

LETO Mario

The Utility of Metaphor in the Language Classroom

1.0 Introduction

This research note is based on a presentation given at a faculty development seminar for the Center for Education of Global Communication (CEGLOC) at the University of Tsukuba. The presentation was based on my lesson content for the university's Integrated English course for first-year students. In that course, a substantial amount of time is given to the exploration of figurative language and metaphor in particular, where the use of concrete nouns in metaphorical expressions are used to explain more difficult concepts in the form of abstract nouns. The decision to focus on figurative language arose from a simple question: What do my students need with regards to their language education? After careful consideration, it was decided that this question was best addressed by first asking a second question: What do my students already have? This research note will therefore begin by setting up a context for answering my questions, hopefully lending some authority to how I arrived at my answers, and then proceed to offer the pedagogical solution that formed the basis of my presentation: *The Utility of Metaphor in the Language Classroom*.

2.0 Context

There exists a long history of formal English education in Japan dating back to the nineteenth century. Most current university students will have had at least six years of English education at their mainstream junior and senior high schools. Indeed, some students will have begun their English education earlier in elementary school with the introduction in 1997 of extra-curricular English-conversation classes at select schools (McKenzie, 2008). This experimental policy has now become a major part of educational reform that all but guarantees that a majority of future high-school graduates will enter university with an English education that began in the third grade (MEXT, 2014). Some students are also encouraged to supplement their English education through cram schools, tutors, study abroad programs, and private English schools, and while the latter option for language supplementation may offer more communicative possibilities for language study, a majority of English education in Japan revolves around a program of systemic knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the technical aspects of the language, including syntax and morphology. As Philip Seargeant (2009) points out in *The Idea*

of *English in Japan*, “one of the most frequently voiced opinions about English in Japan is that the high profile of, and immense interest in, the language is not matched by an equally high level of communicative proficiency among the population” (3). Diane Hawley Nagatomo (2012), in her book on Japanese university English teacher identity, references a similar sentiment when she offers a possible explanation for this language conundrum:

One of the most commonly cited reasons for Japanese people’s poor English skills is the pedagogical method utilized for teaching English. Because university entrance examinations are at the forefront of secondary school teachers’ minds, there is a tendency to overemphasize grammatical details at the expense of communicative and sociolinguistic competence (e.g. Guest, 2000; Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004; Seargeant, 2008). (16)

And therein lie the answers to both questions: Japanese university students possess the technical, systemic knowledge for use in the vast testing culture of formal education; but what the same students lack, and therefore need, is an ability to use the language to competently communicate outside of the educational system. This communicative competence, distinct from the communicative language teaching approach and its emphasis on interactive classroom activities, has more to do with the students’ schematic and contextual knowledge, including background, culture, and situation (Littlemore, 2001b). The use and understanding of figurative language, metaphor in particular, is a central component to this knowledge.

3.0 Metaphor

Figurative language is the heart of great literature and most native English speakers get exposed to it through this medium. Literature, it seems, is about so much more than fiction and entertainment. Literature is “cultural enrichment” (Collie and Slater, 1987); literature is non-trivial (Duff and Maley, 1990); literature is authenticity (Duff and Maley, 1990); and literature is rhetoric (Parkinson and Thomas, 2000). One might also argue that real-life communication is similarly culture-based, authentic, significant in its communicative purposes, and oft times skillfully manipulated to achieve a desired outcome. In fact, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, argue that metaphor and all of its figurative extensions are indeed central to the way people think and communicate on an everyday basis, and the term they give this idea is “conceptual metaphor”. Using the example of the conceptual metaphor *Argument is War*, they explain that

This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions... It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing... This is an example of what it means for a

metaphorical concept...to structure (at least in part) what we do and how we understand what we are doing when we argue. *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.* (emphasis in the original) (4-5)

Notice in the second sentence their emphasis on “culture” and their attempt to distinguish “this culture” from other cultures. They go on to explain that conceptual understandings of the world differ from culture to culture and that a conceptual metaphor for any one concept is subject to change depending on the culture. Jeannette Littlemore (2001b) addresses this same idea in her work on the use of metaphor in education, and while her research is not about conceptual metaphor in particular, she does arrive at similar conclusions about metaphor, language, and culture. She contends that, like Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is culturally based and that individuals entering an unfamiliar culture, like international students studying abroad, might “inadvertently transfer a different meaning...than that intended by the speaker” (334), causing problems in the communication process. From a similar study in 2003, she clarifies the problem further: “One reason why students tend to misinterpret metaphors may be that they use different cultural references when attempting to interpret them” (4). In fact, most of Littlemore’s work, including collaborative research with Graham Low, revolves around the use of metaphor and second-language English speakers (see Littlemore, 2001a; Littlemore, 2004; Littlemore and Low, 2006) and they both come to the conclusion that “metaphoric language and thought play a significant, indeed key, role in all the areas of competence...namely sociolinguistic, illocutionary, textual, and grammatical competence...and strategic competence” (Littlemore and Low, 2006: 289). It is, therefore, for these reasons that figurative language, metaphor in particular, plays a central role in my own Integrated English courses at the university. Metaphor, it seems, is a significant contributor to the students’ communicative ability and a beneficial supplement to their already undoubtedly extensive systemic knowledge.

