionary (MED). The headlines devised by the students demonstrated a reluctance to depart from descriptive and academic-style titles, although an awareness of collocation was evident in most of them. Only one of the 16 headlines exploited a conventional phrase – A ‘fat’ lot of pills – though the student felt the need to add scare quotes. Despite the explicit invitation to be creative with their English, and the ready availability of dictionaries and on-line access to corpora, the students shied away from language that they recognised as being non-literal. Although they find it useful out in their text comprehension exercises to have metaphor pointed, expressing appreciation and interest with regard to its rhetorical and cohesive importance, they are unwilling to make use of it in their L2 production.

#### 4. Discussion

Hoey’s (2005) theory of *lexical priming* may help to explain some of the causes of the artificiality which characterises learners’ language. He argues that words are primed for use in certain patterns, and when disruption occurs within and between these patterns, the fluidity of language forms “cracks” (2005:11). These cracks interfere with the normal process of delexicalisation (Louw 2003, 2000; Partington 2004; Philip 2003, 2004b; Sinclair 1996), forcing language chunks to be broken down into their component words. As a result, literal and/or salient meanings are favoured over non-literal, delexicalised ones, adversely affecting the overall communicative effectiveness of the language.

When we look closely at the errors that language learners make in their use of figurative language, it becomes apparent that the unnaturalness is caused more by imperfect phraseology than by inadequate conceptual awareness. These imperfections differ from the kind of alteration and elaboration of conventional phrases that native speakers produce, because there is a seamlessness to native-speaker variation which learner production fails to emulate. If native speakers do alter conventional phrases, they make any necessary changes to the grammar and syntax as a matter of course, thus ensuring that the expression flows uninterruptedly from word to word and phraselet to phraselet: see Table 2 for an illustration of this point; see also Philip (2000, 2003, 2004b).

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enner spent on petrol the phrase, ‘Pot, kettle and black,’ springs to mind. urope. North and south are like pot and kettle and neither out-shines the ot  
 In a prime case of the pot calling the kettle black, 48-year-old Iglesias, sn't that a case of the Doc calling the kettle black? <h> John, Neil or Pad eat in the kitchen and pots calling the kettle black. I wondered if it was a  
 ‘It is time the pot stopped calling the kettle ‘noir # The scandal is revealing out demons and evil spirits. Pot and kettle, or what? KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD  
 p> Surely a case of the pot calling the kettle schwarz. <p> Germans have reme the speaker ‘sound stupid” (pot, meet kettle). She was sitting next to the wonder, ever heard the words ‘pot” and ‘kettle # Take Bruce Anderson, the au

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Table 2: variant forms of *the pot calling the kettle black* (Bank of English 08/viii/2001)

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Learners have much more difficulty in ‘cutting and pasting’ phrasal chunks, and when the preferred patternings of the words in consecutive sequences do not quite match up, the word-flow is interrupted. By means of an example of non-native renderings of a

concept, consider the following extracts from a guided creative-writing assignment, in which key-words were provided as a means of structuring the story both in terms of narrative and vocabulary: the keywords for these examples were *heart* and *chest*.

3. My **heart** began to beat so rapidly that I feared it was going to jump out my **chest**.
4. That's the reason why, I suppose, when I suddenly heard someone knocking at the door, my **heart** tried to escape from my **chest**.
5. My **heart** started beating incredibly fast, I thought it would have popped out of my **chest** right away.
6. He suddenly heard his **heart** beating in his **chest**: he was getting nervous.
7. My **heart** had almost stopped and I had a **chest** pain with fear.
8. I saw a shadow of a man behind the corner walking quickly to me, I couldn't open the door and my **heart** was got off my **chest**.
9. The **heart** begins bumping in my **chest** with the decise sound similar to footsteps on a stairs.

