

COLOURS AND METAPHORS: COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES

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In this study our primary interest is to explore the cultural-cognitive elements of metaphors dealing with colours. Proverbs, phrases and metaphors are perceived as an adjustment of cognitive and linguistic patterns to the needs of communication.

Recent research in psycholinguistics shows that the meaning of many idioms are motivated by people's conceptual knowledge, which includes metaphorical schemes of thought. Like idiomatic phrases, proverbs give significant insights into the poetics of mind because they reflect how our metaphorical conceptualization of experience bears on particular social situations.

Metaphoric language has its preference regarding colours. Mainly basic, focal colour terms are used in metaphors; some colours are used more frequently than others. Black, white and red are the most frequent having the largest map of experience.

In conclusion, metaphoric language gives us insight into the structure of human mind.

1. Introduction

Everyday language contains many thousands of idiomatic, slang and proverbial phrases whose figurative interpretations diverge in various ways from their literal meanings. Metaphor clearly plays a significant part in the development of idiomatic vocabulary. We use hundreds of them daily without even noticing them. Metaphors are omnipresent in science, politics, etc. In computer science we use them quite often, e.g. "NET", "WEB", "MOUSE", "BUG", "VIRUS". Newspaper headlines use metaphors as bold, simple and direct ways of conveying an abstract idea (e.g. *Poland sails into uncharted waters.*). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that conceptually we live by metaphors, that much of rational thought involves the use of metaphoric model. Metaphoric sentences derive from the human tendency to organize perceptual information. They are considered to be

an important mode of understanding and a way of structuring experience. Metaphors represent a way to deal with the relative inability of language to express directly the complexity of our perceptual experience. Many semantic domains are not easily represented. We do not have a commonly shared interpersonal set of organizing principles for emotion names. Therefore we use set expressions like *blue mood*, *brown study*...

Physical and social
experience ----> perception ----> mental model ----> linguistic model

Exposed to a certain situation we invoke mental representations (concepts) of objects, entities and events stored in our memory. Quite often we use highly structured items, like proverbs, phrases, in order to describe certain situation. Cognitive models often use verbal metaphors as their linguistic device. Cognitive models depend on the culture in which person grows up. The culture provides the background for all situations that we have to experience in order to be able to form a cognitive model. Cultural models are based on informal observation, traditional beliefs. When an area of shared experience is relatively abstract, and in order to talk about it, terms are drawn from another, more concrete area, e.g. *All cats are gray in the dark*. Metaphors involve mapping across different cognitive models.

Most idioms and phrases are easily recognized as frozen or standardized metaphors. They are stored in our memory ready to be activated. Because of their imagery they are easily recalled from our memory or mental lexicon. Such phrasal and proverbial metaphors deserve our attention.

Recent research in psycholinguistics shows that the meaning of many idioms are motivated by people's conceptual knowledge, which includes metaphorical and metonymic schemes of thought. In this way, the study of idioms reveals significant aspects of how people ordinarily think. Like idiomatic phrases, proverbs give significant insights into the poetics of mind because they reflect how our metaphorical conceptualization of experience bears on particular social situations.

2. Phrases and proverbs dealing with metaphors

In order to analyze metaphoric language we targeted our investigation on colour names used in proverbs and phrases.

One enduring belief about idioms and phrases is that these expressions are noncompositional because their figurative meanings are not functions of the meanings of their individual parts. For instance, the figurative meaning of *spill the beans* (to reveal a secret) cannot be determined through an analysis of the meanings of its individual words. It possesses high expressive power and sometimes it can convey a message with more economy and efficiency than a whole passage of ordinary words. It cannot stand alone as an independent unit, e.g.

blue blood
blue mood
white hope

yellow dog
yellow press

Proverbs can be observed as a type of artistic text, which has a single message. According to K. Burke (1957) "*Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations*". We usually select metaphoric proverb with appropriate imagery to suit the character of the situation, which is often repeated. According to the results of statistical analysis 93% of proverbs use metaphors as their expressive device. Proverbs can be viewed as problem solving situations and as a part of our constellation of conversational strategies. They provide a verbal model of some real life situation. Our conceptualization of models of abstract categories is grounded in our experience with people, events and objects. As an input we use basic image schema (*The grass is greener on the other side of fence*) and as an output we have more abstract, general meaning. It seems that metaphors are powerful cognitive tools for our conceptualization of abstract categories. If we want to frame social reality with logical relations such as:

- "*Act immediately*", we can use metaphorical expressions like the following:
Strike while the iron is hot. (English)
Mold while the day is soft. (Swahili)
Cook the pumpkin while the fire is alive. (Hebrew)
- "*Bad things can't be changed*":
You cannot make a silk purse out of sow's ear. (English)
Od konja ne stvori magarca. (Croatian)
Di coda di asino non si puo fare staccio. (Italian)
The snake will not be straightened even if you put it into a bamboo pipe.
(translated Japanese proverb)

Each of the above mentioned proposals correspond to the same situation i.e. conveys the same logical content and the character of the relationship between objects. Cross-cultural analysis of proverb show that our linguistic reaction to the same situation might be different regarding imagery but the logical content is the same. It seems that languages have a tendency to categorize the same experience in different way and the patterns of linguistic selection reflect conceptual content and specific cultural models rather than reality.

