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Metaphorical competence in professional communication

Larisa Ilinska, Marina Platonova, Tatjana Smirnova*

Riga Technical University, Faculty of E-Learning Technologies and Humanities, 1 Kalku Str., LV-1658, Latvia

Abstract

Nowadays the ability to discuss complex scientific and technical phenomena metaphorically is considered to be a compulsory faculty for successful professional interaction. It incorporates the ability of communication participants to understand metaphorical meaning construct, trace its implementation in LSP context, and transfer its meaning to other languages, preserving the effect and associations triggered by lexical items based on metaphoric meaning transfer. The paper aims at describing complex organization of metaphorical competence and at investigating its role in the process of professional communication, paying special attention to the differences in application and challenges associated with its use in the multilingual setting.

1. Introduction

Growing complexity of information communicated in the area of engineering calls for the necessity to be proficient not only in the particular scientific domain, i.e. being able to profoundly understand the content communicated, but also to develop covert information management skills, and that implies the ability for code switching, deeper concept mapping and knowledge of the modes of information transfer. The latter is of utmost importance given that the tendency for information compression governed by the principles of linguistic economy is becoming even more evident in the professional texts.

The mechanisms aimed at increasing the density of information communicated within one lexical slot may differ, but they all provide certain reference to the hidden content, which is decoded only on the basis of the meaning of

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +3-712-670-5473; fax: +3-716-708-9539.
E-mail address: tatjana.smirnova@rtu.lv

particular scientific and/or technical phenomena. Thus, in the process of acquisition of language for specific purposes (LSP) it is necessary to address the issues of information foregrounding, developing not only such relevant skills as cognitive, analytical and critical thinking, but also to pursue excellence in abstract thinking and figurative language use.

Nowadays, the ability to construe complex scientific and technical phenomena in metaphorical categories is considered to be a compulsory faculty for successful communication. It incorporates not just the ability to recognize dead metaphors in the professional setting, but also the ability to understand the mechanisms of metaphorical meaning construct, trace its implementation in the micro and macro context of communication, and, what is even more important, to transfer its meaning to other languages preserving, if possible, the associations and aesthetic effect communicated by the lexical item.

The increasing popularity of the idea of introducing 'the metaphorical or figurative competence' (Levorato, 1993, p. 122) as the compulsory element of academic discourse is also rooted in the necessity to educate and train specialists adopting the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) paradigm in the tertiary education, which implies training the "literacy that enables the creative and comprehensive issue resolution through increasing the interest in and the understanding of the fused knowledge… in the various fields related to science technology on the basis of experience about the contents fused in various fields through creative designs and emotional touches" (Kim and Park, 2013, p. 430). Therefore, nowadays the ability to approach scientific phenomena and technological challenges creatively and to communicate technical information in natural and exact sciences employing the mechanisms of the figurative language is a trait confirming full professional proficiency.

The aim of the present research is to analyze how to teach and develop metaphorical competence in a multilingual classroom uniting participants – exchange students within Erasmus programme, non-native speakers of English from different countries – in the context of LSP acquisition, with the focus on teaching English for Specific Purposes. The advanced level of metaphorical competence is an inherent element of both general and professional foreign language proficiency. Within the framework of the present paper, we concentrate on describing the multilayered structure of the metaphorical competence analyzing its role in the process of professional communication, second language acquisition and development of background knowledge in the multicultural setting.

2. Metaphorical competence: theoretical framework

In the 20th century, metaphorical competence was defined as the capacity to use and paraphrase a metaphor, to appreciate metaphor's effectiveness, to produce a metaphor appropriate to a given context, and to evaluate the appropriateness of metaphoric expressions used by other communication participants, cf. (Gardner and Winner, 1979). Nowadays, metaphorical competence is seen as a multifaceted phenomenon studied in the interdisciplinary perspective considering not only linguistic, but also cognitive, social, behavioral and cultural aspects. The authors of the present paper share the opinion of Witte that the notion of metaphorical competence "implies more than just being aware of metaphorically constructed meaning and its analysis; it is more than just knowing about metaphor" (Witte, 2014, p. 284).

Metaphorical competence is not limited to linguistic proficiency; it correlates with our perception of the world, because it is typical of humans to think and act metaphorically, cf. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 3). It also establishes the framework for clear concept mapping within particular cognitive models and/or categories. It is argued that metaphorical competence originates from cognitive science, as its foundation comes from cognition development, cf. (Wang and Hao, 2013, p. 84). Metaphorical competence is the reflection of the so-called 'conceptual fluency' (Danesi, 1992, p. 493), which implies the advanced command of cognitive modeling and conceptual mapping implemented in the deep understanding of the concept-object relationships and their role in the comprehension of the world. The same view is also supported by Littlemore (2008, p. 201), who refers to 'metaphoric' competence as to "the ability to perceive and create metaphoric relationships between different concepts".

Metaphorical competence is also seen as the instance of behavioral proficiency, which concerns the ability of programming the discourse in metaphorical way and is considered to be the basic feature of a native speaker, cf. (Danesi, 1992, p. 493). It refers to the "learners' ability to draw on the same, or almost the same, range of concepts as native speakers in the contexts of a particular situation" (Harden, 2009, p. 122), while insufficient metaphorical