

“Drugs, traffic, and many other dirty interests”: metaphor and the language learner

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1. Introduction

What kinds of figurative language do learners produce in their discursive writing? Despite its importance for language pedagogy and lexicography, as well as for linguistics in general, this question has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature. Research into learners’ language production tends to focus more on ‘normal’ aspects of the language – organizational markers, collocation errors, and terminological mismatches – with errors of a more abstract, conceptual nature all too often relegated to the rag-bag category of ‘language interference’.

While it would be futile to contest the existence of language interference, the term itself is somewhat abused. It is all too easy to explain away learner-produced oddities by stating that they are caused by the influence of patterns from another language, especially when the oddity itself seems to evade definition in terms of grammar or conventional syntax. The vague explanations that often accompany the indication of such an error, “it doesn’t sound quite right”, “we wouldn’t say it like that”, and so on, do little to illuminate the matter. Having failed to identify the cause of the error, the instructor cannot offer students advice on how to avoid making similar mistakes in the future, and the popular notion that language mastery is acquired, not learned, is reinforced.

Yet there must be some basis underlying the identification of a linguistic peculiarity, even if that reason proves difficult to pinpoint. In this paper, I consider the problem in terms of conceptual mismatches between L1 and L2, and describe its workings using examples from advanced (C1) assignments produced by learners of English at an Italian university. In contrast to the received view that concepts generate linguistic expressions, I argue here the

contrary: that our conceptual knowledge of a word's (or expression's) meaning range is forged from the sum of the conventional collocational and phraseological patternings of that word (or expression) in the L1, and that it is inadequate knowledge of the word's lexico-syntactic behaviour (phraseology) in the L2, rather than incomplete L2 conceptual knowledge, that results in the production of the "doesn't sound right" type of inter-language error.

2. Metaphor and language learning

Metaphor is occupying an increasingly prominent position in language teaching and in pedagogical lexicography. Although Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) theory of Conceptual Metaphor can hardly be described as new, its repercussions are only now gaining ground in applied linguistics, as it filters down through university studies into teacher training courses and pedagogical resources. Abstraction is attractive both to the language learner and teacher alike, as it shifts the emphasis away from the nitty-gritty of word-perfect utterances to a more general impression of how the language communicates ideas, i.e. from knowledge *of* the language to knowledge *about* the language.

Several existing studies attest to the utility of appealing to students' conceptual awareness during the language learning process. In vocabulary acquisition in particular, it seems that language items are more successfully learned when a specific focus is directed on the relation of figurative meanings to their corresponding literal meaning (Boers 2000, Charteris-Black 2000); it has also been shown that encouraging students to make use of their powers of visualisation (Boers & Stengers 2005; Stengers et al. 2005) both aids the comprehension of new items in text, and facilitates the recall of the same items in subsequent vocabulary tests.

Despite the success that raising students' metaphorical awareness has, most researchers remain sanguine about the effects of such knowledge on language production. As Boers explains:

Knowledge of the conventional metaphoric themes of a given language does not guarantee mastery of its conventional linguistic instantiations. As it is impossible to predict exactly how a particular language will instantiate identified metaphoric themes, learners cannot employ their awareness of those metaphoric themes to 'generate' figurative expressions in the target ... (2000:569).

Charteris-Black (2002) also notes that knowledge of the new language's conceptual norms is of limited service for students wishing to produce native-like utterances: "where linguistic forms are quite different, activation of an equivalent first language conceptual basis does not always lead to the correct L2 linguistic form." (2000: 125). He repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the fact that even though conceptualisations may be shared across languages, the precise linguistic instantiations related to the concept can differ considerably; and it is the linguistic form that ultimately carries the meaning. The fundamental role of phraseology is also noted by Deignan *et al* (1997), again stressing that the abstract knowledge which can be drawn on successfully for decoding is insufficient for encoding purposes: "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" (1997: 354); and Holme (2004) reminds us that a conceptual metaphor schema is "a principle of meaning extension whose destination cannot always be predicted." (2004: 97).

