

Metaphorical Competence in the Context of Spanish Language Education

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Abstract: The primary task of teaching a foreign language is to develop in students the ability to communicate successfully in an intercultural foreign language space. Currently, the central theme of many linguistic studies is metaphor, which is a fundamental mental process enabling the understanding of one field of knowledge through another. In the study of metaphor, metaphorical competence holds a special place, referring to the ability to comprehend and employ metaphors in oral and written speech. This article examines and analyzes the main scientific research dedicated to the issue of the content and significance of metaphorical competence. The purpose of this article is to describe the content of metaphorical competence in accordance with the objectives of teaching Spanish in a language university. For our research, we employed various methods, including theoretical analysis of scientific literature, study and synthesis of best practices, and the deductive method.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid scientific advancements of the 21st century have led to the integration of various fields of study, including linguistics, which has greatly benefited from this progress. However, an area that has received less attention but is significant is the study of metaphorical competencies. In the 20th century, metaphorical competence was defined as the ability to use and rephrase metaphors, understand their effectiveness, generate appropriate metaphors for specific contexts, and evaluate the suitability of metaphoric expressions used by others (Gardner & Winner, 1979). Nowadays, metaphorical competence is seen as a complex phenomenon that is studied from an interdisciplinary perspective, considering not only linguistic aspects but also cognitive, social, behavioral, and cultural factors. The authors of this paper agree with Witte (2014) that the concept of metaphorical competence goes beyond mere awareness and analysis of metaphorical meanings; it entails more than just knowledge about metaphors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphorical competence extends beyond linguistic proficiency; it is closely linked to our perception of the world, as humans naturally think and act metaphorically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It provides a framework for clear conceptual mapping within specific cognitive models and categories. Metaphorical competence is rooted in cognitive development, as suggested by Wang and Hao (2013), and it encompasses what is referred to as "conceptual fluency" (Danesi, 1992), which involves a high level of cognitive modeling and conceptual mapping skills, leading to a deep understanding of relationships between concepts and objects and their role in comprehending the world. Littlemore (2008) supports this view by describing metaphorical competence as the ability to perceive and create metaphorical relationships between different concepts. Metaphor is no longer limited to extraordinary or literary language; it is now recognized as a fundamental cognitive ability that shapes our thinking and everyday lives (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Conceptual metaphors, which form the basis of our thinking and actions, have become deeply ingrained in our cultural realities. According

to Cognitive Metaphor Theory, metaphorical concepts enable us to comprehend and discuss abstract phenomena, such as emotions and moral values, by relating them to more concrete entities (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Linguistic phenomena, including metaphor and particularly idiomatic expressions, have attracted considerable interest among linguists and lexicographers due to their frequency in everyday situations. The significance of figurative language, in general, has become a crucial concern for teachers and second language learners as they encounter authentic speech more frequently and in less controlled environments (Ilhombaevna T. I., 2016). In language learning, several elements positively influence learners' language competence, and one of these elements is communication in real-life situations. In multilingual classrooms, learners' language proficiency is associated with their metaphorical competence (Aleshtar & Dowlatabadi, 2014). Metaphorical competence, in practice, influences their linguistic and cognitive abilities and can be regarded as a tool for comparing real-world phenomena with their mental lexicon, promoting the formation of cognitive mapping, network building, logical thinking, and critical thinking skills. Regarding the set of skills and abilities, learners can be categorized into three groups: (1) those who struggle to understand and use complex and highly conventional idioms with metaphorical meanings; (2) those who face difficulties in comprehending and using metaphorical meanings due to gaps in their background knowledge (professional, social, and cultural aspects); and (3) those who find it challenging to grasp and use even expressions with visual imagery, which are relatively easy to visualize and understand but difficult to reproduce. Currently, the study of the metaphorical aspect in teaching is not extensively explored by foreign language teachers, with many relying on idiomatic expressions provided in instructional materials. However, in recent decades, several studies by Azuma (2004), Bakhronova & Abduraimov (2022), Gutierrez Perez (2004), Aquaroni (2008), Lamartie (2011), Turamuratova (2012), and Dominguez (2020) have demonstrated that metaphor plays a more significant role than previously assumed.

