Metaphorically Speaking

Steve Darn and Ian White

Teacher Development Unit, School of Foreign Languages, Izmir University of Economics

There is one single reason why metaphor is important to the English language and language teaching. It is impossible to communicate naturally and effectively without employing this device. Metaphors are an essential part of our everyday language, used to give physical qualities to the non-physical. Whilst we have clear and precise language to describe events, we run into difficulties when we try to describe ideas and concepts. Because we cannot see, feel, smell, taste, or touch an idea, in order to overcome this intangibility we resort to metaphors to represent ideas and understandings from our everyday experiences in a meaningful way. Very often, metaphor is the solution to the imbalance between what we are capable of comprehending and the language we are actually able to produce - the answer to the question 'what do you mean?' While teachers might argue that metaphor is peripheral to language, linguists and philosophers would deem it as being central to our thoughts, actions and conceptual systems.

To the language teacher and learner, it is this elementary level of significance which is important, notwithstanding some of the recent work on right hemisphere processing of language or recent cognitive studies. Such studies add to the rapidly expanding body of knowledge in the area of neurology and language learning. There are its spin-offs into ELT via multiple intelligences and neurolinguistic programming, but research tends to indicate that there is little difference in the way that literal and figurative language are processed. Metaphor, then, can be taught and learned in the same way as grammar and lexis, but also has a role as a tool in teaching other facets of the language.

Despite the apparent richness of English in many areas, the language remains deficient in others, particularly those of an abstract or ill-defined nature, where we are tempted or forced to use metaphor, simile and analogy to clarify meaning. In this context, metaphor is, quite literally, non-literal, being used not only to emphasise the qualitative similarities between two words or phrases but also to make definition or explanation more exact. To this end, we are attempting to objectify the subjective. We are also fond of drawing comparisons for descriptive purposes through the use of simile and analogy, the former being used more often at the personal or micro level, the latter to describe situations and processes. In all cases, what we are trying to do is to conjure up an image, often colourful, in the minds of the listeners which will allow them to comprehend complex or abstract meaning and to make meaning concrete and therefore permanent. There is a difference, then, between using a metaphor *(I saw the headmistress sailing down the corridor),* a simile *(he eats like a pig)* or an analogy *(politics is like football),* and speaking metaphorically, which seems to encompass all the aforementioned as well as lexis as diverse as hyperbolae and Cockney rhyming slang.

Much of what we find difficult to describe and define is a product of the society that we live in, a facet of society itself, or an aspect of change in society. The Germans are more adept at labelling such sociological phenomena, and quick in their sociolinguistic responses. Hence the term *'Zeitgeist'*, meaning the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era, which has crept its way into English dictionaries and been adopted as part of the intellectual genre rather than the nearest we can get to it *(spirit of the age).* Of similar origins are loan words such as *'angst'* and *'weltanschauung' (world view),* calques, or loan translations, such as *'Superman'* and *'Saturday'* and semi-calques such as *'chopsticks'*, while other words such as *'apartheid'* and *'glasnost'* are from cultures where societal necessity was the mother of linguistic invention. Events and states in one culture may not exist in another, giving rise to a high incidence of linguistic theft.

We, the British, and the Americans, are not so exact in describing the world we live in, but good at providing labels for scientific and technological inventions and discoveries that signify advancement. We are also keen on both inventing *(phishing, googlewhacking),* and borrowing *(ubersexual, sudoku)* words for current fashion and lifestyle (the *'Cosmopolitan'* genre), as if we are only too pleased to describe a world that we would like to live in rather than the stark reality of the world that most of us actually inhabit. Perhaps we feel safer in describing our society using metaphor as an anaesthetic.