It therefore becomes apparent that an important relationship holds between concepts and the conventional phraseology with which they are realised. However, this interaction of form and meaning is all too often overlooked. Metaphorical schemata are generalisations, and like all generalisations, they downplay the contribution of details. We have read that knowledge of the L2 conceptual frame of reference does not seem to be enough to ensure the production of acceptable linguistic renditions, and that there is a gulf between drawing on a concept to aid comprehension, and encoding through the concept. This casts doubt on the claim that metaphor and metonymy can be defined as "hugely productive forces within the lexicon" (Moon 2004: 200) and "an important vocabulary-building skill for the language learner." (Lazar, 1996: 44).

What appears to happen is that by abstracting out from linguistic expressions to concept, it is easy to over-generalise the range of application that the concept actually has. Such over-generalisation is difficult to spot in a monolingual setting. Counter-examples are notoriously difficult to invent, as is unconventional phraseology. Learner language however provides a wealth of evidence for the priority of linguistic form over concept, because it illustrates how apparently innocuous changes to conventional phraseology can result in a failure to transmit the intended meaning. Philip (2000a) has shown how students' expression of the concept LIFE AS VALUABLE COMMODITY – common to the students' L1 – is dependent on particular phraseological renderings, and if these are altered, the result is only partial transmission of meaning. As this breakdown in meaning can occur even when there are no grammatical or syntactical errors present, and when the concept has ostensibly been applied

correctly, it must be explained as phraseological in nature, due in particular to collocational incongruity. A knowledge of how words typically combine (in collocations and conventional phraseology) helps to shape the corresponding understanding of concepts. Should the necessary linguistic knowledge be incomplete or inaccurate, so too will be the understanding – and expression – of those concepts. This observation runs contrary to the accepted view that concepts are drawn on in the creation of new expressions. The reality is that word forms do not combine promiscuously. While the generation of new expressions can be ascribed to conceptual force, the precise forms that these expressions can take is entirely determined by norms of linguistic usage, i.e. the accepted ways in which words combine with one another into preferred phraseological patternings or “lexical networks” (Gibbs & Matlock 1999).

Viewed from this standpoint, it becomes apparent that encoding in the L2 requires considerable knowledge of how concepts are lexicalised, rather than knowledge or awareness of the concept alone. In fact, the greater the students’ repertoire of conventional collocations and phraseology, the more proficient they appear to be in expressing concepts effectively (compare to the observations cited above, which note that knowledge of the concept does not lead to the production of appropriate linguistic forms). Perhaps when Danesi speaks of *conceptual fluency* (1994: 454) he is picking up on this greater sensitivity to native-speaker norms of phraseology in which form, meaning and general conceptual trends are interwoven.

3. Encoding idiomatic meaning in the L2

Because Italian and English are quite closely related both linguistically and culturally, it comes as no surprise that the languages enjoy a similar outlook on the world (shared conceptual schemata) and often express this in similar ways (shared linguistic expressions). Cultural and lexical similarities make it relatively easy for an Italian student to achieve average proficiency in English, as so much is ostensibly ‘the same’. The corollary of this perception of similarity is that students often rely more on their powers of deduction and intuition than on explicit learning. This is especially true once students move beyond simple, concrete constructions and start to use turns of phrase and more abstract language. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of assuming that words correspond on a one-to-one basis, and to remain unaware of two fundamental notions: (a) that most words have more than one meaning (in lexicographical and translation terms), and (b) that the meaning of words in combination

does not necessarily correspond to the sum of those words' individual meanings (idiomaticity and phraseological meaning). This lack of language awareness can be remedied for the L2 by making explicit reference to metaphor in teaching, as the studies cited in 2 have affirmed. But unless students are particularly sensitive to the workings of their L1, they do tend to prefer familiar word combinations in their L2 encoding, and as a result their language production is often characterised by anomalous collocations and – even worse – word-for-word renditions of idiomatic phrases such as those illustrated in Examples 1 and 2¹.

Idiomatic language is not only notoriously difficult to decipher in the L2, but it can also pose a problem in the L1 – L2 encoding process. Casting the very obvious cases of idiom aside (those which violate truth conditions, such as *raining cats and dogs*), it should never be forgotten that most language learners are not linguists by profession, and as such they are less inclined to break down and categorise the language they use. It is understandable that non-compositional expressions and terminology can be considered 'literal' by non-experts, because the lay person's perception of what counts as 'figurative' is much closer to literary metaphor than to the much more pervasive dead metaphor: as Gibbs & Matlock remind us, "experts' intuitions often differ from those of ordinary individuals who have no preconceived notions about the phenomenon of interest." (ibid 1999: 263).