Traditionally, in the realm of linguodidactics, the concept of "metaphorical competence" is usually considered as one component of communicative or linguistic competence. Littlemore and Low (2006b) define metaphorical competence as the ability to interpret culturally marked lexical units and figures of speech. Metaphorical competence plays a crucial

role in various aspects of communicative competence, including grammar, text comprehension, illocutionary skills, sociolinguistic awareness, and strategic language use. Littlemore and Low emphasize its relevance to second language learning, teaching, and assessment at all proficiency levels. Gutierrez Perez shares similar views on metaphorical competence, focusing on the cognitive aspect of metaphor and its role in learning Spanish as a second foreign language. The researcher considers metaphorical competence as metaphorical consciousness and strategies for understanding metaphors in a foreign language. However, Gutierrez Perez defines metaphorical competence as one component of lexical competence and suggests the development of strategies to enrich students' metaphorical vocabulary. Littlemore and Low emphasize that learners need more than an understanding of cultural references and figurative language; they need to adopt the target culture and its cultural models, while also mastering conceptual and linguistic metaphors (Littlemore & Low, 2006a).

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, M. Azuma, a Japanese researcher, identifies three aspects of metaphorical competence (MC): 1) recognizing metaphors in foreign language discourse (receptive speech activities); 2) correctly using metaphorical expressions in speech (productive speech activities); and 3) interpreting concepts conveyed through metaphors (cognitive analytical activity). Azuma places MC within the framework of linguistic competence, emphasizing its formation at lexical, semantic, and contextual levels, and highlighting the role of metaphor in conceptualizing culture (Azuma, 2004).

In modern foreign language education, we believe that the content of competence should be determined by the learning goals and the subject-conceptual domain of competence. Considering that the purpose of foreign language education is to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities for effective communication, learning, and interaction within a specific cultural environment, we view metaphorical competence as the intersection of general language learning goals and the subject-conceptual realm of metaphor. To align with the goals of linguistic learning, which include communication in a foreign language and understanding a particular cultural context, we focus on aspects of metaphor that correspond to these objectives. Our approach is informed by the works of the aforementioned

authors and builds upon Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

3. METAPHORS & ROLES IN COMMUNICATION

Before delving further, let us define metaphors and explore their role in communication. Metaphors have traditionally been associated with literature and have not been closely connected to everyday language use. However, Littlemore and Low propose that metaphors should be seen as "structured, analyzable, and related to everyday culture and reasoning" (Littlemore & Low, 2006a). In the 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson revolutionized the study of metaphor by departing from psychological and philosophical perspectives that focused on the poetic and rhetorical aspects of language. They emphasized that many of our daily actions and expressions are inherently metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metaphor is defined as the process of attributing meaning to a concept or object in terms of or through the words of another concept or object (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For example, terms with physical connotations, like "beats," can acquire a different meaning when used metaphorically to represent something mental rather than physical. In Spanish, an expression such as "me golpeó la noticia" illustrates how the verb "golpear" signifies the impact of news on a person's mood. Figurative and metaphorical forms help speakers convey concrete and abstract situations in a way that is easily understood by listeners.

In Spanish, there is a phrase: "EL TIEMPO ES DINERO" (TIME IS MONEY). At first glance, this sentence may seem straightforward, but it incorporates various cognitive and cultural elements to convey its intended meaning as a conceptual metaphor. Conceptual metaphors involve a source domain (a concrete concept) and a target domain (an abstract concept) expressed through metaphorical expressions in language. In this example, the source domain is "TIEMPO" (TIME), and the target domain is "DINERO" (MONEY). These metaphors have specific conceptual components. In Western culture, time can be invested, wasted, lost, saved, or earned. For instance, "con este invento podemos ahorrar mucho tiempo" (with this invention, we can save a lot of time); "perdí mucho tiempo por no saber qué hacer" (I lost a lot of time because I didn't know what to do); "hay que gastar tiempo para ganar

dinero" (you have to spend time to earn money). These examples demonstrate that in Spanish culture, money is perceived as valuable, and the value of time is understood accordingly.

If our thinking is inherently metaphorical, then our learning process should also follow a natural path guided by metaphor (Bakhronova, 2021). Developing metaphorical competence becomes crucial in education as it helps prevent cognitive errors and enhances understanding. Therefore, didactics and teaching methodologies should prioritize metaphor as a key goal and means of achieving comprehension. Considering these points, we propose several tasks that can be implemented in Spanish language lessons.

