

# Some tools for the analysis of metaphorical and symbolic language in the press for translation

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## INTRODUCTION

In discourse terms, and from a semiotic perspective, a text, to be meaningful, has to be negotiated through context. The objective of this paper is to provide some insights for analysis and modes of procedure as tools in our everyday encounter of metaphorical language in the written press. Through discussion we will touch upon ways of approaching one of the basic ingredients of language, whereby, our interests, inventions, and emotions are being expressed in a social-cultural oriented society.

Politicians and journalists have their rethoric for argumentation, persuasion or to incite reflection. They use their own discourse to try to convince others that they have something valuable to say. Through metaphorical language, they find ways to characterize behaviour and promote understanding.

To communicate effectively in writing, student learners with a fairly high knowledge of English need to discover the meaning for translating the exact impression the SL, English, intends to convey into the TL, in this case Spanish, when they are purposely intended exclusionary terms, as a rethorical device. This process of decoding poses imaginative force-problems for interpretation. Some questions come up immediately, as readers of metaphorical language. What does the author say? How does he say it? And, what is his intended meaning as a reflection of reality?

The use of metaphor to describe societies is relatively new and old. Firstly, it is a cultural phenomenon, not concerning with the language system nor linguistics. For one thing, it is the best way to cut into culture. Anthropologists have experimented with the device sparingly. According to several studies, between 25% to 51% of our behaviour is attributable to

cultural influences. Many cultural traditions are metaphor for national character, and researchers would say they are powerful. For example, if we look at how Americans and Spaniards spend their free time, people might ask: Why do Americans cheer football and Spaniards hail matadors? Experts will point out that the first one is associated with aggressiveness and individuality, while the latter personifies the proud individualism of the matador; and the relationship of those in the bullring exemplifies the personal relations in Spain.

## METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE

Literary studies have shown metaphorical language as a code. Something that stands for something else and needs to be decodable. Lakoff views metaphor not as a characteristic of language alone, but rather as thought and action. He considers that our conceptual system, our way of thinking and acting, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature:

Our metaphorical concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.

The very systematicity of comprehending one aspect of a concept in terms of another, as he describes metaphor, is pervasive, and hides some other aspects of the concept. In the middle of a political campaign in 1992, in the US Daily News,<sup>1</sup> the following sentence appeared: “Perot’s chances of winning a Dairy Queen vote melted away last night”. It is a text full of inferences and connotations. A brand name of an ice-cream chain is taken as an argument, so arguments are ice-creams. This effect loses sight of some other aspects of the argumentation.

In disclosing meaning from a text, whether it is a word or a phrase, what is essential is the ability to choose. Reddy observes the fact that our metaphorical concepts hide aspects of our personal experiences. He uses the term the *conduit metaphor* for his thesis. He says:

Ideas are provided with words that carry meaning and will come through the reader and may either strike or move. The interpretation of it would require on our part the ability to: 1. Provide one or more semantic readings of the text, and 2. Disambiguate.

These two premises indicate we have a whole constellation of possibilities before a decision is made. For the translator, who must then make another decision, but in a different language, and on a different level, is quite an endeavor. As it happens in a great number of times, the one possible word or phrase in the original text has many angles to be contemplated in the TL. This may lead us to the argument, Rabassa sustains that there are no equals between

SL and TL, but “closeness” where the quality of a translation could be judged only by its “accuracy”. An awareness facilitate matters as to find equals in the intended meaning of the TL. Within this line of thought, if we take the word *cow* in the context: “Many *cows* are being slaughter”, for an Englishman, a cow might now have a chilling meaning due to pass experiences but, for an Indian, it has a completely different sense. In the case of the Indian, the implicitness of the sacred is there, and it needs to be interpreted as such, or if we were to read in the press: “It’s a classic McCarthite technique”.<sup>2</sup> For a liberal American, it would imply investigation, anti-political correctness. For its interpretation in the TL, we would need to draw from our knowledge of the world and, consequently, come to closeness in the TL for translation.

As an outcome of the discussion so far, the question of reading must be addressed. Babuts, in his theory on metaphorical fields, explains that the reading difficulty of a text comes from the insufficient encoding knowledge, or from the lack of matching sequences:

The gaps for understanding a text occur from the processing of the reader. If the reader has a command of the general concept of the field, he will create a vision that will contain the basis for interpretation. The metaphorical field is, strictly speaking, a process of clarification, rather than change.

Guesses are crucial for perceiving a metaphorical concept and envisaging the meaning of the original information, angling each piece of writing first before entering a field, and then, as part of a larger cultural, proceed. Our knowledge of the world comes in hand, as we have already mentioned.

## SOME COMMUNICATIVE CLUES

What would make things click? The intentionality of the communication, the cultural background, and a critical detachment of the state of affairs. Communication begins when an utterance is intentionally chosen by the speaker/writer for its semantic properties. To communicate one with another is the ability to draw inferences, not only with a semantic representation. The semantic representation of an utterance forms an assumption schema that needs to be developed inferentially until it yields the propositional form of the utterance as an abstract mental structure. This assumption-schema is a source of hypotheses about the communicator’s intention. They provide communicative clues. It is interesting to note that the combination of stimulus plus cognitive environment communicates the author’s intended meaning regardless of background knowledge between the author of the SL and the receptor TL language audience.