Examples 1 and 2 constitute fairly typical instances of word-for-word rendition. The highlighted phrase in Example 1 corresponds to the Italian *provare sulla mia/propria pelle* ("to experience first-hand"); and the phrase in Example 2 corresponds to *la fuga dei cervelli* ("the brain drain").

(1) As I could **experience (on my own skin)**, research in Italian universities is very scarcely promoted.

(2) ...the incredible "**escape of the brains**" and the difficulties in which the scientific research is left.

Often these mistakes are put down to laziness on the part of the student, who is probably aware that the phrase is not correct in English. Students at a lower level of proficiency than those whose work is discussed in this paper often leave direct translations when they do not know the equivalent and have not looked for it /been unsuccessful in their search. As far as

¹ The data consists of an 80 000 word corpus of advanced learner (C1) writing assignments compiled by the author between 2003 and 2005. Any errors in the examples are original; all emphasis is editorial.

these examples are concerned, it is safe to say that Example 2 is a case of laziness, as the stimulus text used the term *brain drain*, and the student failed to recognise and re-use it. Instead, he inadvertently created a piece of phraseological humour: the sensation that *the incredible “escape of the brains”* sounds facetious or ironic is confirmed by corpus data. The only modifier found before *escape of the* is *luckiest* (*the luckiest escape of my life* occurs 4 times in BNC), and, in more general terms, the string *the escape of the* appears to favour the company of wild and dangerous things, a category to which *brain* (intelligent person) is not normally assigned. Using this word to complete the string flouts the expression’s normal combinatorial preferences and creates a comic effect (see Louw 1997).

Example 1 is a different matter, however, as this particular use of *pelle* is not listed in the large bilingual dictionary that the students use (Ragazzini 1995), nor is it listed in the same publisher’s corpus-based monolingual Italian dictionary (Zingarelli 2004), suggesting that it is not really thought of as having a different sense to the established (in Italian) metaphorical ones of “life” (experience) and “proximity/intimacy”. This being the case, the student would not have been able to locate an appropriate translation even had she looked for one, so she fell back on translation.

Examples 1 and 2 above are, thankfully, quite uncommon in advanced learner writing. Students are more likely to shy away from phraseological turns and figurative language than to attempt to recreate them in the L2 (Philip 2005b). They are unwilling to cause offence or unintentional humour, and avoid situations that are liable to end up in a loss of face. These examples have been extracted from coursework assignments which were not graded for assessment, so the students have been less conservative than they might have been in an exam setting. By far the most frequent type of inter-language anomaly is caused by errors of collocation, and these are examined in section 3.

4. Collocation and conceptualisation

While collocation errors could be considered by some to provide evidence of inadequate conceptual knowledge in the L2, they can be comprehensively accounted for in purely linguistic terms. Conceptual knowledge does not come out of thin air – it is created and sustained through linguistic forms. It is through the study of unsuccessful approximations of conventional linguistic forms that it becomes apparent that conceptual mapping is selective

and highly dependent on and sensitive to particular lexicalisations. In this section I discuss a number of collocation anomalies related to non-literal word senses in a bid to reveal their linguistic origin, and how this relates to Danesi's (1994) notion of conceptual fluency.

4.1 The meaning of delexicalised words

Collocations are a headache to the language learner because they are word-form specific and quite difficult to generalise. While common noun-verb collocations are introduced at a very early stage in the language learning process, the collocations that vex advanced learners are those more relevant to academic and other discursive writing, namely verb-adverb and noun-adjective collocations. These often appear to be arbitrary because they differ in inexplicable ways from the equivalent patternings in the L1. Furthermore, the fact that such word combinations do not exert their full meaning potential (they are at least partially delexicalised) is often not perceived by learners, who tend to favour a compositional interpretation of language.