4.0 Pedagogical Solution

The initial idea for my course content on figurative language came from a resource textbook by Jane Spiro (2004) titled *Creative Poetry Writing*. Partially from my own background and interest in literature and partially from the theoretical convergence of how we view literature and figurative language in language education, Spiro’s text has become a valuable resource for approaching the use of figurative language in the language classroom. In her introduction to her textbook, she writes that “everyday language uses many devices traditionally thought of as ‘poetic’. In fact, to recognize and use these is part of our skill as language users. We use metaphors and similes every day, just like poets” (10). Particular to this research note is section 3.5 on metaphor creation and the use of abstract and concrete nouns (59-60). What follows next is a one-lesson adaptation of Spiro’s ideas for teaching metaphor in the language classroom. Adjustments to the lesson plan were made according to the number of students in each course, their communicative ability, and the amount of

lesson time to engage them. While metaphor is the ostensible topic of the lesson, I personally put more emphasis on the difference between abstract and concrete nouns. Metaphor, for simplicity's sake, is merely a vehicle with which to achieve the goal of overcoming the obstacle of explaining and understanding abstract nouns. This, then, is where the lesson begins.

4.1 Preliminaries

Students are given one word to consider: *Love*. They are then invited to explain the word, to define it, to give it meaning. When it becomes apparent that clearly defining *Love* in a few sentences is a near impossible task, the students are then offered a new concept to define: *Beauty*. A similar experience ensues and once again, at the point of frustration, students are asked to consider yet a third term: *Chair*. This term, it seems, is much easier to define. In fact, one need only point to satisfy any confusion about what exactly a chair might be. One final term is offered, for the sake of balance, and students make a quick job of this one as well: *Pen*. Having at this point experienced some dissonance in the ease of explaining these four terms, the students are then asked to offer a reason as to why *Love* and *Beauty* pose significant defining problems while *Chair* and *Pen* are handled with ease. The reason, it seems, is the difference in their noun classifications. *Love* and *Beauty* are inherently abstract concepts while *Chair* and *Pen* are concrete objects. Abstract concepts defy the senses while concrete objects contain substance and offer themselves to our visual, tactile, aural, and olfactory faculties. From this deduction, then, comes the assumption that forms the basis for the lesson: If concrete nouns are easy to understand, then perhaps they can be used to explain more difficult, abstract concepts.

4.2 Explorations

Students are then put in groups and asked to extend the lists of abstract and concrete nouns. Once two modest lists have been offered and displayed at the front of the room, students are then challenged to combine two words, one from each list, using the copula *be* for simplicity. One example from our first four words might be thus: *Love is a chair*. Students are then asked to share their combinations, which, unknown to them, are now metaphors. As the students share their combinations, they are asked the following question: "Why?" Using the previous example, the students would be asked "Why is love a chair?" and a possible answer might be "Because love supports a relationship like a chair supports a sitting person." Grammatical structures will vary, as will the students' ability to offer explanations for near-random metaphors, but they appear to understand and, at all skill levels, competently participate. Depending on the students, new lists can then be made and the activity begins again with a greater understanding of expectations. Students can also be challenged to extend their explanations: "Love supports relationships like chairs support bodies, but chairs can also be uncomfortable as can relationships: Certain kinds of chairs are not healthy for our bodies, and, at the same time, certain kinds of love are not healthy for our minds." Throughout this process, at the point of comprehension decided by the instructor, the concept of metaphor can be introduced to the students and discussed as a tool for

communication. Students can also be given homework at the end of the lesson that encourages them to explore their own use of creative language. Following Spiro's lead, I have in the past asked the students to develop a new metaphor—e.g. Desire is a leaf—and to use the form of the poem to explain its meaning. For lower-level students, the form of the poem is sometimes dropped to allow them to concentrate on their use of metaphorical language. Either way, the goal of the lesson is trifold: 1) Students are given an *awareness* of metaphor in communication, 2) Students are allowed to creatively explore the *production* of metaphor firsthand, and 3) Students are given the tools to *decipher* metaphor should they encounter it in authentic communication.

5.0 Conclusion

Metaphor and other types of figurative language are an important part of how people communicate on a daily basis. Beyond the noun-copula-noun structure of this specific lesson, other metaphorical extensions are also a possibility. One example of this is the use of metonymy, where meaning is derived from a relationship between two concepts, as in the expression *The school is on holiday*. The physical school itself, which is *not* on holiday, signifies the students and faculty. Meaning in this instance can be derived from the relationship of the school to the faculty and student body that inhabit it. Another extension is that of synecdoche, where the part signifies the whole and vice versa, as in *Their team has a few good arms*. The part in this expression, *arms*, signifies players, and is commonly understood as such by native English speakers. These two types of metaphorical extensions—metonymy and synecdoche—play a significant role in everyday communication and are invaluable tools for language students to use in authentic communicative scenarios. Once thought to be the device of poets, dramatists and orators alone, metaphor, as recent work in cognitive linguistics has shown, has a much larger role to play in how we think and act. This becomes particularly important for second language learners as they navigate across cultural boundaries. One practical example, as Littlemore (2001b) has shown, is the need for international students to understand and decipher metaphor in a study-abroad context, and this is no less so for many Japanese students who may experience for the first time the shift from English as a focus of study to English as a tool for authentic communication. Teaching students about metaphor at the tertiary level is offering them a tool to assist them beyond the communicative limitations of systemic knowledge. From my own experience, figurative language and the communicative possibilities it offers are exactly what my students need, and this lesson on metaphor is one example of how I accomplish that.

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