## UNMASKING METAPHOR

Dagut and Reiss position on translation is one of choice governed by abstract rules, ie, in informative text, and metaphor in expressive texts or by decisions made on individual texts depending on, as Dagut points out:

(...) the particular cultural experiences and semantic associations and to the extent to which it can or cannot be reproduced in the target language depends on the degree of overact in each particular case.

He bases his study on “textual analysis”. He severely criticized both the translation of metaphor, strictly according to text-type, and the no-problem approach endorsed by some in Schools of Translation Theory. Their presuppositions are postulated on the grounds that all metaphors are retainable: the greater their individuality is, the easier to be rendered in another language. Also, that they are not only in harmony, but are common property of human beings. The idea is that there are certain structures of the imagination underlying them. Dagut contrasts this observation.

Some scholars, on the other hand, have unaccountably neglected the productive aspect of translating, and have concentrated on the analysis of the reader’s “mental process”. The metaphorical field is a process of shedding light on a text and of general enrichment. We arrive at an impression through comparison. A few years ago, at a US Republican gathering in a State Convention, Democrats were accused of practicing *pastel patriotism*<sup>3</sup> for not decorating their arena with traditional red, white and blue. At the same time, at a Democratic Convention, the then Arkansas Gov. William Clinton’s overlong speech was taken up by the press to describe any politician making a career-trashing blunder as *doing a Clinton*.<sup>4</sup> The impression is realized from the reader’s cultural knowledge and the vision created will contain the basis for the interpretation. Consequently, it can be claimed that the speaker/writer perceives the association on which the metaphor is based on through a mental process and formulates its peculiar linguistic expression. Accordingly, the reader must disambiguate the figurative language of the speaker/ writer’s mental process. Stern defines metaphor in two steps:

(1) the enhancement is the result of a fusion of two disparate notions, i.e., there is no essential identity between the two referents involved; and (2) the relation between the two referents is not expressed.

Thus, the meaning of the metaphor is hidden and has to be accountable. Jargon, as a special language, comes within the metaphorical scope too. It contains special features in the lexicon much used today. Recent studies on jargon have shown its importance. Richard Byrne, an international lecturer on computer technology, has commented the frequency of computer language

used in the press, and, otherwise, as a way of communication. We read: “I think so and so is not *on line* at all”<sup>5</sup> in reference to a person’s intelligence. It is more than a pleasant departure from familiar language. Kathleen Odeon, author of *Wall Street Slang*, wrote in *Los Angeles Times*:<sup>6</sup>

(...) These players are macho guys and they make themselves out as even more macho. There’s an old stock market proverb: “Buy when the money is running in the street.”

which shows how a group looks at life and death. Metaphor takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions and the press has proven to be a source of *language in use*. It emerges that understanding metaphor is understanding an extra proposition. Language and images cannot be divorced. Fries even brings in physical nature to the power of meaning: “Some symbols and images of things are common to all men and, therefore, have a communicative power”.

## SOME PROCEDURES FOR TRANSLATION

We could sum up so far what metaphor is in terms of an equation: *P is R when R is something else*. There is a salient point before going on, and that is the question of the translatability of metaphor. Can metaphors be translated? We have Newmark’s basic approach, a school of thought, which argues that metaphors are easy to translate. They claim that there is a harmony of metaphorical fields among European languages. In the Western World, he says, metaphors can be translated easily from one language into another. Among the languages of Western Europe, metaphors present no problem. Linguistic oriented schools of translation take this view. At one time, it was given massive support. The dichotomy between translatable or untranslatable can be resolved into “more or less translatable”, Hornby.

In literature various typologies have been offered. The need to divide metaphors into neatly delimited categories is Newmark’s typology. Basically, his approach goes from *dead metaphor* to *original metaphor*, with a highway in between to be developed for translation. But we will only take metaphor as it has been defined earlier. Newmark affirms that every metaphor is a complex of at least three interrelated dimensions: first, the object, which is the item described; second, the image, the item in which the object is described, and third, the sense which shows in what particular aspect the object and the image are similar. Now, this multidimensional complex “reflects the tension between resemblance and disparity”, Newmark. Let us look at a text from *The Wall Street Journal*,<sup>7</sup> which reads like this:

There has been a virtual explosion of U.N peace-keeping operations since the end of the Cold War.

*Explosion*: a violent busting (dictionary definition), and it is a sudden, rapid or great increase, (image). The experiential basis for the metaphor would be that explosions are normally connected with debris, which appears in great accumulations, and probably, for that reason, there seems to be a sudden, rapid and great increase of elements (the sense).

