

## Figurative language and the advanced learner

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### 1. Metaphor in language teaching

Anyone teaching English at advanced level will have noticed that metaphor has become something of a buzz-word in recent years. Commercial teaching materials<sup>1</sup> are increasingly incorporating aspects of conceptual metaphor theory as an aid to teachers and learners alike. There are good reasons for this: several studies have shown that learners who can access and make use of their knowledge of metaphorical concepts experience a positive effect on their ability to organise, learn and recall vocabulary, and have greater success in their on-line comprehension of previously unseen expressions (see Philip 2005 for an overview).

The ubiquity of metaphor in the written language makes its presence in the advanced syllabus essential. 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 predict which linguistic structures will constitute acceptable linguistic metaphors and which will not, even when the semantics match the underlying concept (see examples in 3.1). In fact, previous studies have focused 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 article will address the issue by analysing figurative language produced by advanced students, and comparing the data with general reference corpora<sup>2</sup> and monolingual dictionaries in the students' L1 (Italian), and the target language (English). In so doing, it will be possible to identify the extent to which the errors and phraseological oddities that occur in non-native language are caused by incomplete *conceptual* knowledge rather than incomplete *linguistic* knowledge.

### 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. 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. Yet despite the closeness of the languages, there are at least as many mismatches as there are correspondences,

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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 (MED) and related products.

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

and one of the most revealing features of learner production is the interlanguage produced when L1 concepts are transliterated into the L2.

Although the acquisition of *conceptual fluency* (Danesi 1994) brings students closer to acquiring proficiency in the L2, this does not resolve the issue of disfluency generally. Charteris-Black notes that the exploitation of a L1 concept which is also acceptable in the L2 “does not always lead to the correct L2 linguistic form” (2002:125), and the data analysed in the present study<sup>3</sup> demonstrates that even if students use concepts appropriately (either because they already exist in the L1 or because they have been signalled in the course of the L2 learning process), this does not necessarily mean that the wording used to express them will be acceptable. Furthermore, although conceptual awareness aids comprehension, the recall and reproduction of language items – including those which have been explicitly taught and learned – is reliant on precise phraseological patterning over and above the underlying concept (Boers 2000; Charteris-Black 2002; Deignan et al. 1997).

So is meaning conveyed by the concept or by the wording? The next section examines 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 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, shared by Italian, is made explicit in learner dictionaries such as MED, 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*. However, the ways in which students express the concept vary, as in these examples from the same homework assignment:

1. ...a very bad episode in which an Italian member of military intelligence, Nicola Calipari, **lost his life**.
2. ...to pay respects to Mr Calipari, the secret agent who rescued the former Italian hostage, **at the high price of his life**.
3. She has to face the fact that Mr. Nicola Calipari **saved her life at the cost of his own**.
4. I hope this rhetoric of strengthness is going to stop, because **it's not worthwhile a human being life**.

Examples one and three use conventional phrases which are phraseologically accurate; example four contains a grammatical inaccuracy (*worthwhile* instead of *worth*) which is the only feature that renders it unacceptable. The student who wrote ...*at the high price of his life* (ex. 2) is clearly trying to express the concept of paying for something with one's life, but she

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<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.

has coined a novel expression which sounds stilted and unnatural. It is easy to dismiss this as an interlanguage error – it is almost certainly derived from the Italian collocation *il prezzo della vita* – but it is worth pointing out that all four examples cited would be perfectly acceptable in Italian if back-translated. The fact that *the high price of* tends to be used in trade and business contexts, collocating with *oil* or the *low-wage economy* (BoFE) rather than *life*, is linguistic knowledge, not conceptual. 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 linguistic fluency?

### 3.2 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>4</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*. 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 in most of them displayed an appropriate degree of sensitivity to the genre as a whole. The headlines produced were:

A controversy over the euthanasia  
A ‘fat’ lot of pills  
A pill to stop swallowing  
Australia: peaceful pills between euthanasia and suicide.  
Can a doctor help people to dye without killing?  
Can chemistry change our lives?  
Diet will no longer affect our health; drugs will  
Home made euthanasia  
Is Australia Heaven’s Hate or Hell?  
Obsessed with an obesity pill  
Pills for death: who will use them?  
Pills to prevent obesity, soothe the spirit and quicken the mind  
Prelude to death  
Shall we get slimmer as a nation?  
That could be true: “miracle drug”  
The blasphemy in Down Under

Although the headlines are far from unacceptable, it was interesting, and puzzling, that so few exploited idioms and metaphors. Only one of the 16 headlines made reference to a conventional figurative 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 on the whole shied away from language that they recognised as being non-literal. These students stated that they found it useful in their text comprehension exercises to have metaphor pointed out, expressing

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<sup>4</sup> *Researchers hail obesity pill trials* and *Australians to make suicide pill* (The Guardian, 10/xi/2004)

appreciation and interest with regard to its rhetorical and cohesive importance; yet the evidence suggests that this passive interest is not mirrored in their active language use, as they seem unwilling to make use of it in their L2 production.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although this research is still at an early stage, some patterns are already beginning to emerge. The examples discussed above demonstrate that when advanced learners know that their L1 concepts are also used in English they do not hesitate to make use of them. However they tend to shy away from using language which they know (or perceive), to be figurative, idiomatic or metaphorical – especially if it involves unfamiliar concepts. While a general avoidance of flowery figures of speech 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. My data suggests that making students aware of the metaphors underlying conventional linguistic expressions is actually a *deterrent* to their use because by artificially highlighting the figurative sense of an expression, it is made to seem more unusual than it really is). How useful then is it to break down and analyse such expressions?

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 in any way, the meaning resting upon it is placed at risk.

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