Enhancing metaphoric awareness in specialised reading

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Abstract

The main question addressed in this article is whether it is worthwhile to refer to the literal sense or origin of an unfamiliar figurative expression as it is encountered by a language learner in her/his specialised reading. To answer this question, Cognitive Semantic tools were applied to reading economic discourse. The hypothesis that an enhanced metaphoric awareness on the part of language learners can be beneficial to their specialised reading was put to the test in a small-scale experiment. © 2000 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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According to the paradigm of Cognitive Semantics (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987), metaphor is a fundamental cognitive ability that allows us to talk and think about abstract concepts and phenomena. Certain metaphors are so deeply entrenched in human thought that they have been called metaphors we live by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) or conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, 1987). These conceptual metaphors are reflected in conventional figurative language. Here are some examples of conceptual metaphors (in capitals) and their instantiations in everyday language (in italics): MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN (e.g., An IQ of over 150), HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN (e.g., Climbing the academic ladder), HAPPY IS UP; UNHAPPY IS DOWN (e.g., Cheer up!), TIME IS A PATH (e.g., Look ahead and leave the past behind you), and so on. Evidently, in this framework, metaphor is no longer considered merely as an ornamental device that is restricted to literature and

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poetry. In fact, most novel or “creative” metaphors are further extensions of established ones (Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1992). As most figurative expressions in everyday language have become conventional, however, we are rarely aware of their metaphorical nature. In this article we shall explore some of the potential benefits of an enhanced metaphoric awareness on the part of the language learner.

**Metaphor in economic discourse**

If the discussion of abstract domains of experience requires the use of figurative language, then this will also hold for the domain of economics. Indeed, economic discourse contains numerous figurative expressions: tariffs and quota are trade barriers, money transfers constitute cashflow, employees are human capital or human resources, new small firms are fledgling companies, firms may collapse, banks may sink, stockmarkets may crash, economic forecasts may be gloomy, currencies may be weak, strong or stable, and so on (Henderson, 1986; McCluskey, 1986; Mason, 1990; Boers & Demecheleer, 1995, 1997). We understand economic processes through a variety of metaphors, and every metaphor highlights some aspects of the “target”, but leaves the other aspects in the dark. Moreover, the “logic” associated with the “source” is generally preserved in the metaphorical understanding of the “target” (Lakoff, 1990). As a result, metaphors can easily be exploited for reasons of persuasion: describing an economic recession as a tunnel, for example, may lead us to expect better times ahead (the light at the end of the tunnel), describing public debt as a burden may lead us to accept new taxes to reduce the weight, and so on (Boers, 1997a).

Diverse figurative expressions encountered in economic discourse can often be traced back to a single source domain (see Figures 1–3). As with other conceptual metaphors, each carries over its proper “logic”. Each highlights some aspects of economic processes, but leaves other aspects in the dark. Describing socio-economic processes in terms of machines and mechanisms, for example, may leave the impression that these are under control and fully predictable, unlike human behaviour. A conception of socio-economic processes in terms of health care and fitness can be used by employers to argue in favour of slimming their companies (i.e., reducing their

**Mechanisms & Machines**

| the exchange-rate mechanism | fine-tuning economic growth |
| financial instruments | economic tinkering |
| macroeconomic tools | the economy is sputtering |
| the economy is overheating | the monetary lever has rusted |
| tightening the screws on the economy | to overhaul the system |
| | to dismantle a company |

Figure 1. Phrases related to the metaphoric theme of mechanisms and machines (encountered in *The Economist*).
Health & Fitness

- economic sclerosis
- arthritic labour markets
- healthy firms
- sickly companies
- addictive subsidies
- state support is a palliative
- financial hypochondria
- inflataholics
- endemic inflation
- a chronic deficit
- an acute shortage
- a financial injection

- a financial haemorrhage
- anaemic industries
- the right economic prescription
- the best economic medicine
- the market cure
- symptoms of a corporate disease
- nurse a firm back to health
- surgery that costs jobs
- amputations of departments
- economic recovery
- slimming flabby workforces

Figure 1. Phrases related to the metaphoric theme of health and fitness (encountered in The Economist).