Delexicalisation entails two principal aspects of meaning which act simultaneously. In the first case, delexicalised words lose some of their salient meaning (function words lose some of their functional value). When a delexicalised word forms combinations, the combination assumes a meaning which does not correspond to the sum of the salient meanings of the components. This definition is also the standard definition of idiom, but there is one crucial difference: in idioms, the overall meaning amounts to more than the sum of the parts; in delexical forms, the meaning of the whole usually amounts to less than the sum of the parts (Philip 2003).

The examples brought forward in this section are all instances of collocation transfer, and illustrate how L1 delexicalised chunks are broken down and re-formulated verbatim in the L2. An analysis of the errors and the L1 patterns that have influenced them makes it clear that students stick to lexical combinations that are familiar to them; it is difficult to find evidence in favour of a conceptually-driven approach to encoding.

(3) ...you can meet people belonging to different cultures, nationalities, races; you have the chance to **enlarge** your **views**.

(4) Even in Italy the Government is **elaborating measures** for the introduction of e-learning in higher-education institutions in order to catch up with standards in

other countries.

(5) My nerves broke down and I went into a **heavy depression**.

Enlarge one's views, *elaborate* measures and *heavy* depression are all fairly typical collocation errors in Italian natives' English production. *Enlarge* occurs frequently as a mistranslation of "broaden/widen", because *allargare* is formally similar to *large*. Obviously with the two words referring to different kinds of space – horizontal for *allargare*, but both horizontal and vertical for *enlarge* – the meaning referent is anomalous for English. The Italian concept of breadth is reinforced by the typical collocate *orizzonte* (*horizon*, but also *future* and *point of view* in its figurative senses); this is also true of collocates of *horizon* in English, which include *broaden*, *widen*, and *narrow*, but not of *view* or *point of view* whose collocational patterning is quite different. *Elaborate* (mistranslated from *elaborare* "to process (information)") again appears to violate English conceptual norms, in that *elaborate* is a synonym of *embellish*, not *devise*. *Measures*, however, are *introduced* or *taken*, but apparently not formulated so, as was the case for Example 3, both words of the collocation are inappropriate for the context of use.

When the meaning of the offending collocate is figurative but has been translated by the equivalent for the literal sense, the problem is exacerbated. The student who produced Example 3 has used *heavy* to translate *pesante*, a word whose polysemy is not paralleled in its English equivalent. *Heavy* is fine as a translation for the literal sense, but is inappropriate for most of the figurative meanings; here the translation should read *deep depression*. It did not occur to the student that the meaning of *pesante* in this example is not the same as the meaning of *pesante* in *una valigia pesante* (a heavy suitcase), so he had no reason to check the meaning in his dictionary. By "knowing" that these words are translation equivalents, he has simply transferred the patternings of *pesante* onto his use of *heavy* in English. Even had the student known that English defines depression in terms of depth, not weight, he may have still produced an anomalous collocation, such as *profound depression*² (*profound* being close to the Italian equivalent, *profondo*).

² 2 occurrences in BNC, both referring to the atmosphere (ambience); compare to 24 occurrences of *deep depression*, of which 20 refer to the emotional state, 2 to the weather, and 2 to the economy.

4.2 Literal and figurative meanings in translating collocation

The non-recognition of different senses of a word, and the role and function of a word in a language chunk, is a major problem in language acquisition for all but the few students who are linguistic experts. Just as most users of a computer have little idea of how the components are built and how they interact with one another, for most people, language is simply a tool for communicating with. The L1 forms our frame of reference for the world, and part of the pleasure of learning a foreign language is discovering new ways of viewing the world as expressed by the new language.

When learners set about acquiring an L2, they will find that some of their existing L1 concepts are meaningless while others seem to have the same value, so can be transferred successfully. Yet while inappropriate or irrelevant concepts can be suppressed during the use of the L2, it is not so easy a matter to understand how similar concepts match up in appropriate and/or conventional linguistic patterns. We have already seen what happens when idiomatic phrases and collocations are translated verbatim from L1 to L2; but the problem is as relevant to fully lexical language, especially when the literal/figurative boundary is reached.

