

## *UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE*

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*Abstract: The paper will attempt to explore the process of decoding figurative language, seeking to shed some light on how children make sense of the metaphors that appear in different texts. Being at the root of creativity, metaphors are pervasive books for children, proving to be an essential aspect of cognition. Yet, many metaphors need specific strategies in understanding their meaning, and hence reduce the possibility of misunderstanding.*

*Key words: metaphor, children literature, cognition*

Many words have both literal and metaphorical meanings, the literal or most basic sense being often rather different from the metaphorical one, the latter being used to refer to something else. Thousands of words are used metaphorically around us, not just in literary or poetic works, but also in everyday language. It is interesting to note that the metaphorical meanings of some words are so common in everyday interactions that most speakers no longer think of the literal sense of the word when it is used metaphorically. For instance, many words which refer to the concept 'health' are used metaphorically. Literally, *health* in relation to a human being means that someone is physically fit, and that they are not ill or likely to become ill. But, when the term is used metaphorically it may be related to the financial status of an organization, company or individual (*health of the company, healthy bank account, healthy growth/profit*)<sup>1</sup>

Metaphors are defined as a figure of speech that relates two disparate words or larger sentence elements to each other in terms of a similarity dimension or analogical relationship (cf. Aristotle, 1951). Traditionally, aspects of figurativeness – including idiomaticity and metaphor – have been associated with (and often restricted to) the study of literature. But as Lakoff and Johnson pointed out in their seminar work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), the use of metaphor is not restricted to this kind of language, as people construct meaning in everyday interactions by using metaphors, conceptualising one reality in terms of another. They have discovered linguistics evidence that 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought' influencing the way people speak and think.

Cameron and Low (1999) also view metaphor more than a poetic device, as 'it is pervasive throughout everyday language [...] structuring not only how we talk, but also how we think and act; metaphor is thus a matter of mind' (Cameron & Low 1999: 78) They analyse metaphors from a linguistic, conceptual and communicative point of view. Furthermore, metaphor is seen not an occasional foray into the world of figurative language, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Collins Cobuild, English guides 7: Metaphor, London, 1995, p. 18

fundamental basis for everyday cognition. *In all aspects of life, ... we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor.*(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:158)

The power of a metaphor lies in the meaning it can create, which happens inside one's mind, being thus an individual experience. Since the basis of the similarity or analogy to which attention is called by the metaphor is not usually noticed, some tension is created in the comprehender of the metaphor who is forced to initiate a basis for relationship. Nevertheless, the commonality of words means that the well-understood meaning of one world can be associated with a concept that is less familiar in meaning or where new meaning needs to be created. Though metaphors are *representations*, in that they represent an idea, they are not the idea in itself.

In deciphering meaning of new conceptual knowledge, metaphors are considered to 'bridge the gap' between the familiar and the as yet unfamiliar – a foundational principle of learning, a strategy valid for accessing not only literal but also scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

For learners of a foreign language the ability to understand figurative language seems difficult from the perspectives of both comprehension and production, being considered almost exclusively characteristic of advanced learners, thus only more competent users of the foreign language can fully understand figurative language. Examples of idiomatic phrases are sometimes included in low level course-books, only to be presented as exceptions to rules, in the form of phrases to be learned by heart, or fixed expressions which fit specific contexts. It is customary that 'intensive work on the figurative use of language is left to courses on literature, and metaphor especially is tackled through the presentation of literary texts' (Ponterotto, 1994). It becomes clear that such standard approaches to language learning and meaning which consider figurative language peripheral and deviant phenomenon, governed by other rules, different from those that apply to literal language (Levorato&Cacciari, 1995) do not benefit the learner at all in decoding figurative levels of language that are far less distinguishable than previously thought.(Ortony, 1979).

How do then children – younger learners of a foreign language – acquire competence in the area of figurative language and make sense of idiomatic expressions, metaphors and the like? It has been said the humans frame the new knowledge within a familiar landscape, relating thus the novel knowledge to the something more familiar which constitutes the foundational characteristic of learning, building on already acquired knowledge.