3. Colours in metaphors

According to Marjorie F. Vargas (1989; 138): "...colour is more than a physical separation of visible light into its component parts. It is a powerful stimulus upon human beings, both physically and psychologically. Our use of colour is constantly communicating messages to ourselves and others."

Colours are clearly important in mankind's perception of the world. People see in colour, and everything around us is coloured. Colour is connected with what is probably the most important sense, namely sight. Thus, it is equally to be expected that colour will find its way into language in the form of colour metaphors. Colour terms are also useful in metaphors because they have natural and conventional associations, so that it is possible to express ideas and connotations in a very concise way. Metaphors are by their very nature a denser

form of expression than literal language is. Given the importance of colour in human sight, colour metaphors are particularly striking.

Colour terms are a favourite playground of anthropologists and linguists seeking insights into the human mind and its linguistic products.

According to certain indicators the majority of metaphoric proverbs use events, situations that have their point of support in experience and observe external effects and natural phenomenon, e.g. *A green winter makes a fat churchyard*. The colour spectrum is an objective fact: it is "out there" waiting to be dealt with cognitively. The speakers of different languages use colour terms, which contain different numbers of terms. They cut up the spectrum differently. Metaphors dealing with colours make an interesting field of research.

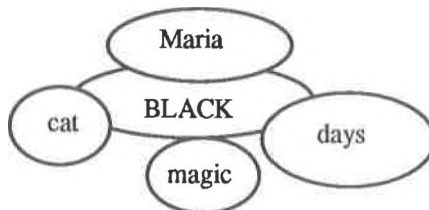
In language colour is frequently related to metaphors. We describe ourselves and our behavior using colours. When we are happy we are "tinkled pink" and greet the world "with flying colours". After we "paint the town red" on the weekend, we are apt to make up feeling "a little green around the gills" and have a "bluc Monday". Envious people "turn green", and cowards are "yellow" in the face of danger. Sometimes we see "pink elephants", or we might be in "a brown study". We call our language "bluc" when we speak in a profane way. In political rhetoric colour is often used to convey a message.

It is obvious that colour terms in phrases and proverbs have additional meaning besides its reference to the colour itself. For example, the word *black* has all sorts of negative associations in English and other European languages in its metaphorical usages, which are not linked with its literal meaning of a colour, e.g. *to blacken someone's name, a black look, blackleg, etc.*

Words dealing with colours are connected to other words by shared features. There is a network of associated words for each colour item based on perceived similarity and general memory information.

BLACK is associated with the following words: death, darkness, evil, bad luck, etc.

Things are looking black. (black=bad)
 The black sheep of the family. (black=disgrace)
 Two blacks don't make a white.
 The devil is not so black as he is painted.
 black cat = bad luck
 black death
 black Maria
 black days
 black market
 black magic



WHITE is usually associated with purity, innocence, chastity, cowardice:

white knight
 white-handed person
 white horses
 white hope
 white-liveried person
 white lie
 white heart
 White silver draws black lines.

YELLOW is accompanied by sickness, jealousy, and sensation:

yellow belly
 yellow press
 yellow peril
 yellow dog

BLUE is associated with noble birth, mood, pornography...

blue blood
 blue film
 blue joke
 blue pencil
 blue mood

RED - In its company are fire, heat, courage, patriotism, anger and danger.

a red herring
 red carpet
 red-light district
 Reds (communists)
 red peril
 red rage
 red-letter day

Evening red and morning gray help the traveler on his way.

GRAY: gloomy, sad, depressing, old:

gray despair, gray spirits, gray man, gray cell, and gray person
 All cats are gray in the dark.
 The gray mare is the better horse. (The wife rules the husband.)

BROWN:

brown bred, brown study

GREEN is associated with the youth, envy, jealousy:

green eye
 greenhorn
 green wine
 A green wound is soon healed.

Preliminary results of the comparative analysis of English, Croatian and Italian language shows that in spite of the fact that colour space or reality is

constant for all mankind different cultures associate different hues to certain colours. e.g.

- E. red wine = C. crno vino (black wine) = I. vino rosso (red wine)
- E. brown bread = C. crni kruh (black bread) = I. pane nero (black bread)
- E. grey hair = C. bijela glava (white head)
- E. black eye = C. modrica na oku (blue on the eye)
- E. All cats are gray in the dark. = C. All cows are black in the darkness.

What is red or *gray* for an Englishman looks *black* for a Croat. Where English speakers use *brown*, Croatian speakers use other terms like *mrk*, *taman*, *tmuran*: brown bear = mrki medvjed, brown ale = tamno pivo, brown years = tmurne godine.