Despite the positive findings from empirical studies, metaphor awareness and linguistic motivation are often neglected in second language teaching materials and practices. This neglect can be attributed to the challenges of presenting metaphors in a rule-based manner, the hesitance to analyze idiomatic expressions as analyzable word chunks, and the absence of proficiency tests specifically focused on recognizing and using metaphors (Littlemore & Low, 2006a).

Task 1: Metaphor in everyday life. This activity aims to introduce students to the cognitive theory of metaphor without assuming their expertise in the field. It is assumed, however, that learners are familiar with the fundamental concepts proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), particularly the two attributes they ascribe to metaphor: conceptual and linguistic. The proposed activity allows students to apply their language knowledge and skills in a playful and creative manner by creating new metaphors (Littlemore & Low, 2006a).

Write the metaphor "TRISTEZA ES OSCURIDAD" (SADNESS IS DARKNESS) on the board. Explain that this concept is a conceptual metaphor that exists not only in Spanish but also in other languages. Ask if they know any expressions associated with this particular conceptual metaphor. Provide or request expressions containing previously encountered conceptual metaphors. Discuss and analyze examples together, connecting them to sentences from the previous task. Ask students to identify the elements of the conceptual metaphor in the sentences. Then, have students create another conceptual metaphor replacing the original domain, focusing on couples. Finally, generate more sentences using different conceptual metaphors (e.g.,

love, intelligence, death, discussion, success). This can be done through group work.

Task 2. Read the sentences that represent sadness for different people and look at the underlined expressions:

Cuando uno está triste, hasta un día de sol radiante parece un día gris con una tormenta a punto de estallar.

La tristeza debilita el alma, el deseo de vivir, el deseo de soñar te hace inútil y te envuelve en soledad.

Tristeza es el vacío del alma por la ausencia de alguien.

La tristeza te acaba hundiéndote hasta desear la muerte.

The underlined expressions are called metaphorical expressions. With the help of the teacher, relate these expressions to the appropriate CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR and discuss it in class.

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Tristeza es ausencia | Sadness is absence |
| Tristeza es oscuridad | Sadness is darkness |
| Tristeza es abajo | Sadness is down |
| Tristeza es soledad | Sadness is loneliness |

In this activity, reading comprehension is developed by providing sentences containing different metaphorical expressions and opinions from different people. The student is required to read and pay attention to the underlined expressions. After reading, the student, with the help of the teacher as the coordinator, is asked to relate the metaphorical expressions with specific conceptual metaphors listed in the table.

Task 3: Individually write a 10-line text based on a metaphor from a conceptual metaphor that you invent yourself or choose from the previous exercise. Here are some ideas:

Example: Conceptual Metaphor: SADNESS IS EMPTINESS

For me, sadness is feeling the absence of a loved one'

This exercise focuses on developing written expression and metaphorical competence. The student works individually, emphasizing learner autonomy. The task involves writing a 10-line text based on a metaphor from a conceptual metaphor that the student invents or selects from a previous exercise. Some ideas are provided as examples.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the analysis of studies on metaphorical competence in both domestic and foreign traditions, along with the correlation of the analysis data with the goals of language teaching, has allowed us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Metaphorical competence involves the ability to understand, interpret, and produce metaphorical expressions in speech, utilizing them as means of communication and representation of underlying cultural meanings.

2. The development of metaphorical competence occurs through interconnected processes that foster knowledge, skills, and abilities underlying the two components of metaphorical competence: speech and cultural representation.

3. By achieving a high level of competence in both components, individuals can effectively and appropriately utilize metaphorical means in real communication situations within the context of the studied linguistic culture. Each stage of metaphorical competence development corresponds to specific teaching methods aimed at addressing particular learning challenges. Identifying these methods will enable the design of a strategy for cultivating metaphorical competence within the framework of foreign language learning, opening the door for further research on metaphorical competence in the field of language education. Through our theoretical review, we have recognized a lack of theorizing on metaphorical competence in the realm of teaching Spanish as a foreign language. We believe it would be beneficial, initially, to replicate studies on metaphorical competence conducted in other countries that have explored its acquisition in various languages. We consider metaphorical competence to be an unexplored field in the domain of Spanish teaching, deserving further investigation and exploration.

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