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Experts' personal metaphors and similes about language learning strategies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines many instances of figurative language – metaphors and similes – employed by six international experts to describe language learning strategies and their involvement with such strategies over many years. The first stage of analysis showed that the experts' metaphors and similes were associated with (a) construction, (b) visual arts, (c) food and drink, (d) liquid, (e) travel/movement, (f) cultivation, (g) music, (h) light, (i) sports, (j) business, (k) animals, and (l) temperature. The next stage of analysis condensed the themes into the following larger themes: (a) awakening to strategies for the first time, (b) receiving and giving powerful gifts along the journey, and (c) learner self-management. The overarching theme, which emerged in the third and final stage of analysis, was the urgent necessity of understanding learning strategies and using appropriate theories to explain them.

Language learning strategies are the steps or actions that a learner consciously takes to improve and regulate his or her language learning (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2008, 2013; Oxford, 1990a, 1996, 2011b). Learning strategies can make language learning more effective, efficient, and enjoyable (Oxford, 1990a). This article answers the following questions: Do learning strategy experts depict those strategies in figurative language, such as metaphor and simile? If so, what metaphors and similes do they employ and why? Using contributions from six international specialists in learning strategies, this article presents a number of strikingly different ways in which learning strategies are depicted by means of figures of speech.

In this article, the theoretical framework explains the nature and importance of metaphor and simile. The literature review focuses on the use of metaphor in prior theorizing and discussions about language learning strategies. The methodology section presents the means by which the six stories were gathered and analyzed. After the methodology the six complete stories are presented, followed by the results of the analysis and the conclusion.

1. Theoretical framework: why look at figurative language?

The focus of the present section is primarily on metaphor, which involves a stated equivalency between seemingly unrelated things. However, many of the concepts in this section also apply to similes, figurative comparisons that lack the

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brilliantly equalizing force of metaphor. Metaphors and similes are part of figurative language, i.e., language using figures of speech that depart from the literal meaning. The word "figurative" implies images or pictures used for special effect, but figurative language can also help us experience other senses as well, such as hearing, touch, taste, and movement. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which an equivalency is made with something that seems, at first blush, unrelated to it. The term comes from Greek *metaphora*, meaning "a transfer," which is based on *metapherein* "transfer, carry over; change, alter," from a combination of *meta* (over, across) and *pherein* (to carry or bear) (Harper, 2012). An active metaphor is often highly creative, fresh, and sometimes even dazzling. Metaphors have three parts: the topic, the vehicle, and the grounds of similarity. In the well-known metaphor "love is a rose" (Ronstadt, 1976/1990), *love* is the topic, and *rose* is the vehicle. The grounds – how the two are alike (the rose has beauty and painful thorns, and love offers beauty and pain) – are frequently understood rather than explicitly stated. For more on metaphor, see Gordon (1978), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Turner (1989), and Stight (1979). Simile is a slightly weaker form of comparison than metaphor. A simile includes words such as "like," "as," or "similar to," as in Robert Burns' song "O my Luve's like a red, red rose…," published again hundreds of years later (Burns, 1994).

Metaphor may be as old as language. Certainly it is as old as written literature. One of our oldest examples of literature, the Bible, is full of metaphor, such as the light of the world, the waters of life, the rock which forms a strong foundation, the camel through eye of the needle, and the farmer sowing seed. These metaphors echo down the ages, and are memorable when something more literal would long have been forgotten. For some reason, the need to express ideas, emotions, and profound thoughts in metaphorical terms seems to be a basic human need which is recorded from the beginnings of written literature, and, therefore, probably goes back beyond into the oral traditions which preceded written records.

As Littlemore (2001, para. 3) pointed out, "the use of metaphor pervades all language and communication. The 'mouth' of a river, the 'eye' of a needle, and the 'heart' of the matter are commonplace expressions which represent metaphorical extensions of parts of the body. Metaphor is so pervasive in language that it would be impossible for a person to speak without using metaphor at some point, whether knowingly or not." From the learners' point of view, Littlemore (2001) continued: "The main benefits [of learning about metaphor] are that it enriches language production and facilitates comprehension of metaphoric expressions, which, as we saw above, are ubiquitous. It is therefore likely to contribute positively to an overall level of communicative competence." In their ground-breaking book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggested that humans think in metaphors. Metaphors make our thoughts more vivid and help to structure our perceptions and understanding, transforming our customary schemata (mental frameworks) and helping us to comprehend more deeply our experiences and what goes on around us. Metaphors thus constitute one of our most significant ways of taking in and processing information, allowing us to build up richer, more complex schemata.

Furthermore, according to Thornbury (1991), "Teachers, like other professionals, resort to and depend on the use of metaphor when it comes to verbalizing their experience; metaphors help them to see what is invisible, to describe what otherwise would be indescribable" (p. 193). Or, as Karlsson (2008, p. 86) put it: "Metaphors make it possible to bring in what we know, but also challenge us to see the already familiar in a new way, in a novel constellation, and from a different point of view."

Uncovering experts' strategy-related metaphors, of which they themselves are often not aware, helps to advance the strategy field by revealing what is on their minds and close to their hearts. The examination of metaphor can produce some interesting insights into the user's background, way of thinking, sense of identity, and underlying realities and can help to guide the experts' more formal contributions to the strategy field. Even the much-maligned mixed metaphor (such as the title of Griffiths's story) can contribute to an understanding of the multifaceted world in which teachers live and work.

Moreover, people talk in metaphors when sharing their stories (narratives). Strategy experts rarely tell their own stories in print, because they are so busy dealing with learners. However, when the first author asked strategy experts to tell stories about their engagement with learning strategies, this opened some creative floodgates. In their narratives, experts' ideas and experiences often came out in metaphorical terms. Turning the tables by asking strategy experts – who are not usually research subjects – to share their own personal stories about strategies is a unique and important way to understand both the experts and the role of strategies in their lives (and, implicitly, in other people's lives). Using this approach, the present article helps to expand and shift the strategy field in useful and novel directions.

Narratives such as those in this article exemplify a key research method which is currently gaining the attention of researchers because of its ability to reveal underlying truths which may not be apparent using more traditional research methods (see, for instance, Barcelos, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2011; Kiernan, 2010). Metaphor is a fundamental part of narrative research. Focusing on strategy experts' personal stories, rife with metaphors about strategies, puts this article squarely into the current movement toward narrative research in education.

2. Literature review: use of metaphor in prior strategy theorizing and discussions

Though metaphors have rarely, if ever, been systematically studied in research on language learning strategies, especially from the teachers' or researchers' point of view, they are present and plentiful; similes are less abundant, or at least they do not stand out in our review. Examples of metaphors in earlier theorizing and discussions about strategies include the metaphorical term "strategies" itself, as well as metaphors involving construction, tapestry as a visual art, liquid/depth, travel/movement, music, light, weight, and business.