

# Applied Linguistics Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Variation in Conceptual Metaphor

Frank Boers

*Applied Linguistics Department  
Erasmus College of Brussels*

Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, and subsequent books outlining Conceptual Metaphor Theory (e.g., Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987), a growing number of applied linguists also have begun to highlight the importance of metaphor and metaphor awareness in the field of foreign language learning (for an overview, see Cameron & Low, 1999).

On the one hand, applied linguists have tried to identify the metaphoric models of language learning that lie behind different language teaching practices and language education policies (e.g., Block, 1992; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Thornbury, 1991). On the other hand, researchers have explored the pedagogical use of metaphor awareness to facilitate foreign language acquisition itself, and more specifically to help learners acquire L2 figurative expressions (e.g., Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997; Lazar, 1996). The general advantage of applying the notion of conceptual metaphor in the latter context is that it offers motivation and coherence to whole clusters of figurative idioms that may—at first sight—appear to be arbitrary and unrelated.

We acknowledge that Conceptual Metaphor Theory is still contending with other metaphor theories (see, e.g., Katz, 1998; McGlone, 1996; Vervaeke & Green, 1997, for some of the ongoing debates), but experimental research has at least shown that the notion of conceptual metaphor can successfully be adapted for pedagogical purposes (Boers, 2000, 2001). If teachers cannot find motivation and coherence in sets of figurative idioms, then attention to them in the language classroom will mostly be confined to pointing out cross-linguistic differences at the

level of individual expressions, and thus to alerting learners to the pitfalls of L1 interference and word-for-word translations (e.g., Cornell, 1999; Swan, 1997).

In this special issue, however, four leading experts in the field look beyond those cross-linguistic differences at the level of individual figurative idioms into more general cross-cultural variations in metaphor usage that may underlie them. We can envisage roughly three types of cross-cultural variation in metaphor usage, and examples of each type will be examined by the contributors to this special issue: (a) differences with regard to the particular source-target mappings that have become conventional in the given cultures; (b) differences with regard to value-judgments associated with the source or target domains of shared mappings; and (c) differences with regard to the degree of pervasiveness of metaphor as such, as compared with other (rhetorical) figures.

To compare conceptual metaphors across cultures one obviously needs to establish what those conceptual metaphors are in the first place. Conceptual metaphors are evidenced by systematic and recurring source-target mappings in natural language. However, the notion of conceptual metaphor carries such explanatory power (e.g., motivating segments of natural language that used to be viewed as purely arbitrary), that it has sometimes tempted (applied) linguists to relegate any attested figurative expressions to underlying conceptual metaphors almost in an ad hoc fashion. Without consistency in identifying or proposing conceptual metaphors, investigations into potential cross-cultural differences in the use of conceptual metaphors can hardly be fruitful. A solid ground for the comparison of conceptual metaphor can be established only if the researchers' proposed generalizations behind linguistic data are validated as being conceptual metaphors in the first place. This crucial methodological issue of validation is addressed in this volume by Graham Low.

In his contribution, Low (this issue) takes a critical look at a number of metaphoric models about the nature of language teaching and language learning that have been put forward (perhaps too offhandedly) in the field of applied linguistics in recent years. He emphasizes the need for strong (linguistic) evidence before accepting the validity of any proposed metaphoric models. Only then can a comparison of those metaphoric models give reliable insight into cross-cultural differences. Low concludes his article with a number of positive guidelines for the design, analysis and reporting of metaphoric models in future.

The other contributions to this volume focus more directly on the issue of actual cross-cultural differences in metaphor usage and their implications for language learning. As previously mentioned, one type of cross-cultural variation occurs when languages differ with respect to the particular source that is conventionally mapped onto a common target domain. In other words, a given conceptual metaphor may be common in one culture but uncommon in another. Not all conceptual metaphors seem susceptible to this type of variation, though. Following Grady (1997, 1999), we suggest dividing the set of conceptual metaphors that have so far

been identified by cognitive semanticists into two broad categories: *primary* and *complex* metaphors. Many primary metaphors map image-schemas onto abstract experience (e.g., Lakoff, 1990). Examples of image-schemas are UP-DOWN, IN-OUT, and so on. These “bare” image-schemas are used to lend structure to abstract domains through general conceptual metaphors like the following: “*MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN*” (e.g., “*An IQ of over 150,*” “*An income below the average*”), and “*THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR THE EMOTIONS*” (e.g., “*She was filled with hatred,*” “*Don’t keep all that anger inside you*”). These metaphors are motivated by correlations in the domain of general physical experience. For example, if you add objects to a pile, the pile will grow (hence “*MORE IS UP*”). Because this kind of general physical experience is universal, we would expect to find similar image-schema-based conceptual metaphors in communities around the world. Other primary metaphors, whose experiential grounding also seems universal, include cases like “*STRONG DESIRE IS HUNGER*” (e.g., “*We are hungry for a victory;*” Grady, 1999, p. 85).

