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Analysing metaphorical political discourse in the L2 academic classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of the following paper is to show a practical solution for analyzing metaphors in political discourse in accordance with the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff 1980) integrated into teaching an L2 upper-intermediate academic class. In view of the fact that the lesson was developed and conducted with military students, the material for analysis was chosen from President Obama's 2013 speech on Syria. Students' task was to formulate metaphors on the basis of metaphorical expressions distinguished in bold in the speech by the teacher. As a result, orientational, ontological and structural metaphors were properly created, which constituted further basis for the interpretation of the discourse sample. In order to assess the relevance of such classes, a post-lesson survey was conducted directly after the lesson. Obtained results point to the usefulness of learning metaphors to facilitate the comprehension of political discourse. Additionally, their importance for the professional career in the army was revealed.

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1. Introduction

Currently, there is a proliferation of press conferences and speeches given by politicians on a wide variety of occasions. Hence, the role of their addressee has gained more considerable importance. Namely, he is no longer a passive target of political ideology, which has to be accepted. In the democratic era of cyclic elections in which people's support is the key for the ruling party's and authorities' success, political discourse aims at involving the

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conscious addressee in its premises. Thus, a number of rhetorical devices and linguistic tools, whose comprehension requires an advanced level of language proficiency are employed. Metaphor is one of such cognitive devices, especially in view of the fact that according to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) it is applied in order to understand abstract concepts so frequently conveyed in political discourse. This understanding is possible owing to a process called mapping during which the structure of a more specific source domain is partially transferred onto a more abstract target domain (Barcelona 2002). In politics, one of the most common metaphors is ARGUMENT IS WAR, as a result of which arguing is expressed by means of linguistic structures characteristic of warfare. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 124) provide the following examples:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every point* in my argument.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 He *shot down* all of my arguments.

Sun Ling (2010) gives further examples of metaphors connected with the domains of politics and war:

A POLITICAL ELECTION IS A BATTLE ON A BATTLEFIELD
 POLITICIANS ARE SOLDIERS
 POLITICAL STRATEGIES ARE WAR STRATEGIES

Structural metaphors mentioned above do not constitute a finite set used in politics. Nevertheless, apart from the structural type, political discourse abounds in orientational[†] and ontological[‡] metaphors as well as metonymies.[§]

The purpose of this paper is to present how political discourse can be analysed with regards to various types of metaphor during an English class with upper-intermediate military students.

2. Rationale and material

The need for such classes is connected with the military students' learning environment and requirements which it creates. Namely, they participate in numerous conferences and student exchanges as part of the Erasmus project. Additionally, their studies incorporate the knowledge of political processes, international war theatres and political situation. Taking these factors into consideration, it becomes evident that training students in English for Academic Purposes is insufficient. More specifically, as future servicemen within international allied armed forces, they require linguistic skills that would enable them to comprehend underlying messages and subtleties of political discourse. Accordingly, the knowledge of metaphors might facilitate the development of such critical skills and consequently stimulate accurate comprehension.

The paper was written after the author conducted classes on analysing metaphors in political discourse with 11 upper-intermediate military students at the Polish Air Force Academy in Dęblin in December 2015. Since Poland is a member of NATO and regular participant of joint allied training events, Polish military students ought to be familiar with basic premises of American international foreign policy. Therefore, the material chosen for analysis was President's Obama speech on Syria given on 10 September 2013.

3. Analysing Metaphors in President Obama's Speech

Classes were preceded by a brief 15-minute introduction of the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor made by the teacher. Basic premises presented on the blackboard included:

[†] Orientational metaphors enable us to understand our experience or emotions in terms of directions: up or down. For instance, HAPPINESS IS UP, DEATH IS DOWN.

[‡] Ontological metaphors enable us to understand abstract concepts in terms of objects and substances. The most common example provided by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 28) is THE MIND IS AN ENTITY.

[§] According to Kövecses (2002: 145) metonymy is a mapping, which occurs within the same cognitive domain or Idealized Cognitive Model. Examples are: THE PRODUCER FOR A PRODUCT, PART FOR WHOLE.

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