*Cold*: low temperature (dictionary definition), something not friendly (image). The experiential basis for the metaphor could mean dead. The body becomes cold after death from our human experience. This idea could be extrapolated to another level. The relationship among nations, which in turn seems to be thought as people interacting in their daily lives (the sense).

Metaphor is a puzzling phenomenon. It is not only used for the sake of effect. It is distinguished for possessing a special kind of meaning. Ordinary words convey only what we already know; whereas from metaphor we can best get hold of something *new*. I.A. Richards accounts for metaphorical meaning as the product of an interaction between the words' original meaning and its novel use as the "unstable amalgam of the two". He makes a distinction between *tenor* and the *vehicle* in metaphor. Working with these two concepts we can analyse a word or phrase by first looking for the underlying idea, (tenor) and, second, what the figure means, (vehicle). In some cases, there would be a plain meaning of the metaphor. The tenor/vehicle approach reveals what is spoken about and what is metaphorically said about it. In this double-unit the metaphor acquires significance. Words whose meanings are not described as metaphorical. For example, in political discourse used by the media, we might encounter the phrase *red meat issues* contextualized in a campaign speech. Analyzing this metaphor, we have:

- red = passion, force
- meat = reference to something solid, essential
- issues = semantic meaning taken as argument

The colour red would be the vehicle. The tenor is the complex of three dimensions. If by metaphorical language we take to mean a *network of relations*, the interiorized language of a word or a phrase becomes meaningful. Widdowson in dealing with how to discover meaning for communication, says:

Comprehension in the sense of understanding sentences is a semantic matter of deciphering symbolic meanings. But this knowledge will not only enable us to understand language in use, for this is always a matter of realizing the particular token meanings of signs in association with the context of utterance. (...) The sign does not function as a symbol but as an index: it indicates where we must look in the world we know or can perceive in order to discover meaning .

Something outside the language functions as *indexical*, as pointing to something away from the sign itself. The translator would very often need

to draw on information available in the remote and cultural context so as to gather from the implicit information explicitness because the dynamics of the target language require to do so. The information conveyed will be the same as that conveyed to the original readers. Larson points out that the SL author and his/her audience share information which is not shared by the SL audience. The implicit information is part of the meaning that ought to be reflected in the TL. There is an interpersonal relation between the translator and the text where meaning serves as the base.

Texts create intimacy and complexity in a community, that shares schematic knowledge: “The knowledge which is acquired as a condition of entry into a particular culture”.

Widdowson, assigning indexical meaning to certain words or phrases for the purpose of interaction between the writer and the reader. Metaphors are closely linked with sensuous perceptions and are cultural-bound. In pragmatics, as opposed to semantics, the focus is extremely defined. Through indexical value of *reference*, *force* and *effect*, we arrive at the textual meaning. A headline in the US 92 political campaign, from The Daily News<sup>8</sup> reads like this: “Perot soaks up his media oxygen”. This text has many presuppositions of schematic knowledge, but from the indexical point of view, Perot is referential one of the candidates for the Presidency; oxygen is life, and also referential, and the media is force. To soak up is lexicalized in the dictionary. It is extensive and when something is more than wet, and extensive, it is heavier. The impression is realized by comparison.

The tool of analysis based on scenes and frames as a holistic approach, winds up my points of departure proposed in this paper. Frame is a grammatical structure or text, which goes back to experiences or meaningful situations, for example, seeing a film. Scenes activate one each other. I have something I want to say and I find words to say it and it leads to something else. The interrelation is complex. The scene is behind the text. Associations in one’s mind activate in another culture, L1 to L2. The metaphor used by Hornby to explain the procedure is: “cloak and dagger”. On the one hand we have the word cloak, a garment and dagger, a weapon. We get the sense of something undercover. A scene is activated in the back of one’s mind by looking at each word, and the whole is seen as a complex which is more than the mere sum of its components, and it is framed. Consequently, they evokes other scenes. To frame, they have to be coherent. It is a great potential for analyzing metaphor.

Metaphor has its own idiosyncrasy. Translation Studies should continue providing bridges for interpreting language in use.

## NOTES

1. *Daily News* (USA), 1992 Campaign. Jere Hester comments. Oct. 10. Dairy Queen is an icecream chain. p. 6.
2. *Daily News*, bis. Nov. 15. General McCarthy was known for investigating people who declared themselves pro-communists in the 50s.
3. & 4. *The Washington Post*, 1988. Edition Final, p. co6. Features. How New Words Wind Up Being Spoken and coined. (3) could be translated as: "falta de patriotismo" and (4) "discurso torpe".
5. *Los Angeles Times*, 1988. Edition: Home, 29th Monday, part 6, p. 1. On Computerized Language.
6. *Los Angeles Times*, 1988. Document: "How the latest Lingo Leaps into Language".
7. *Wall Street Journal*, 1993, Section A 11, April 12. Headline: "Facing the Realities of U.N. Peacemaking".
8. *Daily News*, US Political Campaign 1992. Nov. 15. p. c6. The translation would be: "Perot con su presencia acapara los medios de comunicacion".

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