The second category of metaphors, however, is more likely to be susceptible to culture-specific influences. These are more complex conceptual metaphors that combine (or *compound*) different primary metaphors. For example, “*THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS*” (e.g., “*Without a solid foundation, your theory will soon collapse*”) combines the primary metaphors “*ORGANIZATION IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE*” and “*PERSISTING IS REMAINING ERECT*” (Grady, 1997). Complex metaphors result in “richer” imagery. For example, although “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*” (e.g., “*We’ll have to get round many obstacles to get married,*” “*The quest for love and happiness*”) is clearly based on the MOTION image schema, it can be “enriched” by specifying the kind of vehicles involved, such as trains (e.g., “*It’s about time you got back onto the right track*”), ships (e.g., “*She’s been drifting without a real purpose in life*”), cars (e.g., “*He’s in the fast lane to success*”), and so on. “*ABSTRACT COMPETITION IS RACING*” (e.g., “*Running for president,*” “*Staying ahead of our economic competitors*”) also belongs here, because the metaphor imposes a richer scenario on the “bare” MOTION schema. Other examples of complex metaphors are those that map our knowledge of man-made things onto abstract domains: “*THE MIND IS A COMPUTER*” (e.g., “*This amnesic patient processes input, but cannot retrieve the data afterwards*”), “*ECONOMIC COMPETITION IS WARFARE*” (e.g., “*To conquer market share*”), and so on.

Unlike the general physical experience that underlies primary metaphors, complex experiential domains are more likely to be culture-dependent and thus to vary from place to place. As a result, such a particular domain may not be (equally) available for metaphorical mapping in all cultures. It follows that cross-cultural variation is more likely to occur when metaphors of the second category (i.e., complex metaphors) are involved. For example, one would not expect an isolated community in the Andes to generate an abundance of sailing metaphors like English

(e.g., “*She sailed through her exams,*” “*The government is being blown off course*”). Metaphors in this category are also subject to change over time, as new man-made things appear or go out of fashion (e.g., Leary, 1990; Miller, 1995). “*THE MIND IS A COMPUTER,*” for instance, is obviously a comparatively young metaphor.

The hypothesis that complex metaphors are more likely to be culture-dependent than primary ones has already been corroborated by case studies. For example, although the image-schema-based metaphor “*THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR THE EMOTIONS*” (e.g., “*Rage was building up inside her*”) appears to be universal, important differences do arise by virtue of the culture-specific imagery that is often added to the general image-schema. Some cultures show a preference for “locating” particular emotions in specific parts of the container-like body. In Hungarian, for example, the emotion of anger is commonly “located” in the head, whereas in Japanese, anger can rise from the stomach via the chest to the head (Kövecses, 1995). Western cultures seem to take it for granted that most so-called higher emotions are a matter of the heart (e.g., “*I’ve got a heavy heart,*” “*She’s broken my heart*”), but in Malay these associations are commonly made with the liver (Charteris-Black, 2002).

The culture-specific nature of certain figurative expressions may (initially) be a stumbling block for foreign language learners. Still, learners may be helped by the observation that those figurative expressions belong to a larger set that can be motivated by a single conceptual metaphor (albeit a “foreign” one). For example, although some learners may initially be puzzled by the Malay use of “*liver*” in a figurative idiom, they subsequently may be helped by the recognition of the general “*LIVER*” metaphor that is instantiated in a wide range of Malay idioms.

A variant of the first type of cross-cultural variation in conceptual metaphors occurs when two languages display the same source-target mapping, but with markedly different degrees of productivity or conventionality (e.g., Emanatian, 1995). For example, although sport metaphors abound, cultures differ with respect to the kinds of sport that are especially popular. Baseball, for instance, is evidently more popular in the United States than in Europe, and consequently American English is likely to produce more baseball-based figurative expressions (e.g., “*I had a date with Helen last night, but I couldn’t even get to first base with her,*” “*Three strikes and you’re out*”). One of the ways in which this type of variation can be detected is through comparative corpus-based quantitative research, that is, through counting the frequency of occurrence of a metaphor and the diversity of its figurative expressions (e.g., Boers & Demecheleer, 1997; Deignan, 1999).