Many aspects of figurative language seem to present difficulty for learners, as the mechanisms of decoding the message and grasp its meaning are considered characteristics of advanced stages of language competence. Though some standard approaches to language and meaning consider figurative language a sort of deviation from the rules that apply to literal language, recently some studies investigated the way in which children acquire idioms (Cacciari&Levorato, 1989, Gibbs, 1991) and how they make sense of nonliteral meaning of expressions (Ackerman, 1982, Prinz, 1983). The findings show that figurative language

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<sup>2</sup> See Cameron's (2002) example of 'ozon layer'

acquisition follows the same pattern(s) required for literal language as “literal and figurative language not only coexist in discourse, but, more than an all-or-none phenomenon, can be considered as endpoints of a continuum that includes polysemy, indirect speech acts, novel compounds, and so fourth” (Levorato&Cacciari, 1995). Moreover, studies carried out with young learners of English as a foreign language (Piquer-Píriz, 2008, 2010) have pointed out that children are able to think about foreign language forms metaphorically from an early age, which provides learners with an opportunity to expand the semantic possibilities of the familiar words, as applied cognitive linguists have proposed in relation to older learners (Boers & Lindstromberg 2008).

Accepting the above premises, that is, if we admit that figurativeness is a common place in language, then children’s natural ability in what concerns metaphorical reasoning could be exploited in the foreign language classroom to help young learners expand their linguistic knowledge. Metaphors and idioms should not be postponed or reserved for later stages of learning a language, but be integrated into the course from the very beginning as figurative reasoning and language use are continua in a person’s life (Piquer Píriz, 2011), and, in early stages, may be instrumental in developing children’s linguistic system (Clark, 1993).

Context facilitates the interpretation of figurative expressions, providing the semantic information necessary to comprehend the figurative sense appropriate to the situation. Johnson (2006) suggests that discussing, for instance, idioms in the context of what they read allows English language learners to use the context of the whole story to support the meaning of the phrase. In this line, *Amelia Bedelia* books are excellent examples of texts to be used with children learning English as a foreign language, as these books contain many examples of figurative and literal meaning.

Amelia Bedelia – a literal, now iconic, book character – is a childish maid, hired by Rogers family. She is given a list of chores to do which she interprets literally, not understanding the vernacular used by the Rogers. Thus, she "dresses the chicken" in tiny clothes, "drawing the drapes" on a piece of paper, dusts the furniture (instead of un-dusting it), and "puts the lights out" by hanging them on the clothesline, among other things. Besides the fact that Amelia Bedelia’s blunders are good examples for young students who can successfully interpret the figurative meaning behind most idioms, by realising that sometimes words might have double meaning, they also represent authentic idiomatic language (e.g to keep an eye on the cat). The books contain sketchy illustrations to help readers in better understanding the puns, the dual meanings of words, and how misinterpretations of intended meaning can create conflict. Classroom activities based on such readers are seen to extend learners’ awareness not only in grammar or vocabulary, but also in more problematic areas of linguistics as they target competence in semantics and pragmatics. Giambo and Szecsi (2006) suggest that language teachers can create a linguistic centres where students practice identifying and categorizing homophones and homographs with the illustrations from the *Amelia Bedelia* books. The *Amelia Bedelia* books represent authentic materials to teach young learners the vocabulary, figurative language, idioms and metaphors because the language used in these materials attach new meanings to the words and put them in context, where the character, Amelia Bedelia does not. Exposing learners from an early age to figurative forms will foster creativity and will enrich

their expression of meanings, while they will be able to transfer some competence with metaphor, mostly in comprehension where conceptual metaphors may work across languages.

Being aware that the essence of language lies not only in form or structure as emphasized by old style grammarians, but also in language use as proposed by semantics and pragmatics, teachers can help the learners in understanding of how the meaning is constructed, to decipher the idiomaticity and metaphoricity of language. It is thus possible that metaphoric processes that function quite early in the child's life contribute to learners linguistic development. Evidence of nascent metaphoric competence in young children attests to the possible contribution of metaphor not only to the extension of vocabulary but to the growing mastery of reality.

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