
TEACHERS' FORUM

Metaphors We “Language” By

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In recent decades, language education research has broadened its scope to examine personal perceptions of language(s), and different methodological approaches have developed to give voice to these perceptions. Seeing our relationship to language learning as an ever-evolving project of engagement (an autobiographical identity project) helps us to think differently about what motivates people to learn languages. First-person perspectives also highlight cultural patterns in our perceptions of different languages, and how these perceptions are shaped by politics and ideology. One way to challenge the view of languages as fixed or discrete systems is to look at how people use metaphors to describe and understand languages and their learning of them. In this article, I draw on Kramsch's (2009) concept of the multilingual subject to offer a personal reflection on how my own view of learning has changed, namely from seeing it as a process of individual skill building to understanding learning as something shaped by emotions, relationships, and personal and cultural narratives that unfold over time. This framing of subjectivity encourages us to see “language” as a verb, a form of social practice that is ever shifting and shaping our ways of being in and acting on the world.

A multilingual imagination is the capacity to envision alternative ways of remembering an event, of telling a story, of participating in a discussion, of empathizing with others, of imagining their future and ours, and ultimately of defining and measuring success and failure. (Kramsch 2009, p. 201)

METAPHORS AND SUBJECTIVITY

One of the *files conducteurs* throughout Kramsch's scholarship is the invitation to examine language subjectivity, that is, how individuals perceive themselves as speakers, and the role of language(s) in their lives. As educators, we are then led to reflect on how these insights can be integrated into different sites of learning and teaching. In my own trajectory as a language learner, teacher, and researcher, I have been moved by the same line of inquiry. Over the course of my professional development, I have seen how colleagues pursuing similar understandings have drawn on evolving epistemological frames, marked by shifts in terminology from early conceptions of *affect* through *learner identities* and *teacher cognition*—described by Kubanyiova and Feryok (2015) as “a fast-growing discipline in applied linguistics which investigates what language teachers think, believe and know”—to more complex engagements with *emotion(s)*. Each of these stages of development reflects wider shifts in our research culture, but a constant is the will to reach for an understanding of the personal experience—the subjectivity—of the language learner in context. As a teacher educator, my driving question is how to apply these shifting epistemological perspectives to the classroom,

so I share here some staging points in my conceptual journey as these have been applied to my work with teachers.

“Perception,” writes Kramersch (2009, p. 27), is “the neglected dimension in language learning,” and exploring the complex relationship between a word’s *denotation* and its *connotation* is central to Kramersch’s anti-Saussurean model of language. A word as a symbol is never neutral or denuded of complex webs of meaning in this framing, but actually constitutes our subjectivity as speakers and is always connotative. (This is further exemplified by Kramersch in *Language as Symbolic Power*, 2021). The focus on how language is perceived—particularly its form rather than its meaning—is often overlooked or minimized in functional treatments of language, such as in communicative language teaching, where phrases can be reduced to tools with practical, measurable outcomes (like introducing oneself, asking for directions, buying a ticket, or requesting a refund).

Metaphors structure our understanding in both additive and limiting ways, for while they facilitate our navigation of the physical and symbolic worlds we occupy, they also circumscribe our perceptions. Awareness of how metaphors filter our experience can offer an important starting point to expanding our agency as learners and language users. So, what is meant by metaphor? The term refers traditionally to a figurative use of language most associated with literary aesthetics whereby the quality of one thing is conferred on another for expressive purposes, giving poetic formulations such as “leaden sky” or Shakespeare’s famous “all the world’s a stage.” The definitional boundaries of metaphor are not clear cut, and from its more limited traditional meaning metaphor has now extended both to encapsulate figurative use of language more broadly and to denote a basic cognitive mechanism through which abstract concepts are understood via more concrete domains, reflecting the embodied and conceptual nature of human thought. In my work with language teachers in London, I have found that metaphor is a helpful starting point for developing language awareness on many levels: enhancing aesthetic appreciation, considering cultural variation, and promoting metacognition of one’s own learning. Collectively, these approaches support the cultivation of what Kramersch refers to as our “multilingual imagination,” offering a counterpoint to mechanistic and overly denotative models of language learning.

LANGUAGE LEARNING IS LIKE

As a starting point, the figurative properties of language can often be highlighted through looking at the histories of words; etymological analysis traces the trajectory of words as they lose their overtly metaphorical value to become conventionalized ways of speaking. The word “culture” itself, which is so often problematized in our field, provides an interesting example of how metaphors become fixed or so-called “dead” metaphors in that their metaphorical dimension ceases to be immediately recognized. “Culture,” as referring to human groups of collective patterns of behavior, stems from a metaphorical extension of the word denoting biological culture, as in agricultural cultivation. Marking this new development in the eighteenth century in the first (1755) edition of his seminal English dictionary, Samuel Johnson lists the primary definition of “culture” as cultivation or growth in agriculture, and only its *secondary* sense as “the art of improvement and melioration,” still recognizable as a metaphor derived from its primary meaning.