The nature and use of metaphor varies widely from culture to culture. Metaphor may be the product of a cultural incident, an observation by the culture on its own characteristics, or a feeling generated by the culture. Metaphor, then, may be useful in exploring and understanding culture, though one must be aware of the context when attempting to translate or find equivalents. The following metaphors and sayings tell us something about the culture they come from:

Woe to him who gives a preference to one neighbor over another. (Ireland)
Gentle words open iron gates. (Bulgaria)
Convert great quarrels into small ones, and small ones into nothing. (China)
Fair speech turns elephants away from the garden path. (Swahili)
If a man steals gold, he is put in prison. If he steals land, he is made king. (Japan)
Unless you fill up the crack, you will have to build a new wall. (West Africa)

Metaphor can be valuable not only at the society level, but also at the individual level. We, as mere patients, are not, for example, linguistically equipped to describe medical complaints. There are probably as many kinds of headache as there are types of snow, but Inuktitut (Inuit) and Finnish have the words for snow in their everyday vocabularies whereas those of us who are not medically trained refer to *'knives stabbing'* and *'full of cotton-wool'* to describe our head ailments. Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts fight a constant battle to infer meaning through a barrage of metaphor with a good measure of nuance and innuendo thrown in.

At the situational level, metaphor offers a convenient mode of describing work and the workplace. As language teachers, we often find ourselves referring to our work load as being *'up to my neck in it'* or *'snowed under'*, our institution as *'the factory'*, our facilities as *'Victorian'* our superior as *'The Chief'*, co-operation as *'pulling together'*, our elder colleagues as *'dinosaurs'* and our work as *'the grindstone'*. In this situation, metaphor performs the same function of adding colour, though perhaps for different purposes, those of relieving tedium, describing common ground, or making light of the onerous.

Metaphor at individual and situational levels has two major functions; to conjure up a meaningful image, but also to allow the listener to make the transfer between the language of the layperson or the person outside their social sphere and their own specialised professional, technical or cultural terminology. Metaphor is as much a product of idiolect as of extrinsic social forces. As our individual linguistic worlds become increasingly infested with intra-professional jargon (witness our own ELT world) and as society becomes increasingly fragmented, this function of metaphor assumes enormous communicative value and importance on the inter-personal, inter-professional and inter- (sub) cultural levels.

If metaphor is so important, then why don't we teach it? The nearest one finds in most course material is the ubiquitous unit on describing items in a shop, when one might come across the occasional simile (it's like/looks like) amongst a welter of language including 'a thing with', 'made of' and a variety of relative clauses. Metaphors may also be found in the unit on poetry at advanced level, the units which have songs in them, and, of course, in authentic reading passages chosen for reasons other than their clarity and uncoloured language. There have been occasional attempts to adapt conventional exercises to teach and practise metaphors using common concept-image relationships such as anger and heat (*a blazing row)* and quantity and water *(showered*

with compliments), which are probably better presented as lexical chunks. Similarly, there are thematic focuses such as metaphors to do with the body or the weather, but such classifications tend to be simplistic, decontextualised and deal with common fixed expressions. Classifications of metaphors also present a problem akin to that of the traditional listing of phrasal verbs according to the main verb or the preposition, with metaphors presenting a more complex problem in that they can be classified according to part of speech (noun, verb or adjective), the derivation of the metaphor (colour, the weather, the body), or to what it describes (people, health, event/state):

A red-letter day (adjective, colour, event)
A rough diamond (adjective + noun, object, person)
The foot of the mountain (noun, body, place)
To be in the pink (adjective, colour, health)
To be snowed under (verb, weather, state)

The problem for the teacher and the learner is that metaphor is often unpredictable and personalized. One man's poison may be another man's nectar of the gods. It may be that some metaphors are unnecessary, different or meaningless in the learner's own language. Metaphor requires interpretation rather than interpreting. Even in our own grammar instruction, we are taught the definitions of metaphors and similes and how to distinguish between them, but not how to make or use them.

There is strong case for teaching metaphor (as with phrasal verbs) as lexis, for drawing attention to it in any 'noticing' stage of a lesson, and for storing it meaningfully. Certainly, learners need to see or hear a lot of metaphor, perhaps through stories and anecdotes, before they can produce their own. In a monolingual environment, where exposure is lacking, comparisons may be drawn with metaphors in the mother tongue in order to highlight non-literal meaning and clarify ambiguity; *'One swallow doesn't make a summer'*. Probably the best vehicle for exploring metaphor, however, is the reading passage, since listening texts demand instant attention and metaphors within them may be insignificant in terms of general meaning, confused, or be missed completely. In an authentic reading passage, however, metaphor can easily be concept and image checked:

