



2nd International Conference on Higher Education Advances, HEAd'16, 21-23 June 2016,
València, Spain

Analysing metaphorical political discourse in the L2 academic classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of the following paper is to show a practical solution for analyzing metaphors in political discourse in accordance with the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff 1980) integrated into teaching an L2 upper-intermediate academic class. In view of the fact that the lesson was developed and conducted with military students, the material for analysis was chosen from President Obama's 2013 speech on Syria. Students' task was to formulate metaphors on the basis of metaphorical expressions distinguished in bold in the speech by the teacher. As a result, orientational, ontological and structural metaphors were properly created, which constituted further basis for the interpretation of the discourse sample. In order to assess the relevance of such classes, a post-lesson survey was conducted directly after the lesson. Obtained results point to the usefulness of learning metaphors to facilitate the comprehension of political discourse. Additionally, their importance for the professional career in the army was revealed.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of HEAd'16

Keywords: autonomy; methodology; design; EINA; intensification; process.

1. Introduction

Currently, there is a proliferation of press conferences and speeches given by politicians on a wide variety of occasions. Hence, the role of their addressee has gained more considerable importance. Namely, he is no longer a passive target of political ideology, which has to be accepted. In the democratic era of cyclic elections in which people's support is the key for the ruling party's and authorities' success, political discourse aims at involving the

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conscious addressee in its premises. Thus, a number of rhetorical devices and linguistic tools, whose comprehension requires an advanced level of language proficiency are employed. Metaphor is one of such cognitive devices, especially in view of the fact that according to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) it is applied in order to understand abstract concepts so frequently conveyed in political discourse. This understanding is possible owing to a process called mapping during which the structure of a more specific source domain is partially transferred onto a more abstract target domain (Barcelona 2002). In politics, one of the most common metaphors is ARGUMENT IS WAR, as a result of which arguing is expressed by means of linguistic structures characteristic of warfare. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 124) provide the following examples:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every point* in my argument.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 He *shot down* all of my arguments.

Sun Ling (2010) gives further examples of metaphors connected with the domains of politics and war:

A POLITICAL ELECTION IS A BATTLE ON A BATTLEFIELD
 POLITICIANS ARE SOLDIERS
 POLITICAL STRATEGIES ARE WAR STRATEGIES

Structural metaphors mentioned above do not constitute a finite set used in politics. Nevertheless, apart from the structural type, political discourse abounds in orientational † and ontological ‡ metaphors as well as metonymies. §

The purpose of this paper is to present how political discourse can be analysed with regards to various types of metaphor during an English class with upper-intermediate military students.

2. Rationale and material

The need for such classes is connected with the military students' learning environment and requirements which it creates. Namely, they participate in numerous conferences and student exchanges as part of the Erasmus project. Additionally, their studies incorporate the knowledge of political processes, international war theatres and political situation. Taking these factors into consideration, it becomes evident that training students in English for Academic Purposes is insufficient. More specifically, as future servicemen within international allied armed forces, they require linguistic skills that would enable them to comprehend underlying messages and subtleties of political discourse. Accordingly, the knowledge of metaphors might facilitate the development of such critical skills and consequently stimulate accurate comprehension.

The paper was written after the author conducted classes on analysing metaphors in political discourse with 11 upper-intermediate military students at the Polish Air Force Academy in Dęblin in December 2015. Since Poland is a member of NATO and regular participant of joint allied training events, Polish military students ought to be familiar with basic premises of American international foreign policy. Therefore, the material chosen for analysis was President's Obama speech on Syria given on 10 September 2013.

3. Analysing Metaphors in President Obama's Speech

Classes were preceded by a brief 15-minute introduction of the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor made by the teacher. Basic premises presented on the blackboard included:

† Orientational metaphors enable us to understand our experience or emotions in terms of directions: up or down. For instance, HAPPINESS IS UP, DEATH IS DOWN.

‡ Ontological metaphors enable us to understand abstract concepts in terms of objects and substances. The most common example provided by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 28) is THE MIND IS AN ENTITY.

§ According to Kövecses (2002: 145) metonymy is a mapping, which occurs within the same cognitive domain or Idealized Cognitive Model. Examples are: THE PRODUCER FOR A PRODUCT, PART FOR WHOLE.

- the concept of mapping source domain onto target domain on the example of ARGUMENT IS WAR;
- set of metaphorical correspondences between the target and source domain;
- types of metaphors: structural, orientational, ontological.

Subsequently, students were divided into groups of three. They were provided with slips of paper with excerpts of President Obama's speech on Syria, in which two metaphorical expressions were made bold by the teacher. Their task was firstly to formulate a metaphor, be it structural, ontological or orientational, for a particular expression. Secondly, they were to write a set of metaphorical correspondences if possible. Finally, they were asked to interpret the meaning of the expressions in relation to the metaphor as well as the context of the speech – that is the political situation between the United States and Syria. Below, in points 3.1. – 3.3. three samples of excerpts and students' responses are presented.

3.1. Group One

Excerpt 1: “And a failure **to stand against** the use of chemical weapons would weaken prohibitions against other weapons of mass destruction and embolden Assad's ally, Iran, which must decide whether to ignore international law by building a nuclear weapon or **to take a more peaceful path.**” (Obama 2013)

Students' answers:

1) to stand against = to resist:

- orientational metaphor: STANDING IS UP, UP IS GOOD;

- understanding: resistance against the use of chemical weapons is justifiable since upward posture is considered healthy.