CULTURE. n.s.
[cultura, Latin.]

2. Art of improvement and melioration. “One might wear any passion out of a family by culture, as skilful gardeners blot a colour out of a tulip that hurts its beauty”. *Tatler*, No. 75.

Such etymological work helps us to recognize the precarity of word meanings, and by extension, the referents they point to. Zooming in on the cultural specificity of idiomatic metaphors can often highlight language development in relation to broader social and economic history. One might note, for instance, that the great number of idioms referencing nautical metaphors in British English—featuring more than in other European languages—reflects the prominence of Britain’s maritime history (e.g., “to sail close to the wind,” “to nail one’s colors to the mast,” or “to be high and dry”), while others have lost any transparent connection to their nautical origins (e.g., “by and large,” “leeway,” and “to be taken aback”). In this example of cultural idiomatic metaphors, such culturally specific distinctions are brought further into relief by corpus analysis showing that nautical metaphors are more frequent in British and Australian than in American or Canadian English (Isserlis, 2009).

In *The Multilingual Subject*, Kramersch reports on a study she conducted with her students (see also Kramersch, 2003) whereby they were asked to describe their experience of language learning by articulating aspects of their learning through metaphor. Although the study used the linking word “like,” which in literary studies indicates a simile rather than a metaphor, similes with “like” still operate within the broader framework of metaphor and so can be subsumed under the category. Kramersch’s students were asked to complete the following phrases:

Language learning is like
 Speaking this language is like
 Writing in this language is like (2009, p. 58)

Kramersch clustered the responses into different areas of embodied experience: for instance, comparing learning to “experiencing one’s body in new physical spaces.” “Learning a language,” offered one student, “is like scaling a barbed-wire fence,” or “like skydiving without a parachute” (p. 61), and so forth. Kramersch’s clustering of answer types draws attention to the importance of embodiment in the way language and learning are experienced, as many students not only pointed to the physical aspects of producing new sounds in the face and body but also the figurative image for them of “escaping the limits of one’s skin” (p. 61) through speaking a different language. The descriptors chosen by students varied according to the medium, with “speaking” correlating with a desire to identify with native speakers, whereas “writing” afforded greater awareness of the different functions of language, as a “means for the private expression of the self, and as a mode of public communication exposed to formal and cultural scrutiny” (ibid). There was also a variance in metaphor type according to competence and level of instruction, with beginner and earlier stage students metaphorizing their learning as a painful experience and more advanced learners expressing a more positive aesthetic engagement.

Kramersch’s study led me to reflect on my own relationship with my language learning. As a confirmed Francophile, I reflected on what “linguaging” French means to me personally and how I could metaphorize my relationship to French as well as to other languages I know. Some initial analogies that sprung to mind were “French as freedom” or “French as clarity.” The latter association is, of course, steeped in a centuries-old cultural bias that proclaimed

French as the universally supreme language of clarity, articulated most famously by Antoine de Rivarol in his 1784 *Essai sur l'universalité de la langue française* (Essay on the universality of the French language). (See Meschonnic, 1997, for a critical history of this famous concept.) Had I internalized longstanding discourses positioning French as the supremely “clear” mode of expression in comparison with other languages?

To understand the association of French as “freedom,” I turned to my autobiographical identity project, which involved moving to France in my early twenties in an attempt to reinvent myself through a new language. This trope of reinvention through relocation to a new geographical and linguistic setting only became apparent to me later, however—and was likely a form of retroactive projection—after encountering the works of translingual writers such as Beckett and Kundera. Their narratives of liberation through language resonated deeply with my own experience. These writers all expressed a freedom in writing in an adopted language, even where the relationship was ambivalent or bittersweet, as when Agota Kristóf (2004, p. 4) wrote in her autobiography *L'analphabète* that she felt French was “*en train de tuer ma langue maternelle*” [killing my mother tongue]. I seem to have absorbed metaphorical representations from others’ narrated experience. In another setting and given a different timescale I might metaphorize “Learning / Speaking French is like ...” differently: during a long French language conference when I am not feeling especially enamored with the topic, I can perceive French as “like a soupy fog,” whereas at other times, in a restaurant with French friends in the South of France for instance, I experience speaking French as “like a ride on a magic carpet.” In other words, our relationship with the language(s) in our lives is always in flux, and so metaphorical expressions of this will vary according to specific conditions, only one of which is measurable proficiency.

