

Teaching English metaphors using cross-linguistic awareness-raising activities

What this study was about and why it is important

The study investigated the potential usefulness (for second language learning) of raising learners' awareness of the similarities and differences between metaphors in their first (L1) and second language (L2). The researchers found that some, but not all, of the metaphors translated can be used in similar ways in both English and Polish. Based on the data, the researchers designed a series of tasks to help and encourage future learners to explore and discuss metaphors in their L1 and L2.

What the researchers did

- **Participants:** 143 Polish learners of English as a university subject (advanced proficiency) at a Polish teacher training college.
- **Procedure:** The participants were asked to translate 68 English sentences containing metaphors (see examples below) into Polish and discuss their thoughts on this exercise with the researchers. All sentences were taken from the Bank of English, a large collection of contemporary English texts. Learners worked in small groups, each group translated five sentences, each sentence was translated by several groups. The metaphorical parts of the sentences were not highlighted, and instructions stated that students should aim for "natural Polish" rather than word-for-word translations. There were two aims: (1) to explore correspondences between the two languages; (2) to find out whether students had problems understanding and translating the metaphors, and if so, whether certain types of metaphors were more difficult for them than others.

What they found

The researcher found that many metaphors could be used in a similar way in both languages with some exceptions:

- **the same concept, but different words used to express it** (e.g. IDEAS ARE FOOD exists in both languages, but Polish has an expression "unripe idea", whereas English uses "half-baked");
- **different concepts preferred in the two languages** (e.g. the expression "sweep off (one's) feet" connects to the concept RATIONAL IS (STANDING) UP in English, however some groups translated it into Polish using the concept LOVE IS MAGIC);
- **words/expressions with similar literal meanings, but different metaphorical meanings** (e.g. English uses "grill" to mean *interrogate*, whereas Polish uses "maglować", literally translated as "mangle", which may be comprehensible to an English native speaker, but which is more commonly used to mean *not speaking/writing clearly*).

The researchers observed that learners had particular difficulties translating "bring something (a fact/situation) home to someone" and "drive something (a message/idea) home", which do not have semantic equivalents in Polish. The attempted translations of these and other sentences revealed that the learners may have initially interpreted such sentences literally. Not all problems appeared to have been caused by the absence of a similar L1 metaphor. For example, "enter through the back door", which is similar in Polish (but involving "kitchen door") was problematic, suggesting that issues may also relate to the challenge of decoding longer fixed expressions.

The tasks the researchers developed on the basis of their data included:

- Reading an L1 text (with L2 translation) and commenting on what makes bolded words 'special'.
- Underlining L2 words (in sentences) that are metaphorically associated with plants (e.g. "...seeds of doubt").
- Underlining verbs used to metaphorically talk about increases and decreases (e.g. "plunged").
- Matching various words to form metaphors (e.g. ("a stream of – traffic") and commenting on whether they convey a positive or negative viewpoint.

Things to consider

Comparing L1 and L2 metaphors is intellectually demanding and might be unsuitable for less motivated learners, those with lower proficiency, or those who do not have sufficient linguistic terminology for discussion. In your context, what are the potential benefits, challenges and practicalities of discussing similarities and differences between L1 and L2 metaphors? Could you use the tasks described by the researchers to develop your own activities?