It seems that language categorizes the information it does find significant and each language imposes its own grid on our experience trying to reduce our universe to order. In other words languages have a tendency to "improve" the structure upon the real world by treating some distinctions as crucial and ignoring other. Languages differ in the way they classify experience.

Colour space or reality is constant for all mankind but we use different naming, classification. It seems that the ways in which we categorize our perceptual experiences are rooted at the same time in the perceptual world, in its properties and in our experience of it.

4. Proverbs as conceptual metaphors

The assumption is that specific situations and events which appear frequently attempt to develop their own organization of verbal means such as proverbial sentences based on metaphors which are usually supported by the rules of the economy of language. The high frequency of most communicative situation compiled with the natural desire for brevity and the path of least resistance influences the structure of proverbial sentence. Specific sentence structure serves as a framework for a mental model, which pictures the situation. There is a use of almost identical strategy in the choice of the model sentence while images on which syntactic structures are based are culture specific.

The maker of a proverbial sentence frequently selects metaphors as categorization tools of our experience in order to achieve some strategic goals like avoiding direct reference, shifting the responsibility of his claim to past traditions and unquestionable natural phenomenon, e.g. *Even the black cow gives white milk*. Metaphorical language is based upon imagery, verbal associations and abstract representations. Proverbial metaphors show accommodation of our language to the casual structure of the world. We use them to experience one kind of thing in terms of another creating new conceptual realities. When we understand a metaphor like *He is yellow* we assess the attribution of yellow and of man. Yellow evokes symbolic values grounded on tradition and in this context it is associated with cowardice. We perceive the potential relationship between the two topics: *man-yellow*. We suggest here that the two entities share relevant features.

Mostly proverbs are phrased impersonally, so that the very personal problem becomes more universalized (neutral statement, third person singular). The appearance of the objectivity is further heightened when they employ metaphoric technique of argument (particular > universal). We can use creative metaphoric language to avoid committing ourselves personally in such a way that a speaker can thus voice his own opinion without being strictly accountable for it. Lakoff and Turner (1989; 160) see proverbs in terms of conceptual metaphor 'generic is specific' and of the mapping of one kind of schema onto another and they suggest that proverbs 'lead us to general characterizations, which nevertheless are grounded in the richness of the special case'.

The results of the analysis show that proverbial sentences based on literal meaning show a tendency towards phonic devices like rhyme, alliteration, repetition of words while metaphoric proverbs show a tendency towards the usage of imagery and in the same time they do not show an inclination towards acoustic effects. Sample of proverbs which are not easily imagined in terms of other sensory and storage media require to rely more on the synthetic frames and specific stylistic features than high-imagery sentences.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, most idioms and phrases are easily recognized as frozen or standardized metaphors. They provide economical and selective codes for events, making information processing more efficient. It seems that metaphors are powerful cognitive tools for our conceptualization of abstract categories. As an input we usually use basic image schema (e.g. green grass) and as an output we have more abstract, general meaning. According to R. P. Honeck (199; 163): "inputs that are concrete tend to be recalled better than more abstract inputs."

Proverbs, phrases and metaphors put a great deal of conceptual power in a small, condensed package. One way to address this property is in terms of mental economy, which is consistent with a mental law of least effort.

Speakers use metaphorical expressions because they are more colourful and effective than straightforward, literal sentences. Metaphoric language has its preference regarding colours. Mainly basic, focal colour terms are used in metaphors; some colours are used more frequently than others are. Black, white and red are the most frequent having the largest map of experience.

Finally, we perceive metaphors as an adjustment of cognitive and linguistic patterns to the needs of communication. It is the most economic condensation of understanding of many levels of experience, symbolic connotations, all in a phrase. According to Sticht (1993; 622) the function of metaphor is to extend human communicative and conceptual capacities. Metaphors are in fact windows to the systems of knowledge that are relevant and central in a given culture. The approach described here is influenced by models of language and thought developed by research within cognitive linguistics.

It seems certain that the study of cliched idiomatic expressions can provide significant evidence on how people think metaphorically in everyday life.

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Danica Škara: BOJE I METAFORA: KOGNITIVNI ASPEKT

S a ž e t a k

Primarni je cilj ovoga rada istražiti kulturne i kognitivne modele metafore utemeljene na poimanju boja. Poslovice, fraze i metafore promatraju se kao okvir kognitivnog i jezičnog uzorka koji se učestalo koristi u komunikaciji.

Novija istraživanja u psiholingvistici pokazuju da je značenje navedenih idiomatskih izraza snažno motivirano čovjekovim konceptualnim sustavom koji uključuje metaforičku strukturu misli. Jednako kao i fraze i poslovice daju značajan uvid u poetiku misli jer odražavaju strukturu metaforičkog poimanja iskustva u određenoj situaciji. Rezultati analize pokazuju da se metafora oslanja uglavnom na temeljne nazive za boje. Tako npr. crna, bijela i crvena pokrivaju najveće iskustveno polje.

Zaključno je moguće reći da nam analiza metafore pruža uvid u strukturu ljudskih misli.