Fighting & Warfare

- economic arm-twisting
- the fight for market share
- to combat fraud
- a take-over battle
- retaliation against US exports
- invading new markets

- conquering the market
- breaking ranks with one’s associates
- keeping shoulder to shoulder
- trade war
- trading truce
- a price war

Figure 2. Phrases related to the metaphoric theme of fighting and warfare (encountered in The Economist).

workforce). Fighting and warfare metaphors can be used by employers to call for extra sacrifices on the part of their employees or for protectionist measures on the part of the government. Experimental research has shown that exposure to certain metaphors can indeed have a profound effect on people’s reasoning about abstract phenomena (e.g., Gentner & Gentner, 1983). Also with respect to the socio-economic domain, it has been shown that subjects’ problem solving strategies are guided by the figurative language they are confronted with (Boers, 1997b). Describing economic competition in terms of racing, for example, nurtures different thought patterns from those used describing economic competition in terms of fighting.

Cognitive Semantics and ELT

In Cognitive Semantics, multi-word expressions (idioms, collocations, etc.), are treated as central to the language (Langacker, 1987, 1991). This view clearly supports recent calls in applied linguistics for a more central place for collocations and other multi-word expressions in language learning (e.g., Cowie, 1988; Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992).
Being a fairly new paradigm, Cognitive Semantics and its tools have only recently been introduced to the field of English language teaching. So far the main area of interest has been vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Hatch & Brown, 1995; Lazar, 1996; Deignan, Gabrys & Solska, 1997), especially the teaching of prepositions, phrasal verbs and idioms (e.g., Lindstromberg, 1996; Kővecses & Szabo, 1996; Boers & Demecheleer, 1998).

One of the next possible steps could be to introduce Cognitive Semantic insights to the field of ESP. The present paper explores ways in which students can cope better with the specialised reading of economic discourse. The vehicle proposed is an enhanced metaphoric awareness on the part of the language learner. One simple way of raising learners’ metaphoric awareness is to draw their attention to the source domain or to the origin of unfamiliar figurative expressions as they encounter these in their specialised reading. The proposed strategy is not self-evident, as teachers may feel this kind of (additional) explanation to be too time-consuming and/or too distracting. Obviously, the usefulness of a given method depends on the objectives of the reading task at hand. The method proposed here is clearly meant for in-depth reading rather than “skimming” or “scanning” activities.

Henderson (1986) also proposes to raise students’ awareness of the role of metaphors in theory construction and question formulation in economics as a social science. Helping economics students to recognise the metaphors behind commonly accepted economic models and encouraging them to adopt alternative metaphorical perspectives may foster a questioning attitude.

Metaphoric awareness and author opinion

As we have seen, various metaphors are usually available to describe a single economic scenario. Economic competition, for instance, can be described in terms of warfare (e.g., the battle for market share) or in terms of racing (e.g., the race for market share). The former conception may highlight the need for financial discipline and hard sales techniques, while the latter may highlight the importance of R & D and innovation (Boers, 1997b).

If diverse figurative expressions are available to an author to describe a given socio-economic reality, then her/his choice may reflect her/his conception of that reality. In other words, the choice of figurative expressions may reflect the author’s opinion about the issues under discussion. Therefore, an understanding of the inferences and value judgements associated with a figurative expression may help students recognise the author’s point of view. This requires an enhanced metaphoric awareness, which may be achieved simply by drawing students’ attention to the source domain or origin of the figurative expression.

The hypothesis that enhanced metaphoric awareness can facilitate certain aspects of in-depth reading comprehension was put to the test in a small-scale experiment. Subjects were French-speaking university students of business and economics at Université Libre de Bruxelles. One of the objectives of the English course of these students is for them to be able to read and discuss articles in The Economist and The...
Financial Times. In order to do this, they need to be able to cope with a register of socio-economic discourse that is rather specialised but at the same time fairly popular (and often argumentative). The use of metaphors in this type of journalistic discourse serves many different purposes and may offer a greater linguistic variety than would be expected from the use of metaphors in more technical economic registers (specialised research articles or text books on economics).