As Kramersch (2009) points out, “variations in metaphor patterns” offer valuable insights for language educators, as these highlight personal and embodied encounters with language(s). These experiences contrast with the input-output, information-processing metaphors that dominate much of second language acquisition research (p. 58). Reflecting the mismatch often experienced between teachers’ own lived experience of languaging and the syllabus content we are often required to deliver, Kramersch found that “far from being perceived as primarily a tool for communication and exchange of information, the foreign language is first and foremost experienced physically, linguistically, emotionally, artistically” (p. 60).

FROM METAPHORS WE “LIVE” BY TO METAPHORS WE “LANGUAGE” BY

The title of this report is in homage to the seminal *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published in 1980. In this hugely influential book, Lakoff and Johnson reframed the status of metaphor from being a literary device to a conceptualizing mechanism through which we structure mundane experience by orienting our bodies in the physical world across spatial axes such as up/down, in/out, high/low, near/far. They give several examples of what they call “conceptual metaphors”—“time is money” or “the mind is a machine”—to illustrate how one concept (referred to in conceptual metaphor theory as the source domain, which is usually abstract) is expressed in terms of another (called the target domain, usually concrete). This metaphorization sets up a whole frame for the way we think about and articulate our experience of the world.

Since the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, the field of cognitive linguistics has spurred investigation into how metaphors are both shaped by and, in turn, constitute sensory experience, although the linguistic articulation of metaphor per se was not the primary consideration of Lakoff and Johnson, who viewed metaphor as an essentially psychological matter. As Cameron (2003, p. 2) points out, “cognitive linguistics has shifted the focus of attention from metaphor in language to metaphor in the mind”, yet the focus on metaphor as a structuring device has clear implications for the way we “language” (verb) our lives. “Language” as a verb was introduced by Becker (1991) to emphasize how language not only serves as a tool for communication but also as a way of shaping our understanding of the world. Experimental psychologists now investigate what multilinguals and translators have long discussed: the extent to which a particular language determines the perceptual relations between words and the world (e.g., in color linguistics).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, while metaphorical mapping of the world is a fundamental part of human cognition, this is overlaid by cultural and linguistic frames, so that, for instance, metaphorizing the mind as “a machine” may be inscribed in cultural norms. Such a framing would in turn engender a way of thinking about the mind as processor or computer that receives and process data as input and output, and this metaphorical frame would then afford particular ways of talking and thinking about “language” and “learning.” This framing, though, could be reoriented or extended by different base metaphors such as, for instance, comparing the mind to a mirror, maze, or tool.

METAPHORS OF LIFE AND LANGUAGING

In language education, metaphor can prove a fruitful lens through which to view cultural difference and to examine conceptions of language(s) as an identity project. Any reflection on a subject’s multilingualism is, first and foremost, an autobiographical production and even the way life is conceptualized is a metaphorization. For instance, “life is a journey” is a classic conceptual category—and an example used by Lakoff and Johnson (1980)—giving rise to descriptive devices that metaphorize the lifespan into movement (going along the road of life, etc.) so that time and space are conflated as travel in metaphor. Unsurprisingly, therefore, language autobiographies have become a powerful tool for understanding language subjectivity. Though referentially diachronic, the narration of language autobiographies is performatively synchronic (told in the here and now), thus telling us—and the narrator—more about how we are feeling vis-à-vis our language learning project. Initially inspired from published language learning memoirs (such as those of Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* or Nancy Huston’s *Nord Perdu*), language autobiographies have now been widely used as tools to encourage reflection on one’s language learning, whether in words, drawing or through multimedia production. Using different creative means to express one’s relationship to language(s) enables the learner to feel seen and heard, even though they are not always cognizant of the matrix conditions that have shaped their choices and their learning trajectory.

Metaphors are not, of course, only lexical but intersect the semantic and semiotic. As Besmeres reminds us in her analysis of cross-cultural autobiographies, “culture impinges on language in more ways than those captured by the verbal” (2004: 151), and one of the ways to examine how metaphor shapes our thinking of language(s) and of learning is to consider how visual representations have been used to schematize language(s). Non-textual modes of autobiographical narration include metaphorizing by using maps, language body portraits and other forms of illustration (see for further examples Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019, 2024;

Krumm, 2011; Kusters & De Meulder, 2019). Language body portraits, in particular, have proven a popular strategy for bringing into relief embodied perceptions of language(s), and are an exercise which I used in my own teacher education courses for many years, asking teachers to map their plurilingual repertoire onto a body silhouette. These portraits allow us to see how learners metaphorize languages as inside-outside, in-the-head/in-the-heart, solid-hazy, warm-cold, fluid-static etc. (see Coffey, 2015). Some of the teachers went on to integrate the activity in their own lessons. Krumm (2011), who pioneered the method in Vienna, states:

Drawing these language portraits, many children become aware, for the first time, of the diversity of their languages. For this reason, we advise teachers to develop other language projects inspired by this reflection. ... Thus, language portraits become part of language courses; they call attention to the sphere of language reflection and allow us to address other possibilities, degrees of relationship, word migrations, similarities and differences between languages. (p. 104)