Examples 3, 4, 5, and 8 all express the concept which is part of the stock-in-trade in animated cartoons, where the heart is seen to beat so hard (from love, fear, and so on) that it escapes the confines of the chest. However, none of the example sentences is quite 'right', even if we overlook those errors which are purely grammatical in nature. As far as the conceptualisation is concerned, it is the force of the heartbeat, not the velocity (*rapidly, incredibly fast*) or sound (*bumping, popped*) which would need to be stressed, so it can be said that in these examples we have evidence of imperfect mapping from L1 to L2. Yet it is also true that the problem is not just conceptual in nature – it is also collocational. Appropriate verbs would include *bang, hammer, thump* and *pound*, not just because they correspond to the overall mental picture, but also because corpora tell us that they are frequent collocates with *heart* in contexts such as the one illustrated in examples 3-9. What then should we make of the fact that no student used the verb *to hammer* when this same collocation (*martellare* with *cuore*) is conventional in Italian and equivalent to the English in meaning? It is especially perplexing because the collocation is also listed in the MED, and was a key-word in a language exercise carried out not long before this one. What prevented them from using this common collocation when at other times they resort freely to word-for-word translations? Why did they all choose expressions which in some way lacked the semantics necessary to fully realise the concept behind the phrase; expressions which would not fit the back-translated context either? Is this a conceptual error or a linguistic error, or a mixture of both? What relationship holds between concept and phraseology? The former seems more dependent on the latter than one might intuitively think, but why should this be true, and what factors are responsible?

One hypothesis worth entertaining is that the metaphorical nature of such phrases is not consciously registered – neither in the L2 nor in the L1. Certainly, this would be the view supported by the theory of delexicalisation in the corpus linguistics literature. This posits that conventional formulaic language in naturally-occurring discourse does not exert its full meaning potential, and thus a dead metaphor might only strike us as being metaphorical when encountered in a decontextualised citation. It would follow, then, that if students do not think of their L1 phraseological language as figurative, they will make use of equivalent ways of expressing themselves in the L2; when they

realise that the language is figurative, however, they develop a mental block which prevents them from incorporating the expression, and its corresponding concept, into their working L2 vocabulary. This is certainly true of idiomatic phrases, and it also seems to occur in the case of language which is recognisably metaphoric because it relates to L2 concepts which are alien to the L1. The precise manner in which familiar conceptualisations are affected may depend on the accuracy of the mapping acquired in the L2 as well as the linguistic means of communicating it, though further research needs to be carried out in this area before reaching any firm conclusions.

## 5. Conclusions

Although this research is still at an early stage, some patterns are already beginning to emerge. The examples discussed above demonstrate that when students know that their L1 concepts are shared by the L2 they do not hesitate to make use of them. This is especially true of the conventional formulaic phrases that constitute our repertoire of dead metaphor. However they tend to shy away from using language which is known, or perceived, to be actively metaphorical – that which is based on unfamiliar concepts, or is semantically opaque, or violates truth conditions, and so on. While a general avoidance of tropes in argumentative writing is understandable – it is also likely to be true of most students' L1 style – it is the students' use of dead metaphor that is linguistically and pedagogically significant. If making students aware of the metaphorical underpinnings of conventional linguistic expressions has the result of deterring their use (because of the mistaken belief that they are more figurative than is in fact the case), to what extent should we break down and analyse these delexicalised forms? And how can learners' language creativity (the exploitation of metaphorical conceits) be encouraged without compromising communicative effectiveness?

Although both native and non-native speakers can coin novel metaphors by exploiting and elaborating existing figurative expressions, the rules which govern such creativity are not clearly defined. Concepts are not as productive as native-speakers might like to think: they do not readily generate new linguistic metaphors. Novel linguistic metaphors tend to exploit existing phrases by drawing on complex semantic and syntactic relations rather than abstract concepts alone (see Philip 2003:179ff.). It is also easy to ignore the fact that the expression of conventional figurative language is tightly bound up with conventional phraseology, grammar, and collocational preferences. These are all aspects of language that the native-speaker takes more-or-less for granted, but which the learner can spend a lifetime acquiring. As far as the learner is concerned, then, grasping the concepts is relatively easy, whereas mastering the phraseological nuts and bolts of the language is a much more difficult process.

The data analysed in this study reinforce the notion that while metaphorical language can be usefully broken down and categorised by concept, this is more useful from the point of view of the *receptive* language skills (reading and listening), than for *production* (speech and writing). The evidence of L2 written production is that, at least with cognate languages, it is more of an imperative to focus on linguistic form than on any apparent underlying concept. Whereas limited conceptual resources merely impoverish the language, linguistic form is a semantic scaffold; if it is defective, the meaning will inevitably fall apart.

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