Smart little restaurants boasting cuisine to die for have sprung up all over Dublin...
Can restaurants boast? No
What springs up? Flowers, plants
Would you die for this food? No

There is also logic to metaphor which lends itself to systematic lexical teaching. Since metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts, language often develops with the concept in a systematic way. An example would be the concept *'Time is money'*, which is based on the scarcity and value of time in our society. The root metaphor gives rise to common phrases such as:

You're *wasting* my time.
How do you *spend* your time these days?
I've invested a lot of time in that project.
I don't have enough time to *spare* for that.
Take the motorway; it'll *save* you an hour.
He's living on I *borrowed* time.
You should use our time more *profitably*.
Similarly, common collocations reflect the same basic metaphorical relationship. We talk about *hourly rates, yearly rentals, annual interest* and paying our debt to society by *serving* or *doing time*. Similar base metaphors include *'Life is a river'* and *'Argument is war'*. The scope for exploring lexical sets and collocation in this framework is enormous.

Metaphor is also closely linked to functional language. Lakoff and Johnson identify the 'orientational metaphor' commonly found in our everyday language to describe the spatial organization of our lives. Orientational metaphors are either locational (going *up* to town, he's *down* the pub', thus substituting for complex locational descriptions, or based on the metaphor that health, life, happiness, virtue, consciousness and common sense (good) are '*up*', while illness, death, sadness, depravity, unconsciousness and irrationality (bad) are '*down*'. Other orientational metaphors referring to control, power, status and quantity have to do with in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral, all of which give a concept a spatial orientation which has a real physical basis. Hence:

Things are looking up	*I'm in deep water*	*He's in the upper echelon*
Put your feelings aside	*He's at the peak of his career*	*He dropped dead*
That would be beneath me	*I'm out of work*	*At the peak of fitness*
Down in the dumps	*Productivity is going up*	*He's in top shape*
He's climbing the ladder	*I'm coming down with the flu*	*I usually rise early*
He sank into a coma	*I'm feeling low these days*	*His spirits sank/rose*

Songs are also a rich source of metaphor, and because learners are often interested, a good context within which to categorise and explain basic use. Certain metaphors are common to particular genres of music, such as the use of the railroad in country and western:
'I wish I was a headlight on a northbound train'
In popular and rock music, metaphor may be overt:
'Oh honey you turn me on, I'm a radio'
Tangential:
'Old trees just grow stronger, old rivers grow wilder every day, old people just grow lonesome'
Related to sub-culture and street language:
'If ya'll can quit poppin' off at your jaws well then I can...we all fall down like toy soldiers'
And can again be easily identified:
'A nation turns its lonely eyes to you'
Can a nation have eyes?
Can it be lonely?

It is the imagery of metaphor and its value in description and explanation, which makes it such a powerful teaching tool which course materials and syllabuses barely pay lip service to. Metaphor is difficult to test, while teachers may feel unable to cope with its complexities. In two recent articles in Humanising Language Teaching, Simon Mumford clearly demonstrates how metaphor can be used in teaching grammar by making connections based on shape, structure, sound, object and process, between familiar objects and unfamiliar language. Metaphors help to avoid lengthy explanation and are often memorable, as are proverbs and sayings (often metaphorical in themselves). Using them as teaching tools helps learners to understand and use them for communicative purposes. One only has to be a little wary in that the over-use of metaphor may detract from central meaning. Over-use of metaphor can also be unnatural, inappropriate, jarring on the ear of the listener or symptomatic of 'showing off', and judicious use is recommended. Inappropriate use of metaphors is often characterised by the mixed metaphor and malapropism *(Once you open a can of worms, they always come home to roost).* The analogy here is with statistics where anything may be connected with anything, but the connection is only of value if there is an underlying rationale.