EIGHTY-FIVE SUBJECTS PARTICIPATED IN THE EXPERIMENT. THEY WERE GIVEN THE FOLLOWING (CONSTRUCTED) TEXT (SEE FIGURE 4):

THE TEXT WAS CONSTRUCTED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE EXPERIMENT AROUND THE FOLLOWING CONVENTIONAL FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS: (i) overcoming a hurdle; (ii) bailing out; (iii) weaning off; (iv) shifting tack; and (v) weeding out. THESE EXPRESSIONS WERE CHosen FOR VARIOUS REASONS: (i) THEY ARE AUTHENTIC EXPRESSIONS ENCOUNTERED IN THE ECONOMIST; (ii) THEY ARE LOW FREQUENCY ITEMS, SO OUR STUDENTS WERE NOT LIKELY TO BE FAMILIAR WITH THEM;

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**Economic Integration in Latin America**

General disagreement over state intervention is a major hurdle that South America has to overcome in order to reach full economic integration of the region. Top politicians of the member countries of Mercosur are meeting in Brazil next week to discuss the issue. Mercosur consists of six countries that have signed a trade agreement (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay). Whether or not they will opt for a complete ban on state intervention is still a matter of speculation. While some countries in the region have abolished most subsidies, others — like Chile and Paraguay — are still bailing out firms that are in dire financial straits. Bolivia and Uruguay are also reluctant to wean their infant industries off state support. No matter which option is chosen at next week’s summit, some member countries of Mercosur will have to shift tack. Whatever the decision, an international commission will have to be set up to weed out any discrepancies between the domestic policies of the member countries.

Figure 4. Text used in the experiment.
and (iii) they have no direct one-to-one French equivalents (e.g., weed out), or the French equivalents are not normally used in the same context (e.g., wean off), or the French equivalents lack the same connotations or inferences (e.g., bail out).

The meaning of the expressions was explained in a glossary added to the text. For 39 subjects (the control group) this glossary gave explanations of the figurative sense in the context of economics:

**hurdle:** (here) difficulty, problem  
**bail out:** (here) help, rescue from financial difficulties, give subsidies  
**wean off:** (here) disengage, make independent  
**shift tack:** (here) change policy  
**weed out:** (here) remove, get rid of

For the other 46 students (the experimental group), the glossary gave explanations of the expressions solely in terms of the source domain, i.e., their literal usage:

**hurdle:** frame to be jumped over in athletics  
**bail out:** try to keep a sinking boat afloat by throwing out water with buckets  
**wean off:** gradually stop breastfeeding a baby  
**shift tack:** turn a ship around so the wind is caught on the other side of the sails  
**weed out:** pull out unwanted wild plants

Subjects were given 15 min to read and study the text as preparation for a comprehension test (before which they were to hand in the text). The test consisted of a list of statements about the text. The subjects were asked whether they agreed that the statements were in accordance with the contents of the text. For every item their task was to tick YES, NO or DON’T KNOW. Most items in the test were meant to measure “general” comprehension (e.g., It is already clear what the outcome of the summit will be). These items posed problems for neither the control group nor the experimental group. Both groups were on a par with respect to general comprehension. Since these test items also related to the figurative expressions included in the text, the test results so far suggest that students in the experimental group were quite capable of interpreting the figurative usage of the expressions, even though only their literal sense had been explained to them. In other words, given sufficient context, students managed to make the extension from literal to figurative sense themselves.

Two items in the test were related to the expressions bailing out and weaning off and to the author’s opinion about state subsidies. According to the “logic” of the source domains of bailing out and weaning off, subsidies can only be a temporary solution (throwing water out of a sinking boat does not mend any holes, and breastfeeding an infant can last only until it needs solid food). When confronted with statements concerning the author’s opinion about state subsidies, subjects in the control group typically ticked DON’T KNOW. In the experimental group (i.e., those who had received explanations of the literal senses only) the majority decided that the author was against subsidies. The difference between the scores of both groups proved...
statistically highly significant ($P < 0.001$, using a chi square test). These findings suggest that students are capable of transferring the inference patterns and value judgements associated with the source domain of an expression to its metaphoric extension. This ability can facilitate recognition of the author’s opinion.

