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**METAPHORS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: ENGLISH
AND ROMANIAN BUSINESS METAPHORS¹**

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Abstract

The use of metaphors, far from being a literary decoration of a text, is instead a part of our everyday language. This feature has been pointed out and extensively studied by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who stressed the cognitive nature of this linguistic device. Thus, learning a foreign language implies to learn not simply grammatical facts, sophisticated as they can be, or idioms, but also the metaphors such language uses or, more appropriately, the conceptual system of metaphors employed by the speakers. Using a metaphor in a cognitive view means to express a concept, belonging into a structured system, in terms of another concept also structured in another system. Despite many conceptual metaphors are grounded into universal domains of knowledge and universal correspondences, their use may differ from culture to culture and, therefore, from language to language, making the learning of a foreign language more difficult, especially in certain domains. In order to facilitate the task of the students it is useful to prepare repositories of metaphoric expressions in different languages and establish correspondences between them.

This paper will present the project UvaBuMet, carried out at the University “1 Decembrie 1918” in Alba Iulia, which aims at the building of two corpora of business language both English and Romanian in which metaphors are highlighted by annotation. These will be immediately ready to carry comparison, but also to derive an ontology of business metaphors that allows cross-cultural comparison in the light of the categories proposed by Hofstede (1997).

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1. Introduction

Metaphors have been studied since ancient Greek philosophy as a mechanism that stands between a literary decoration and a cognitive device that allows a continuous enrichment of a language's lexicon. Thus Aristotle defines it as "the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from a species to another or else by analogy" (*Poetics*, 1457b.7; trans. Loeb). He offers a formal classification of metaphors (and similes) that is continued in *The rhetoric* (passim), also highlighting its clarity, sweetness, and strangeness (1404b). Many centuries after the Greek philosopher, both Bréal (1897) or Darmesteter (1897) consider metaphor as one of the most important sources of lexical evolution. In the field of semiotics, metaphor has been studied for its literary value, although scholars show to be aware of its cognitive nature. This has been asserted without ambiguity by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), who position the study of metaphor definitely in the field of Cognitive Linguistics.

1.1. Metaphor: the Cognitive View

According to the cognitive theory, using a metaphor means to express a concept, belonging into a structured system, in terms of another concept also structured in another system. Thus sentences like "he holds strong beliefs", "we share many beliefs", "he acquired most of his beliefs during childhood" go back to the same metaphor BELIEFS ARE POSSESSIONS, which motivates the use of verbs like "hold, share, acquire". Humans experience the world through their body and mind, and organize such experience in term of 'image schemas'. Image schemas are dynamic embodied patterns, i.e. they are a mechanism that abstracts over bodily experiences, in a continuously updatable schema that shapes human cognitive activities. Thus they are multi-modal, not simply visual, as the name suggests.

POSSESSION is an image schema that establishes relations between the elements of the experience of owing something, such as owner, owned, acquisition, sharing etc. The above metaphors 'build' the image schema BELIEF in terms of POSSESSION, thus applying all the elements of the 'source domain' (POSSESSION) to the 'target domain' (BELIEF), such as owned = belief, share owned objects = have common beliefs, acquire an object = form one's beliefs etc. The metaphor is, then, portrayed as a representation of a target domain in terms of a source domain. The source domain is in general concrete, while the target is often abstract, because it is easier for humans to represent abstract in terms of concrete objects, rather than the contrary.

Many conceptual metaphors are grounded into universal domains of knowledge and universal correspondences, and this motivates both the setting up of metaphor lists, like the Master Metaphor List (Lakoff, Espenson & Schwartz, 1991), which supposedly offers a list of universal correspondences, and the search for 'typical' metaphors through different languages, such as that carried in the project MetaNet (<https://metanet.icsi.berkeley.edu/metanet/>) or the Croatian MetaNet (<http://ihjj.hr/metafore/metanet-hr/>). However it turns out that at a surface level metaphors may differ from language to language for cultural or historical reasons.

1.2. Learning a Language, Learning Metaphors

In this view metaphor building is part of the cognitive mechanisms that form the lexical repertoire of a language. Thus, learning a foreign language implies at a surface level to learn grammatical facts, lexical items in their ordinary and special uses, or idioms, but at a deeper level also to acquire the metaphors such language uses or, more appropriately, the conceptual system of metaphors employed by the speakers. Knowing a language is not only being able to appropriately use the formal mechanisms of it, but also to acquire familiarity with its conceptual system. According to several authors (Aitchison 2003, Geertz 1973, Jackendoff 2007, Kachru, & Kahane 1995, Wierzbicka 1992, 1997) the lexicon of a language shows the connections between cognition, knowledge, and communication strategies. Thus, interrelatedness between language and culture is tight, culture denoting “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973, p. 89).

In the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, metaphors participate into the process of conceptualization that lies at the basis of language; therefore, they are the realization of universal correspondences between image schemas, but they are also affected by the cultural patterns underlying any language.

The learning of such cultural features is certainly more complex than the learning of grammatical features of a language, and complexity increases in certain more technical domains; one of the most complex is business language, as it has strongly metaphoric roots, although in some cases metaphors have reached a high level of lexical stabilisation.

In order to facilitate the task of the students it has been judged useful to prepare repositories of metaphoric expressions in different languages and establish correspondences between them.

2. The Project UvaBuMet

The project UvaBuMet, carried out at the University “1 Decembrie 1918” in Alba Iulia, adopts an empirical methodology for the creation of such a list of corresponding metaphors, i.e. metaphoric expressions are identified in a corpus of real texts and put into relation with one another. Thus it aims at the building of two corpora of business language both English and Romanian in which metaphors are highlighted by annotation. These will be immediately ready to carry comparison, but also to derive an ontology of business metaphors that allows cross-cultural comparison in the light of the categories proposed by Hofstede (1997). The objective is not only the plain teaching of one-to-one correspondences between metaphoric expressions, but also the teaching of the underlying intercultural categories. The project is in its starting phase.

