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Boundaries and hybrid blends: How one multilingual narrator displays symbolic competence in a college writing class

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ABSTRACT

Literacy scholars and second language researchers have identified ELL writers' border crossing experiences as prime sites of critical literacy, observing multilingual speakers' increased ability to manipulate and inflect language with cross-cultural connotations, including metaphorical blending. Most second language researchers who look at ELL's metaphor production focus on language fluency, rather than symbolic competence. This case study compares one Vietnamese-American writer's unconscious application of conceptual metaphor with her consciously chosen metaphorical blend. This analysis finds that Violet displayed symbolic competence when unconsciously modifying source and target domains of conceptual metaphors as well as when consciously crafting her own metaphoric blend. The difference is that, despite Violet's symbolic competence, the conventional conceptual metaphors are more restrictive than her creative metaphoric blend. Violet's creative hybrid space allows her to imagine reconciliation and potential combinations of selected values rather than wholesale subscriptions to cultural norms.

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The growing student population[1] of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States, or those who speak a language other than English at home, presents both opportunities and challenges to practitioners of postsecondary reading and writing. To facilitate ELL students' pathways through college, L2 writing researchers look for pedagogies that value students' local knowledge while learning about, incorporating, and changing institutional knowledge (Zisselsberger, Assaf, & Singh, 2012, p. 93). Some second language researchers have recognized ELL writers' linguistic and cultural border crossing experiences as prime sites of transformation, experiences exemplified by the linguistic narratives of Anzaldúa, Rodriguez, Hoffman, and Kaplan (Coffey & Street, 2008; Kramsch, 2009). They have observed multilingual writers' increased ability to manipulate and inflect language with cross-cultural connotations, which sometimes include metaphorical blending (Turner, 1996; Warner, 2004). These writers who are able to manipulate symbolic systems, interpret signs and their multiple relations to other signs, and who use semiotic practices to convey meaning and to position themselves for their benefit in the symbolic power game have what Kramsch (2006) termed, *symbolic competence*. Symbolic competence includes not only an awareness of the building blocks of a symbolic system, including conceptual metaphors, but the ability to manipulate these metaphors and create new ones for one's own benefit. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980a, 1980b), conceptual metaphors are more than literary artifices, they are basic structures of everyday thought and language in which one thing is described in terms of another. More specifically, the elements of a source image schema are projected onto those of a target image schema, projections which show up in conventional linguistic expressions that we are hardly ever conscious of. Conventional metaphors (i.e. LOVE IS A JOURNEY, TIME IS MONEY, ARGUMENT IS WAR) make up the ordinary conceptual system of a culture, but the same cognitive process can also produce new imaginative or creative metaphors which one may use in the symbolic power game to position oneself between cultures (i.e. "love is a collaborative work of art"; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 139).

Other second language researchers have identified *metaphorical competence* as an integral component of communicative competence, or knowledge of language and appropriate communication strategies (Canale & Swain, 1980). Metaphorical competence is the awareness of guiding conceptual metaphors in a language, and the network of linguistic phrases that they engender (MacArthur, 2010, p. 160). L2 researchers argue that learning metaphors helps with all areas of communicative competence including grammatical competence, textual competence, illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Littlemore & Low, 2006, p.268; Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, & Turner, 2014).

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[1] Currently, ELLs represent more than 20% of the school-age population, a number that has doubled in the last 30 years (Kanno and Harklau, 2012).

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This is because metaphor appears at all levels of language including local features like prepositions ("under investigation", "in time"), personifications ("companies realize"), evaluative phrases ("the bottom line is") and global features like expressions of abstract concepts including nominalizations ("lung cancer death rates") and direct metaphors ("women still manage a little country called family") (Littlemore et al., 2014). Still, these educators, who have native-like competency as a goal (Bachman, 1990; Littlemore & Low, 2006), have offered few recommendations for productive instructional strategies for metaphor that would support ELLs' ability to define success (Kramsch, 2009, p.201), shape the context of learning (Warner, 2004, p. 73), or change institutional knowledge (Zisselsberger et al., 2012, p.93).

This article contributes to the development of instructional strategies for developing symbolic and metaphorical competence of multilingual students by examining the production and critical reflection of creative metaphorical blends in an early college writing course. It compares the focus of one Vietnamese American student's creative metaphorical blend with the unconscious, conceptual metaphors that appear in her writing. While the successful deployment of these conceptual metaphors signals her increased communicative competence in English, it reinforces existing mainstream American cultural norms and boundaries. In contrast, the student's consciously chosen creative metaphoric blend portrays a hybrid conceptual space in which traditional Vietnamese and mainstream American cultural values interact. Violet's creative hybrid space allows her to imagine reconciliation and potential combinations of selected values rather than wholesale subscriptions to cultural norms.