**Metaphoric awareness and vocabulary retention**

A second stage of the experiment was meant to measure the effect of enhanced metaphoric awareness on the retention of unfamiliar figurative expressions. Three days after their reading comprehension test, 75 subjects were given the following gap fill exercise, constructed around the same five idioms (see Figure 4):

The subjects in the experimental group turned out to be more likely than the others ($P < 0.03$, using a chi square test) to reproduce at least one of the targeted figurative expressions. (There appeared to be no differences between the scores for the individual items: all gaps appeared equally difficult.) These test results suggest that enhanced metaphoric awareness may contribute to the retention of figurative expressions in an ESP context. Whether this benefit is solely due to the strategy of raising metaphoric awareness itself, or to the fact that this strategy presumably takes more cognitive effort, or both, remains a matter of speculation.

However, since there is a tight relationship between cognitive effort and retention (e.g., Nattinger, 1988), enhancing language learners’ metaphoric awareness could at least be exploited as a channel for that increased cognitive effort. Again, of course, the particular objectives of the reading task at hand and considerations of time may need to be weighed against the potential benefits of the approach.

**Some additional perspectives**

When applied systematically, a strategy of enhanced metaphoric awareness may offer an additional or alternative framework for the organisation of figurative lexis. As we have seen, idioms and other figurative expressions do not constitute isolated lexical units that defy analysis. Instead, various figurative expressions constitute clusters around a single source domain. For example, bailing out and shifting tack can be grouped under a “nautical” source domain along with various other expressions. Likewise, weeding out belongs to a cluster of expressions around the theme of gardening (see Figures 6 and 7).

This type of lexical organisation (which could be taken as an alternative kind of semantic field approach) may be especially beneficial when the given metaphoric themes are more common and more productive in English than in the students’ native language. The above metaphoric themes of sailing and gardening, for example, occur more frequently in English than in French popular socio-economic discourse (Boers & Demecheleer, 1997).

It is not uncommon for authors to use a metaphor consistently throughout a text.
The genocide and the civil war in central Africa can be taken as symptoms of Belgium’s failure to offer political guidance to its former colonies. But the roots of central Africa’s problems run deeper than ethnic tension and political strife. Central Africa also needs to overcome formidable economic _______ on its road to peace and prosperity. One of those obstacles is the external debt that most African countries owe to western banks. Some African governments spend over 60% of their GDP on interest payments on outstanding loans that they received from western banks in the sixties and seventies. In fact, since the 1970s the I.M.F. and the Worldbank have repeatedly been asked to ________ out those countries when they were close to bankruptcy. Partly as a result of their debt burden, central African countries have found it hard to invest in their domestic economies and they have largely depended on humanitarian aid from Europe. This can only be a temporary solution and the time has come to _______ developing countries off development aid, so they can finally learn to provide for themselves. In order to achieve self-sufficiency, however, these countries will have to adopt drastic political reforms. As long as authoritarian regimes control the money flow in the region, most of the financial resources will keep on disappearing into the pockets (bank accounts) of dictators or other government officials. In order to cultivate true economic development, central Africa needs to _______ out such cases of corruption. This also means that western countries — like Belgium — should adopt a new foreign policy regarding their former colonies. It is high time for Belgium (and the other European countries) to shift _______ and to chart a completely new course of political action.

Figure 5. Gap fill test used in the experiment.
question the validity of the metaphors they encounter by asking them to list ways in which a given target domain (e.g., economics) is NOT like the presented source domain. For example, students’ attention could be drawn to the fact that the ECONOMIC COMPETITION IS RACING metaphor builds on a “loose” analogy, since in economics there does not seem to be a finish line, etc. Students could be made aware of the “loose” analogy involved in the ECONOMIES ARE MACHINES metaphor by highlighting the unpredictable nature of human behaviour, and so on.

**Conclusions**

Is it worthwhile to draw students’ attention to the source domain or origin of the figurative expressions they come across in their specialised reading? While acknowledging the need to take various parameters into account, the answer given here is yes. I have argued in favour of enhancing language learners’ metaphoric awareness, i.e., their awareness of the source domain of figurative expressions and its associated inference patterns. Means of achieving this include explicit reference to the literal sense or origin, grouping figurative expressions under their source domains, and questioning the validity of the underlying analogies.

A small-scale experiment examined the effect of explaining only the literal sense of certain English figurative expressions in socio-economic discourse. The results suggest that an enhanced metaphoric awareness may help students to (i) recognise the infer-
ence patterns associated with given figurative expressions and (ii) to remember unfamiliar figurative expressions.

References


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