Concepts are often perceived to be shared across languages, because of the existence of a few felicitous direct (or nearly direct) equivalents, but no two languages are translations of each other, so it is inevitable that there will be differences. However, the precise ways in which the L1 and L2 uses diverge can easily be missed by learners, by their teachers (unless their command of both languages is excellent), and also by lexicographers: monolingual lexicography is not concerned with contrasting languages, and, perhaps surprisingly, most bilingual lexicography is still structured on (native) monolingual models. As a result of this under-emphasis on contrast, and over-generalisations of collocational patternings, the documentation of fine levels of distinction is usually inadequate to prevent inter-language from seeping into learners' speech and writing.

One of the most difficult aspects of meaning for learners to grasp is that the translation of a L1 word in its literal sense may not be an appropriate translation for the same L1 word when used figuratively. For the non-expert language learner, words are not split up into sub-senses unless they are homographs and thus quite clearly 'different words'. If a translation is known for the literal meaning, therefore, it is likely that this L2 expression will serve as an all-purpose 'equivalent' for the L1 word, regardless of the context in which it appears. From this (erroneous) assumption of simple equivalence, it is easy to overlook the fact that the

‘same’ word in fact has a different range of meaning and reference, and has its own rules of syntactic patterning.

Example 6 illustrates an example what can happen when the differences in figurative extensions of a common word have not been identified.

(6) If you live in a condominium **conflicts and discords** can be **born** with others.

The concept of BIRTH AS BEGINNING is very closely related to the literal sense of birth, and it is used in both English and Italian. At first glance, Example 6 looks like an attempt to be creative which results in a conceptual near miss, though, as with so many errors, its ‘creativity’ stems from L1 norms: the student has transferred the conventional collocational patterning of *nascita*, in a way which is alien to English.

In Italian, *nascita* (birth) collocates with *emozioni* (emotions, feelings) *difficoltà* (difficulties), *equivoci* (misunderstandings), *guai* (trouble), *problemi* (problems) – the general category to which “conflicts and discords” belongs – over and above the range that English expresses with *birth*. BNC data for English indicates that the metaphorical sense of *birth* applies to nations, businesses, organisations, political movements, social trends and academic disciplines, but nowhere is it used for emotional or mental states. For this reason, then, the collocation of *conflict* and *discord* with *born* is inappropriate (atypical) and also invalid, in that it violates English norms of usage of the word, and, by extension, the conceptual range ascribed to *birth*. I would like at this point to stress that it is a matter of collocation error, and not one of conceptual incompatibility. The error is fundamentally one of collocation – not because of the particular conceptual ranges that *birth* or *nascita* have, but because when English speaks of the creation of nations, businesses, organisations, political movements, social trends and academic disciplines, *birth* is one of the most frequent words used to lexicalise the concept; however *birth* is not a commonly-used way of describing emotions or troubles (troubles *start*, problems *arise*, and conflicts and discord are *caused/provoked*). The overriding concept (beginnings) is basically the same for all these expressions, but English chooses to lexicalise the ideas in different ways, whereas Italian can use *nascere* for all of them.

Further cases of erroneous metaphorical transfer are found in Examples 7 and 8. Again, Italian collocations are translated in ways which are not acceptable nor particularly comprehensible in English.

(7) It might be better if we **slacken** our **way of life** and if we learn from the nature!

(8) Summing up, I prefer to live in a city like Bologna because of the **many-sided opportunities** that I can find in it.

Here, as in Example 6, the errors can be read from either a conceptual or a linguistic point of view. If we consider them as compositional choices which privilege the salient meanings of *slacken* and *many-sided* respectively, then we have to try to justify the choices in terms of what these words' figurative meanings imply; if we consider them instead as the direct translations of non-compositional or formulaic expressions, then it is the meaning of the whole expression that is of interest, and not the individual values of the components.

As a literal translation of *allentare*, *slacken* (Ex. 7) is the best choice, but here the meaning is not literal (i.e. collocating with *screw*, *knot*, etc.), but rather the figurative sense "to slow down or relax". Does the student mean to *unloosen* in its fully salient sense, which would trigger off metaphorically-related meanings such as that life is tense and we feel constrained by it; or does she mean *slow down the pace/ take things easy*, in the received idiomatic sense, "relax". My impression is that it is the second option, and I base this interpretation on the fact that students are on the whole very reluctant to create novel figurative language (Philip 2005b), and that their reliance on L1 norms of phraseology is due to their avoidance of expressions which they perceive as being more figurative than a native speaker would consider them to be. Thus they display a preference for wording which reflects familiar L1 expressions rather than adopting the L2 conventions which they find unfamiliar and strange.