Much has been made of the value of metaphor in teacher training, particularly in terms of attaching images to the common tools of the teacher, and thus a direct springboard for discussions on methodological issues:
A course book is like a crutch/spare tyre/lifebelt/straightjacket
My classroom is a battlefield/the womb
Alternatively, the metaphor is used to draw parallels with aspects of a chosen situation:

If teachers are like parts of the body, which part do you feel you are in terms of the role you perform in your institution?
This use of metaphor has filtered down from a wider use in education whereby metaphor is seen as either cognitive:
Schools are prisons, gardens, factories, societies, families
Teachers are parents, guides, directors, actors, animal trainers
Students are bottles, plants, circus animals
Or generative:
School should be a market-place/a co-operative/a nursery garden/one big family
Learning should be growth, filling up, acquiring goods, building a structure
In the educational context, the distinction between cognitive and generative is at the very least more relevant and productive than other philosophical and linguistic classifications such as objective/subjective and ontological/structural metaphors. The generative metaphor sits comfortably alongside humanistic teaching and training in that it aims to produce change and is experiential by nature.

In teaching and training, the cognitive metaphor is of immediate use, while the generative metaphor is designed to encourage and influence actions such as reform, reflection and ongoing development. Generative metaphors and actions tend to coexist '*Students are like limitless containers',* for example, implies an ongoing and endless learning process. Cognitive metaphors are relatively safe ground, generally open only to personal misinterpretation. Problems occur, however, when cognitive metaphor is mistaken for generative metaphor and when generative metaphor is misunderstood, thus producing an error in reasoning and possibly in decisions over process or strategy. In Britain, the policy of turning social institutions, including schools and universities, into businesses may well be founded on the unquestioning acceptance of a view of Britain as a nation of shopkeepers, originally and famously coined by Napoleon. The message here is that while metaphor and process/state coexist, processes are dynamic and states may alter. Metaphors may thus become redundant and turn into fossilized lexical items, or into clichés and 'dead metaphors' ('*time is running out'*) which have lost their impact through over-use. Perhaps this is how proverbs, saying and adages emerge; they may be the black dwarfs of metaphor.

The real value of metaphor in education lies in its utility as a vehicle for turning fantasy and concept into reality and practice, both in terms of language for the learner and methodology for the teacher. Metaphor may provide the only way of perceiving and experiencing much of the world. We should remember, however, that since neither language nor methodology is static, we should not obscure newly developed ideas with metaphors from bygone ages.

In the world of metaphors,
there are no boundaries, ownership, or conflict.
(Vivian Chu)

Song lyrics from: The Grateful Dead, Joni Mitchell, John Prine, Eminem and Paul Simon.

References and Recommended Reading

Chu, Vivian. *Teaching Global Unity Through Proverbs, Metaphors and Storytelling.* Developing Teachers http://www.developingteachers.com/articles_tchtraining/global1_vivian.htm
Clandfield, Lindsay. *Explaining the metaphor vocabulary lessons.* Onestop English, http://www.onestopenglish.com/grammar/vocabulary/metaphor1.htm
Cortazzi, Martin, and Lixian, Jin. *Bridges To Learning: Metaphors Of Teaching, Learning And Language*. In *Researching And Applying Metaphor*, ed. Cameron, L. CUP 1999
Goatly, Andrew. *The Language Of Metaphors.* Routledge 1997
Kövecses, Zoltán. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. OUP 2002
Krantz, Caroline. *Exploring Metaphor.* Macmillan English Dictionary E-lesson Archive

http://www.macmillandictionary.com/medelessonsarchive.htm

Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. Univ. of Chicago Press 1980

Lakoff, George, Espenson, Jane, and Schwartz, Alan. *Master Metaphor List (Second Edition).* Cognitive Linguistics Group, University of California at Berkeley, October 1991

Lazar, Gillian. *Exploring Metaphors In The Classroom,* British Council/BBC Teaching English. http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/metaphor.shtml

Lazar, Gillian. *Meanings and Metaphors* Cambridge University Press 2003

Mumford, Simon. *Explaining Grammar Through Metaphor*, Humanising Language Teaching, Year 7, Issue 3, May 2005

Mumford, Simon. *Explaining Grammar Through Metaphor Part 2*, Humanising Language Teaching, Year 7, Issue 6, November 2005

Ormell, Christopher. *Eight Metaphors Of Education*. Educational Research 38 1996

Ponterotto, Dianne. *Metaphors We Can Learn By*. English Teaching Forum 32 1994

Sommer, Elyse, and Weiss, Dorrie. *Metaphors Dictionary*. Visible Ink Press 1996

Steve Darn and Ian White December 2005

steve.darn@ieu.edu.tr   ian.white@ieu.edu.tr