2.1. The Sample

The scientific hypothesis motivating this research is that metaphors mirror cultural differences between languages, as linguistic expressions reflect the diverse cultural and social realities. The analysis aims at highlighting British and Romanian cultural differences, focusing on business language. The

analysis is based on two corpora (British and Romanian), consisting of articles from general audience and financial broadsheets, written during 2012-2015, i.e.: The Economist, The Guardian, The New York Times and The Telegraph for the English corpus, and Adevărul, Jurnalul Național, Cotidianul, Capital, and Ziarul Financiar for the Romanian corpus (Popescu, 2015).

The corpus has been preprocessed by a concordancing tool (ConcApp) in order to highlight the lexical items which can be candidate to be part of a metaphoric expression.

2.2 Identification of Metaphors

The first step in the text-based creation of a repository of metaphors is the identification of the metaphors themselves. This is not a straightforward process, as there is no clear-cut distinction between literal and non-literal meanings. Annotators are required to decide what is and isn't a metaphor, and this decision is in general an intuitive one, based on linguistic intuition. Thus, the recognition of "metaphoricity" of a word or an expression in a text depends upon three parameters, the personal linguistic sensitivity of the annotator, the project specifications that shall set the boundaries within which metaphors are to be recognised, and the theoretical framework against which identified metaphors shall be classified.

In most of the projects annotators are required to look for "interesting stretches" of text on a totally intuitive base. The method adopted by the Pragglejazz Group (Pragglejazz Group, 2007: 3) consists in identifying, for each word that occurs in the text, its meaning related to its context, and, then, check whether there exists another more basic meaning. In general by "more basic" one of the four following possibilities is meant: more concrete, related to bodily action, more precise, and historically older. In the affirmative the word is considered metaphoric. A similar approach is adopted by Shutova (see Shutova et al. 2013). Other approaches rely anyway on intuition.

In this project the headwords, highlighted by means of the concordancer, are first manually searched through the target domains in the Master Metaphor List (MML, see above). It may be the case that a given headword is not to be found directly in the list, as a synonym is used. Thus, in order to make the search an extensive one, lexical instruments are used as dictionaries or WordNet (see <https://wordnet.princeton.edu/> and <http://multiwordnet.fbk.eu/english/desc.php>). The words used in the target domain are clustered in groups of semantic equivalents and searched through the list.

The Master Metaphor List is also used to establish correspondences between the two languages (see below)

2.3 Annotation of Metaphors

Once proper metaphors have been identified, it is necessary to annotate them in the samples. Two aspects are to be taken into consideration, the physical delimitation of metaphors and their classification. For what concerns the first activity, most of the metaphors can be single words, but it is not to be excluded that also some longer spans (phrases) take a metaphoric sense. For what concerns the classification, it is necessary to set up a coherent theoretical framework to establish which metaphors are to be annotated and which are to be rejected. To make an example, in the sentence

“giving chancellor George Osborne the leeway to retreat”

the words “leeway” and “retreat” can be considered as either two metaphoric items (“leeway”=“margin” and “retreat”=“change one’s position”), or components of a single metaphoric expression (“leeway to retreat”=“a possibility of revising one’s position”). The decision on this matter is also affected by the degree of stabilization that is adopted to accept a metaphor. Thus, the sentence

“to treat all forecasts with a bucket (not just a pinch) of salt”

can be taken as a stabilized metaphor (“salt”=“wisdom”, of ancient, possibly biblical, origin) augmented with a sort of pun (“bucket”=“a great quantity” rather than the traditional “pinch”=“ordinary quantity”), or as a complete metaphoric expression.

Once the annotation schema has been set up it has to be translated into an SGML-style tag-set.

3. An Ontology of Metaphors

The comparison between the two metaphor cognitive systems is possible if the single metaphors of the two languages are put into correspondence with one another and represented in terms of a network of relations.

The proposed solution consists in translating metaphors into a common paraphrase language, which can be used to establish the correspondences. For instance, the metaphoric interpretation of “fly” is “pass away quickly” according to the Princeton WordNet. In MultiWordNet (see above), the only WordNet that includes Romanian, this word is translated as “alerga, fugi, goni, zbură” and the corresponding explanation is “(figurativ (Despre vreme sau despre unități de timp)) A trece repede, a se scurge rapid”. The Romanian explanation is a translation of the English version, and can be taken as a standard paraphrase; the effect is that the English verb “fly” will correspond, in its metaphorical meaning, to Romanian “alerga, fugi, goni, zbură”. The inverse test consists in searching for the four Romanian forms and their English correspondent; this will show that the global correspondence is to Eng. “fly, fell, vanish”.

By this method it will be possible to build a network of correspondences in terms of an ontology where paraphrases (common meanings) have different realizations in the two languages. Such an ontology will also take into account Hofstede (1997) cultural categories as they are shown in the site <https://www.geert-hofstede.com/cultural-dimensions.html>; these are taken as deep motivation for the choice of a given metaphor

3. Conclusions

The project is in its early stage and most of the phases described in this paper are still to be experimented. Some experiments have been carried for the phase of metaphor identification, showing that the methodology is perfectly viable. Also the application of Hofstede’s categories has proven efficient. For instance, Romanian metaphors seem more rooted in a high Uncertainty Avoidance Index with respect to the English metaphors. The respective scores are 90% for Romanian vs. 35% for British people and

this explains why, for instance, money fluctuations are associated with metaphors indicating anxiety, contrary to what happens in English. A definite assessment of the methodology will follow from further progresses of the project.

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