Such subtle variations in the productivity of shared metaphors may seem trivial at first, but there is some evidence to suggest that they do have an impact on learners’ comprehension of L2 figurative idioms. For example, French-speaking learners of English seem to find it harder to “guess” the meaning of English idioms derived from the domain of sailing than of those derived from the domain of eating

(Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). In addition, the high frequency and diversity of a particular metaphor can sometimes be taken as a reflection of a country's history (e.g., the comparatively high number of sailing metaphors in British English) or even its national stereotypes (e.g., the relatively high number of gardening metaphors in British English; Boers, 1999). In such cases, awareness of metaphor might even serve as a window onto a community's "culture."

Although the connection between metaphor and culture is an intricate one (e.g., Kövecses, 1999; Palmer, 1996), variation in metaphor usage could also be studied with a view to finding (indirect) evidence of linguistic relativity (e.g., Niemeier & Dirven, 2000), in the sense that a community's figurative language could be considered as a reflection of that community's conventional patterns of thought or world views (e.g., Lakoff, 1987, p. 295; Palmer, 1996, p. 222–245). A warning note about this approach is sounded in this issue by Deignan who cautions us to interpret metaphor in language mostly as a diachronic reflection of culture rather than a synchronic one.

In her article, Deignan (this issue) uses corpus linguistics to compare the relative degrees of productivity of a number of source domains of metaphor across various languages. Although her corpus evidence suggests that there is variation in metaphor usage across the different languages, she also cautions that this should not automatically be taken as evidence of present cultural differences. A lot of figurative expressions may "merely" be reliquaries of a community's past culture. Nevertheless, she supports the view that historical perspectives on figurative expressions as well as other systematic analyses of figurative language are beneficial to the foreign language learner. Even a partial and indirect culture-metaphor connection would support arguments to include "cultural awareness" objectives in the foreign language curriculum (e.g., Byram, 1997; Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001; Kramsch, 1993).

Let us now turn to the second type of cross-cultural variation in metaphor usage. This type occurs due to differences in the value-judgments that are associated with the source domain, the target domain, or the appropriateness of the metaphor as such. Cross-cultural differences of this kind carry the risk of learners' missing culture-specific "connotations" of certain figurative expressions, which can in turn lead to communication failure. For example, not all communities tend to be equally appreciative of the institution of government. If an American chooses to liken his federal government to a machine, the underlying message may be that he feels this institution to be too impersonal and inflexible. Citizens of countries where governments are held in high esteem, on the other hand, might use a machine metaphor to imply that this institution is actually effective and smooth-running. People's appreciation of particular metaphors also depends on the ruling "rhetorical etiquette", which can vary across discourse communities, too (e.g., Eubanks, 2000). Jeannette Littlemore's article (this issue) investigates cross-cul-

tural variation of this type by examining the effect of cross-cultural variation at the level of value-judgments associated with the use of certain metaphors.

More specifically, Littlemore's (this issue) study takes a closer look at the problems experienced by overseas students studying at British universities when they need to interpret metaphors used by their British lecturers. Many of the problems appear related to cross-cultural differences in value systems, as detected by means of questionnaires borrowed from Hofstede (1980). Littlemore concludes that it is important for lecturers as well as students to reexamine their own sets of values and to be aware of possible areas of misunderstanding when using metaphors in ways that carry value-judgments.

The third type of cross-cultural variation in metaphor usage to be addressed in this special issue concerns potential differences in the degree of pervasiveness of metaphor as such. Charteris-Black's (this issue) comparative study of Malay and English therefore widens the scope of the discussion to include another figure of speech (or thought), namely metonymy. Special attention is given to what Goossens (1990) called "metaphonymy," that is, expressions that combine the processes of metaphor and metonymy. Apart from providing evidence of cross-cultural differences with regard to the evaluative use of particular figurative expressions (and their relevance for language learning), Charteris-Black demonstrates how a culture's rhetorical etiquette can be reflected in its general preference for either metaphoric or metonymic phraseology.

It could be argued of course that, as a result of ongoing economic and cultural globalisation, the cross-cultural differences in metaphor usage that are explored in this special issue will eventually be eroded. Alternatively, one may argue that globalisation involves increased cross-cultural contact, and thus increased opportunities for cross-cultural communication. In the latter view, the need to master foreign languages is obviously enhanced. If language is an integral part of culture, and if culture is expressed (albeit indirectly) through metaphor, then it follows that cross-cultural communication would benefit substantially from a heightened metaphor awareness on the part of educators and language learners.