Example 8 is characterised by the same type of error: *many-sided* (Ex. 8) is the literal translation of *poliedrico*, the adjective derived from *poliedro* ("polyhedron") To his credit, the student has recognised that the meaning is figurative, avoiding transliteration and opting for the translation provided for the figurative sense "many and varied". However, the choice of translation still reflects the literal meaning of *poliedrico* (the correct translation in this context would be [*great*] *variety of*). Once again we are forced to decide if he is trying to express a particular mental image, or if he is using a familiar L1 expression in translation. We cannot rule out the possibility that the student has a mental image of *opportunity* as an object with many facets, like a diamond. *Poliedrico* collocates principally with two recurring feminine common nouns – *figura* ("figure"), and *attività* ("activity / activities") – and with

proper names (c.f. *figura*), in particular names of artists, musicians and other people who are creative; this conventional use of the adjective in the student's L1 contributes to and reinforces the conception that people or things described as *poliedrico* are characterised as having many sides to their personalities, or many talents. This interaction between familiar language and familiar concept is one of the factors responsible for collocation errors such as *many-sided opportunities*. The student may feel that a different adjective does not quite convey the right sense, and so prefers the L1 rendering without taking into consideration the thought that it might have no currency in the L2, and sound odd as a consequence. And the reason why it sounds strange is that *many-sided* collocates with things which in English are conceptualised as having sides, aspects or faces – *questions, debates and problems* – but not *opportunities*, which are defined by number and quantity (*many, a lot of*), not by their quality of having multiple characteristics.

The student's repertoire of conventional L1 collocations has contributed to his conceptual knowledge of what an *opportunità* is, and he applies this semantic information to the L2 encoding process, without thinking that his conceptual knowledge is language-specific, and so will not carry over to the L2. It is here that we see how language and concepts interrelate. Concepts do not exist independently of language, and contrary to the opinion that concepts generate new linguistic metaphors, cross-linguistic comparisons demonstrate that conceptual schemas are linguistically determined and language-specific. As a final illustration of mismatch between L1 and L2 concept/ conventional linguistic expression, let us examine the example which also appears in the title to this paper: *drugs, traffic and many other dirty interests*.

(9) And in the end one of the biggest problems that affects big towns is the criminality that frightens especially women and people in general. It's **a plague** that sometimes is connected to **drugs, traffic and many other dirty interests**.

As well as referring to things that are physically soiled, *dirty* is used to describe dishonesty, unfair dealings, negative evaluations of sex, and bad things in general. These abstract categories are informed by collocates such as *jokes, words, business, and lies*, but the precise ways in which these concepts are lexicalised in language are far more specific than might be imagined. For example *dirty business* is a conventional, non-compositional expression, but the apparently synonymous *dirty interests* (Example 9) is not; in fact it is almost meaningless in English. Being a compositional pairing, it is difficult to figure out which particular sense

of *dirty* is being alluded to, and by grouping together *drugs* (*dirty* = “illegal”), *traffic* (*dirty* = “polluted”) and *interests* (*dirty* = any of the established senses, including “sexually deviant”, “illegal”, “morally questionable”), the resulting chunk reads as an opaque metaphor, or a rather zany and imaginative zeugma. In contrast, the Italian expression which this student has translated, *interessi sporchi*, is a conventional collocation which draws on the corruption sub-sense of *sporco* (“dirty”). Whereas the near-synonyms *affari* (“business”) and *interessi* both collocate normally with *sporco*, it is interesting to note that although *business* can collocate with *dirty*, *interests* cannot. Even if the student had already come across the expression *dirty business* in text or in a dictionary, he would have had no means of discovering that the collocation he produced should be unacceptable. If we abstract out from *dirty*’s collocational patternings to the concept that it represents, there is no logical reason for *dirty interests* to be unacceptable; it is simply an illustration of the fact that “linguistic behaviour among users of a language is highly stereotypical, even in matters of fine detail.” (Hanks, 2004: 246). As was true of examples 6-8, it is doubtful whether any figurative meaning was intended, especially as the phrase is introduced by a metaphor proper, *a plague*, which although conventional, still exerts some degree of metaphorical life in both languages.