1. Literature review

1.1. Unconscious use of conceptual metaphor, a sign of fluency

Second language researchers recognize that language shapes and is shaped by human conceptualizations of the world, and that learning a language means learning these conceptual conventions, or metaphors. Informed by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, language researchers recognize that while the cognitive process of viewing one thing in terms of another is universal, the conceptual systems within languages vary across cultures. For example, although "THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR THE EMOTIONS" is used across many languages, the specific ways in which emotion (indeed specific emotions) are located in the body vary. For example, Boers (2003) argues that anger is located in different parts of the body in Hungarian, Japanese and Malay (head, stomach and liver respectively). Thus, becoming familiar with a few conceptual metaphors can help learners retain and produce the multiple idiomatic expressions guided by these concepts (Bialostok, 2008; Boers, 2000; Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997; Kalyuga & Kalyuga, 2008). For example, the italicized expressions below subscribe to the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR.

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
He *shot down* all my arguments.

In the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, the parts of the source image schema WAR (opponents, attack, defense, weapons) semiotically *index* elements of the target image schema ARGUMENT (friends, comments, replies, words) (Peirce, 1991, p. 251).

Unconscious conceptual metaphors, or conventional ways of thinking and talking about concepts like 'argument' that we use automatically without questioning, are the most common type of metaphor in language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, 1980b). In a well-known multi-genre corpus, BNC Baby, phrases like these made up the majority (99%) of metaphorically used words (Steen, Dorst, Berenike Herrmann, Kaal, & Krennmayr, 2010, p.781). Only 1% of metaphorically used words were arranged as consciously chosen metaphorical comparisons, following an *A is like B* format ("He wings up high, like an eagle") (Steen et al., 2010, p.787, & p.774). Altogether, unconscious conceptual metaphors and consciously chosen metaphorical comparisons comprised less than 14% of spoken and written texts (Steen et al., 2010, p. 785).

Production of conceptual metaphor is a marker of linguistic proficiency, both in speech and writing. For example, Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, & Turner (2012), Littlemore et al. (2014) discovered that English language learners produced more metaphors in their writing as they achieve greater proficiency (Hoang, 2014). Littlemore et al. (2014) used the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to determine proficiency, and observed that proficient writing (CEFR Level C) contained more conceptual metaphors, including prepositions and idiomatic phrases, as well as direct metaphors. It appears that mastery of metaphors is required for a "smooth-flowing text in an appropriate style," while writing about "complex subjects" often prompts proficient writers to use direct metaphor (p.135).

Nevertheless, neither English speaking college students nor EFL college students produce very much metaphorical wording (MacArthur, 2012). Discourse analysts report that among the various types of discourse in which one would expect to find metaphor (e.g. news articles, political speech, and novels), student writing contains the least metaphors (9–11%) while expert academic articles contain the most metaphors (18%). Only conversation has slightly lower metaphorical content than student essays (Dorst, 2015; MacArthur, 2012; Steen et al., 2010). By comparison, second language writers often produce 'unidiomatic' metaphors that have unconventional determiners, prepositions, or subordinators (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011, p. 280) or avoid figurative language altogether because they are afraid of communication breakdowns (Hashemian & Nezhad, 2007; Kecskes, 2007; Ramos, 2014).

Language educators have used comparisons of metaphors in first and target language to improve comprehension and production (Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997) and a higher retention of vocabulary (Boers, 2000, 2001; Guo, 2007). Their goals have been to give learners a rationale for why idiomatic phrases mean what they mean ('languaging,' Swain, 2006), and an understanding of the ways in which a cultural group conceptualizes daily life experiences with the body and the environment, and then instantiates them in language (Charteris-Black, 2003; Littlemore, 2003). They want learners' metaphoric competence to support their communicative competence (Littlemore & Low, 2006), in other words, to be effective replicators of the target culture.

1.2. Conscious use of metaphor, a stylistic choice

The same cognitive process that organizes the ways we unconsciously perceive the world can be used to consciously compare one thing in terms of another. It is argued that this type of consciously chosen metaphor constitutes less than 1% of several registers of speech and writing, appearing more in news articles and fiction than academic writing and conversation, and that direct teaching is essential for students to develop a conscious focus on metaphorical language and direct metaphorical comparisons (Moe, 2011; Picken, 2005; Polanski, 1989; Rudden, 1994; Steen et al., 2010; Wan, 2011; Wiseman, 2011). And although bilinguals wield greater cognitive flexibility and executive control than monolinguals (Grigorenko, Sternberg, & Ehrman, 2000; Kroll & Bialystok, 2013), metaphor seems to require its own competence that cannot be achieved simply through proficiency in a second language (Littlemore, 2010 p.306).

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