2) to take a more peaceful path:

- structural metaphor: POLITICS IS A JOURNEY

- mappings distinguished: path → political agenda, travellers → politicians, destination → political solution;

- understanding: Iran has to make a decision whether to adopt a militant or peaceful stance.

3.2. Group Two

Excerpt 2: “But I'm also the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. So even though I possessed the authority to order military strikes, I believed it was right, in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our security, to take this debate to Congress. **I believe our democracy is stronger** when the president acts with the support of Congress, and I believe that America acts more effectively abroad when we **stand together.**” (Obama 2013)

Students' answers:

1) democracy is stronger

- structural metaphor: DEMOCRACY IS A PERSON;

- mappings distinguished: strong healthy person → strong democracy, weak sick person → weak democracy, a person's failure → failure of democracy;

- understanding: strong democracy is ensured by cooperation between authorities. If there are some problems, it can be cured just like a sick person.

2) stand together

- orientational metaphor: STANDING IS UP, UP IS GOOD;

- “together”- structural metaphor: NATION IS A PERSON, UNITY IS FORCE;

- understanding: unity guarantees a nation's strength.

3.3. Group Three

Excerpt 3: “This is especially true after a decade that put more and more **war-making power in the hands of the president**, and more and more **burdens on the shoulders of our troops**, while sidelining the people's representatives from the critical decisions about when we use force.” (Obama 2013)

Students' answers:

1) power in the hands of the president

- ontological metaphor: POWER IS AN OBJECT;
- understanding: power is like a small object kept tightly only by the President.

2) burdens on the shoulders of our troops

- structural metaphor: RESPONSIBILITY IS A BURDEN
- understanding: troops execute the President's orders, are engaged on the battlefield and decide about people's lives. As a result, they have enormous responsibility, which is as heavy as a burden on their shoulders and can make them bend, that is feel depressed.

All the above presented examples 4.1. – 4.3. indicate that students were able to complete the task and thus achieve objectives established by the teacher. Firstly, they formulated metaphors accurately since the appropriate order of mapping from source to target domain is preserved in the metaphor's name. More precisely, for instance RESPONSIBILITY IS A BURDEN means that the source domain is a burden and the target one – responsibility, a reverse order A BURDEN IS RESPONSIBILITY would be conceptually wrong. Secondly, types of structural, ontological and orientational metaphors were identified correctly. In two cases, namely: POLITICS IS A JOURNEY and DEMOCRACY IS A PERSON, a set of mappings was provided, which indicates a deeper comprehension of the metaphor subject to analysis. Lastly, some interpretation taking into account the political context was given.

4. Post-lesson Survey

After the lesson, which lasted an hour and a half, the teacher designed and conducted an anonymous survey (Figure 1). Its purpose was to determine the relevance of classes incorporating the analysis of metaphors in political discourse for the chosen group of military students.

POST-LESSON SURVEY			
1. Do you think that the knowledge of metaphors might be useful for understanding political discourse?			
Circle the chosen answer.			
YES			NO
Why/ Why not?			
2. Can the knowledge of metaphors in political discourse influence your professional career in the army?			
Circle the chosen answer.			
YES			NO
Why/ Why not?			
3. What is the function of metaphors in political discourse? Circle the chosen answer or provide your own.			
decorative	manipulative	informative	Other:

Figure 1. Post-lesson survey.

Results of the survey are presented in subsequent tables below. Data in Table 1. unquestionably prove that students are convinced that the knowledge of metaphors will help them comprehend political discourse. To justify their opinion, they mostly wrote that metaphors enable them to understand the underlying meaning and avoid misunderstanding.

Table 1. The usefulness of metaphors for understanding political discourse.

Answers	Number of respondents	%
Yes	11	100
No	0	0
Total	11	100

A slightly different interpretation can be made on the basis of percentage given in Table 2. Namely, approximately 63% of all respondents argued that metaphors might have an impact on their career in the army. The reason given for it being that high level command structure resembles politics. Consequently, the frequency of metaphor occurrence is high. Nevertheless, the remaining 36% failed to take such a factor into account. Consequently, they stated that orders, which they would follow throughout their career must be characterized by clarity. Hence, the use of metaphor is undesirable and may contribute to the addressee's confusion.

Table 2. The influence of metaphor on the career in the army.

Answers	Number of respondents	%
Yes	7	63.6
No	4	36.3
Total	11	100

Results given in Table 3. indicate that the majority of respondents perceived metaphor as a tool for manipulation and not providing information. Yet, these figures clearly show that metaphor performs an important function and is not just a decorative linguistic device.

Table 3. The function of metaphor in political discourse.

Answers	Number of respondents	%
Decorative	3	27.27
Manipulative	7	63.63
Informative	1	9.09
Other	0	0

5. Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, it can be concluded that lessons aimed at the analysis of political discourse in terms of conceptual metaphors can be integrated into the L2 academic syllabus as is already teaching of English for Academic Purposes. In view of the fact that throughout their studies students are required to develop hypothesizing, creative use of language and argumentation, the knowledge of metaphors is relevant as was proved by the post-lesson survey. Nevertheless, such lessons pose a few challenges. Firstly, they require a basic introduction of the theory, which means that the teacher is obliged to have some linguistic knowledge. Secondly, there are no course books available on the market, therefore the teacher must act as the material developer. Last but

not least, students have to activate their cognitive thinking processes and go beyond the well-entrenched idea of completing exercises during an L2 lesson. Once these difficulties are overcome, metaphorically-based lessons may prove valuable and thus boost learners' motivation.

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