4.3 Discussion

The data presented above lends support to the claim that ‘conceptual’ errors are ultimately caused by the inappropriate use of linguistic forms. However, attributing all errors to language interference is somewhat simplistic and not particularly illuminating. If we start from the premise that our conceptual knowledge is built up from the sum of the linguistic expressions that we know, then figurative language studies must examine the role of phraseology in considerably greater detail. When figurative language is studied from a cross-linguistic perspective, it becomes all too apparent that conceptual sets are only partially and selectively exploited. The meanings conveyed by conceptually-related figurative expressions are not governed by abstract thought, but by their collocational tendencies, and in particular with the very precise and detailed phraseological patterns in which those collocates co-occur.

Conceptual knowledge in the L1 is an abstraction of the language patterns of the L1. Proficient learners tend not to find decoding difficult because they have already amassed a considerable store of conventional language forms in the L2 on which they can draw; but although recognition of forms is relatively trouble-free, the memorisation of new language

items, or new uses of familiar language, poses a number of related problems. Conventional phraseological patterns seem to get distorted at some point between recognition and recall. This is most likely due to the prioritising of salient meanings, with the result that these will be recalled with greater ease than will their contextual, phraseological meanings. Yet conventional expressions are not typified by salience but by delexicalisation and idiomaticity, which function in close collaboration with regular phraseological patternings. Even the smallest change to the established wording of a phrase can interfere with the transmission of the intended meaning.

5. Encoding L1 concepts in the L2: the creation of opaque metaphor

While the phraseology of Example 9 saves it from total incomprehensibility (the pattern “x, y and other z” indicates a logical connection between *dirty interests* and its collocates *drugs* and *traffic*), the final examples to be presented in this paper are not so fortunate. When L2 lexical and conceptual mapping is inadequate or erroneous, the inevitable result is communicative failure. There are clearly different gradations of incomprehensibility, and context can do much to ease the passage of information. When the collocation is at fault, as in Examples 3-9, the context helps the reader to ignore the error and select an interpretation based on native norms, and this helps to neutralise the disjointedness that arises from the non-standard phraseology. Text is predictive, and textual meaning is partly created by the reader’s expectation of what will come next. Sometimes, however, text does not do what we expect it to, and if the language does not follow familiar patterns, deciphering its meaning can be challenging. This was the case with Examples 1 and 2, which transported L1 idiomatic meaning word-for-word into L2. A reader unfamiliar with the L1 patterns would recognise that the meaning was idiomatic, but may not be able to understand what is meant.

(10) Recently, Britain’s young have been questioned about several issues so as to try to inquire which their interests, expectations, ambitions are and how they relate to society. Yet this attempt to define clearly these features has ended up **leaving us with the same puzzled and confused frown.**

(11) We had better understand the young and elderly without starting off from a biased point of view, whereby they are **separated by so deep a grave**, but rather by watching how their perspectives on reality can change when they face up reality.

(12) In this situation, the **horizons** for the Italian young researchers **are full of clouds** whose name are temporary and little-paid work, ancient structure of power, impossibility to plan a future.

Examples 10-12 show what appear to be deliberate attempts to use figurative language for rhetorical purposes: they do not follow standard L1 patterns, nor do they tally with L2 norms, and they appear to be compositional. Meaning can be extracted from these phrases, but by failing to adhere to L2 phraseological norms, fluency is compromised. *Puzzled and confused* (Ex. 10) does not appear in the BNC (even though the near-synonymous phrase *bewildered and confused* occurs 3 times); and although *puzzled*, *perplexed* and *worried* all modify *frown*, *confused* does not. Additionally, *puzzled and...* follows the verb *look* in 25% of instances, and is typically located in post-modifying position. Were *frown* to have been replaced by *look (on our faces)*, the expression would have passed virtually unnoticed. As it is, however, the non-standard version requires reprocessing. As a facial expression, *frown* is related to *look*, but it forms different phraseological patterns; and this is enough to impede the flow of the meaning.