## REFERENCES

- Block, D. (1992). Metaphors we teach and learn by. *Prospect*, 7(3), 42–55.
- Boers, F. (1999). When a bodily source domain becomes prominent: The joy of counting metaphor in the socio-economic domain. In R. W. Gibbs & G. J. Steen (Eds.), *Metaphor in cognitive linguistics* (pp. 47–56). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Boers, F. (2000). Metaphor awareness and vocabulary retention. *Applied Linguistics*, 21, 553–571.
- Boers, F. (2001). Remembering figurative idioms by hypothesising about their origins. *Prospect*, 16(3), 35–43.
- Boers, F., & Demecheleer, M. (1997). A few metaphorical models in (western) economic discourse. In W. A. Liebert, G. Redeker, & L. Waugh (Eds.), *Discourse and perspective in cognitive linguistics* (pp. 115–129). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Boers, F., & Demecheleer, M. (2001). Measuring the impact of cross-cultural differences on learners' comprehension of imageable idioms. *ELT Journal*, 55, 255–262.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, Avon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Nichols, A., & Stevens, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Developing intercultural competence in practice*. Clevedon, Avon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cameron, L., & Low, G. (1999a). Metaphor: State of the art survey. *Language Teaching*, 32, 77–96.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2002). Second language figurative proficiency: A comparative study of Malay and English. *Applied Linguistics*, 23, 104–133.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2003). Speaking with forked tongue: A comparative study of metaphor and metonymy in English and Malay phraseology. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18, 289–310.
- Cornell, A. (1999). Idioms: An approach to identifying major pitfalls for learners. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37 (7), 1–21.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1999). Bridges to learning: Metaphors of teaching, learning and language. In L. Cameron & G. Low (Eds.), *Researching and applying metaphor* (pp. 149–176). Cambridge, England: CUP.
- Deignan, A. (1999). Corpus-based approaches to metaphor. In L. Cameron & G. Low (Eds.), *Researching and applying metaphor* (pp. 177–199). Cambridge, England: CUP.
- Deignan, A. (2003). Metaphoric expressions and culture: An indirect link. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18, 255–271.
- Deignan, A., Gabrys, D., & Solska, A. (1997). Teaching English metaphors using cross-linguistic awareness-raising activities. *ELT Journal*, 51, 352–360.
- Emanatian, M. (1995). Metaphor and the expression of emotion: The value of cross-cultural perspectives. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 10, 163–182.
- Eubanks, p. (2000). *A war of words in the discourse of trade: The rhetorical constitution of metaphor*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Goossens, L. (1990). Metaphtonymy: The interaction of metaphor and metonymy in expressions for linguistic action. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1, 323–340.
- Grady, J. E. (1997). THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS revisited. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 8, 267–290.
- Grady, J. E. (1999). A typology of motivation for conceptual metaphor: Correlation vs. resemblance. In R. W. Gibbs & G. J. Steen (Eds.), *Metaphor in cognitive linguistics* (pp. 79–100). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. London: Sage Publications.
- Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination and reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Katz, A. N. (1998). Figurative language and figurative thought: A review. In A. N. Katz, C. Cacciari, R. W. Gibbs, & M. Turner (Eds.), *Figurative language and thought* (pp. 3–43). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (1995). The “container” metaphor of anger in English, Chinese, Japanese and Hungarian. In R. Zdravko (Ed.), *From a metaphorical point of view: A multidisciplinary approach to the cognitive content of metaphor* (pp. 117–147). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Kövecses, Z. (1999). Metaphor: Does it constitute or reflect cultural models? In R. W. Gibbs & G. J. Steen (Eds.), *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics* (pp. 167–188). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1990). The invariance hypothesis: Is abstract reasoning based on image-schemas? *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1, 39–74.



- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lazar, G. (1996). Using figurative language to expand students' vocabulary. *ELT Journal*, 50, 43–51.
- Leary, D. (Ed.). (1990). *Metaphors in the history of psychology*. Cambridge, England: CUP.
- Littlemore, J. (2003). The effect of cultural background on metaphor interpretation. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18, 273–288.
- Low, G. (2003). Validating metaphoric models in applied linguistics. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18, 239–254.
- McGlone, M. (1996). Conceptual metaphors and figurative language interpretation: Food for thought? *Journal of Memory and Language*, 35, 544–565.
- Miller, A. I. (1995). Imagery and metaphor: The cognitive science connection. In R. Zdravko (Ed.), *From a metaphorical point of view: A multidisciplinary approach to the cognitive content of metaphor* (pp. 199–224). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Niemeier, S., & Dirven, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Evidence for linguistic relativity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Palmer, G. B. (1996). *Toward a theory of cultural linguistics*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Swan, M. (1997). The influence of the mother tongue on second language vocabulary acquisition and use. In N. Schmitt & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy* (pp. 156–180). Cambridge, England: CUP.
- Thornbury, S. (1991). Metaphors we work by. *ELT Journal*, 45, 193–200.
- Vervaeke, J., & Green, C. D. (1997). Women, fire and dangerous theories: A critique of Lakoff's theory of categorisation. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 12, 59–80.