In their “manifesto” for creative multilingualism, Kohl et al (2020) highlight the “creative power of metaphor” to guide reflection on how languages metaphorize differently. The subtle example they give is the way we language the concepts of progress or even of time itself, as in the expression “time flies”:

which gives expression to an everyday sense of time passing faster than expected or faster than seems natural to a human being. The metaphor makes the abstract, intangible and shapeless concept of ‘time’ imaginable as a physical, animate body that moves swiftly through space, by analogy with the familiar phenomenon of a bird. (Kohl et al, 2020, p. 26)

Aside from the intrinsic interest we may have in deepening our understanding of how experience and language are framed through the lens of metaphor, such an approach also offers language teachers a valuable springboard for creating motivating classroom activities, especially where there is a focus on the links between language and cultural understanding. In this case, drawing metaphorical representations—whether cultural idioms or new coinages—is a powerful way to challenge dominant metaphors of learning (for more on this see Coffey & Patel, 2023).

METAPHORIZING LANGUAGE AS PROCESS vs LANGUAGE AS PRODUCT

Depending on one’s motivation to undertake language study, and probably on one’s own language autobiography, a typical lay perception of language, which is often reinforced in learning material such as textbooks, is that “a language” such as French is a single, unified entity—an autonomous body of knowledge. Such a perception results in confused pedagogical aims between, on the one hand, developing communicative competence and, on the other, accuracy-focused technical treatment of language needing to be corrected, e.g., gender agreements, spelling, and norms of standardized syntax. The perennial tension between standardized accuracy and functional (communicative) competence reveals mixed

metaphorical constructions of languages, one as social action (denoting movement, connection), and one as codified structure (denoting solidity, knowledge).

At the root of much disagreement about the differing aims of language learning and teaching lurk the implicit metaphorical models of language as either a *process* or a *product*. The relationship between these constructions is, of course, complex and has been philosophized over for millennia, not least by Aristotle who distinguished between activity as *energeia* (denoting activity in progress) and as *ergon* (the accomplished act as end product or outcome), a distinction later applied to “language” by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In my own professional life, I have often felt a split between conceptions of language conveyed in the methodology and pedagogy courses I teach and the more fluid conception of language as participatory and experiential that emerges from personal intuition when working with language autobiographies or creative pedagogies. I find this distinction lends itself to discussions with student teachers around pedagogical stances. When students or teachers question their own legitimacy as a speakers, often in comparison with idealized native-speakers, it is useful to remember that according to Zdzislaw’s (2003) reading of Humboldt, “language is *energeia* and not *ergon*, in other words, it is a generative activity of expression and an affective force, which repeats always in the same way and always in a new way” (p. 65). What I have also found to be useful for teachers and their students is to reflect on which metaphor they are applying in a given moment and which metaphor is helpful. If, for instance, knowledge of languages (e.g., “my proficiency in French” or my perception of “*the* French language”) is metaphorized as a thing, body, or process, then how does this perception meet the learner? The ways in which new knowledge is integrated into existing cognitive schemata are personal yet also shaped by cultural frames as well as neurobiological patterns.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using metaphors as an investigative frame to explore how language structures our subjectivity allows us to examine seemingly hardwired conceptions about our relationship to language. Understanding language’s inherent metaphoricity is a profound cultural and humanist undertaking. In addition to recognizing how language is intrinsically connotative—both *explicitly* as in figurative, culturally specific idioms and *implicitly* in the way it structures our range of experience—working with metaphors in different ways encourages awareness of our relationship with language(s) and with learning. Rather than limit our view of metaphor to its function as a literary device, the wider definition of cognitive metaphorization enriches language learning programs by offering a means to examine cultural and personal constructions of language(s) and how we experience language learning.

Developing strategies to identify and even transform our framing of experience offers a potent means to transform our motivational relationship with language learning, with our subjectivity as a language user-learner, e.g., do we feel *inside* or *outside* the target language culture? Is the language in question *outside* our body and *in* the world? Is it in our head, our heart, or flowing through our veins? Do we feel light or heavy, clear or fuzzy, when we speak or hear different languages? Once there has been a process of identification and awareness then we are better placed to think about how to transform our learning journey. This transformation would likely occur anyway when students persevere (as Kramsch’s study showed, more advanced learners metaphorize more positively), yet some earlier conscious

focus on which metaphorical constructions are mapping our learning journey may facilitate progress in promoting more positive mindsets at an earlier stage.¹

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¹ As well as some of the activities suggested in this article (e.g., asking learners to express their language learning metaphorically, or mapping conceptual metaphor onto autobiographical language portraits, etc.), emotional transformative work has been proposed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) in the form of visualization techniques, where guided imagery control is shown to improve resilience and change mindsets.

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