Separation by depth is unusual in both Italian and English, as the principal collocates both *separato* and *separated* are indications of length: time spans (which are conceptualised horizontally in both languages, distance (centimetres, miles, kilometres, and so on), and the only examples of vertical separation offered by BNC and CORIS data refer to separation (physical division) by plates of glass or metal, implying that the things to be kept apart are very close and at risk of merging. So *separated by so deep a grave* (Ex.11), while beautifully constructed in grammatical terms, is anomalous because it refers to vertical space. To further confuse the reader, the choice of *grave* here is rather infelicitous because it occurs in a context where the young and the old are being compared. The proximity of *elderly* and *grave* triggers the literal meaning of *grave*, which may not be the one intended. With no other indicators provided, the expression remains opaque and open to variable interpretation.

It was mentioned in 3.1 (Ex. 3) that *orizzonte* in Italian means both “horizon” and “future”, the second meaning not being common to English. By extending the reference of *horizon* in a way that is not appropriate in English, it is not immediate to the reader what young Italian researchers’ *horizons* (Ex 12) might possibly be. Were *horizon* to have the same figurative meaning as Italian, the continuation of the phrase with *full of clouds (pieni di nubi)* would have reinforced the metaphor. However, as it stands, it is the literal

interpretation that is strengthened, because there is nothing in the phraseology to suggest that an idiomatic meaning is intended.

This observation brings us back to the central issue. The sorts of language mismatch illustrated in this paper lead me to believe that familiarity with collocational patterning is ultimately more influential than conceptual knowledge in achieving fluency in a foreign language. Students bring their L1 conceptual knowledge with them when they work in the L2, and if the languages share common cultural and linguistic ground, over-generalisations abound regarding the applicability of conceptual and lexical information. The 'same' word is thought to have the same meaning and sphere of reference, and because of this students are apt to use the L2 equivalent in the same phraseological patternings as those used by the L1. Similarity makes students reluctant to consult dictionaries at the advanced level, because they are quite convinced that they already 'know' the word. And because many students have managed to get by in much of their language learning by falling back on translation and approximate renderings of what they believe they have seen, they often fail to develop the necessary degree of sensitivity to phraseology that is necessary if they are ever to master the L2.

6. Conclusions

While attention to metaphor in language pedagogy is indisputably helpful to the learning process, some of the issues raised in this paper require further attention. In the first case, it is apparent that a great deal of awareness-raising is required in the language classroom if students are to fully appreciate how their L1 knowledge is to be encoded in the L2. It is not apparent to most students that their world knowledge is structured in terms of their L1, and it comes as a surprise to find that the L2 lexicalised concepts in palpably different ways. It is therefore important that students be encouraged to compare and contrast the two languages, even though this runs somewhat contrary to the preferred monolingual approach to foreign language teaching.

One of the problems with teaching and learning figurative expressions in the L2 is the risk of over-interpreting the degree of metaphoricity present. Decoding from the L2 favours salient meanings, with phrases being read compositionally when in most cases the language is non-compositional, delexicalised and metaphorically dead. As a consequence, figurative

expressions whose wordings are different to those used in the L1 are often perceived as being more figurative than they really are. It is not easy for a learner to appreciate delexicalised, phraseological meanings because they sound unconventional compared to the patterns they know in the L1. The relatively low incidence of this sort of language in learner writing can probably be ascribed to a desire to avoid sounding 'foreign', when in fact the use of these conventional phrases would have precisely the opposite effect.

Figurative and metaphorical senses of words do not exist in isolation, but are created and fixed in context. Form and meaning interact in very delicate and detailed ways, as discussion of the data above has highlighted, so if priority is given to content words alone, the link between wording and meaning is seriously compromised. Encouraging students to remember lexical information conceptually or visually, while advantageous to the learning and decoding of new vocabulary, may cause interference between recognition of a language item and its recall for encoding process (as opposed to recall in language elicitation tests). Errors and inaccuracies in the phraseology can interfere with meaning even when no fault can be found with the collocation of content words.

Divorcing content and structure causes meaning to disintegrate. Meaning is wholly dependent on form, and if learners are to incorporate conventional figurative language into their productive repertoires, they will have to focus at least as much on the finer points of phraseology as they currently do on the semantic and conceptual content.

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