

# Original Research

## The cultural environment of metaphors: A study of German as a Second/Foreign Language

by Evelyn Vovou

**Evelyn Vovou** National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece [evovou@gs.uoa.gr](mailto:evovou@gs.uoa.gr)

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*This paper aims to empirically show that mediation of metaphor in a second language is more than a competence. Metaphor is an ecosystemic construct combining linguistic, cultural and semiotic symbols that may instigate different cognitive functions within the minds of language users in different languages. In order to empirically study the above, a metaphor mediation task was given to Greek speakers of German as a Second Language, where participants had to identify metaphors mediating the content of visual stimuli. The results of the study show that, although the analysed conceptual metaphors proved to be similar between the two languages, the participants could not identify the metaphoric mediation in their second language in more than half the cases. The findings suggest that more parameters should be addressed regarding the mediation of metaphor in a second language, and that triangulation of theories and methodologies is in order for safely analysing an ecosystemic construct such as metaphor.*

**KEYWORDS:** *metaphor, metaphoricity, culture, within-culture variation, German as a Second Language, German as a Foreign Language*



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor research has brought about many valuable insights into the works of mind and language, especially in the field of cognitive linguistics. From the 1980 seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) until today's distributed (Carston, 2010; Bambini et al., 2019; Bolognesi & Aina, 2019; McGregor et al., 2019; Kossarik, 2018; Murashova, 2021) and embodied approaches (Wilson & Golonka, 2013; Hellmann et al., 2013; Casasanto & Gijssels, 2015; Jensen, 2015; Jensen & Greve, 2019; Kramsch, 2008; Solopova & Chudinov, 2021) to metaphor and metaphoricity, cognitive linguistics has a long tradition of studying metaphor as well as other known forms of figurative speech. Another field of

linguistic research that has incorporated the study of metaphor is second/foreign language acquisition (Littlemore & Low, 2006a, 2006b) for the simple reason that metaphor is a means of communication, most often anchored in culture and, since language and language learning is so closely knitted to culture and cultural awareness in the target language, metaphor is a carrier of our environment – including our cultural environment (Kövecses, 2005) – which in turns shapes the way we view and express reality. Alongside the developments in those fields, however, there is no significant implementation of the findings of language acquisition related studies in curriculum design and praxis in language teaching. This means that although a lot is being

said and empirically proven about the importance of incorporating this and other forms of figurative speech into teaching practice, the lack of detailed curricular guidelines makes the incorporation of this knowledge from the teacher side difficult and, most of all, optional (Abdullaev, 2022). This creates a hiatus not only between research and practice but also in the essence of language teaching and learning that is reduced to the teaching more of form and less of meaning, and particularly of complex structures of meaning, such as metaphors. This paper briefly discusses the didactic approaches to metaphor regarding second/foreign language teaching that have been implemented to this day, argues about the complex nature of metaphor and its negotiation in the second/foreign language and aims to empirically reveal the dynamic parameters of this complex construct that build its semantic environment and take place when metaphoric meaning is mediated in a second/foreign language.

## 2. FROM COGNITION TO COMMUNICATION AND BACK

In order to address the lack of curricular guidelines described and the resulting lack in the direct teaching of metaphors, we first need to discuss second/foreign languages policies as well as the sociopolitical dimensions of these policies, since they create the environment in which metaphors are constructed, used and negotiated. Coined by Halliday (1970) and established with the introduction of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, 2001), the Communicative Approach (CA) is still considered the dominant strategy used in language teaching today. Before this, the approach to language teaching and learning was a cognitive one. Language could be learned through the memorisation of linguistic structures. Linguistic forms were the centre of interest and not the cultural semantics and pragmatics behind the forms, since the aims of language teaching and learning were not mainly to interact with the speakers of the target language but simply to understand the patterns of the language and be able to reproduce them through repetition. Real-life usage of the linguistic patterns taught was not a pedagogical-didactical objective at the time. The sequencing of linguistic patterns – as in pattern drills – provided the learner with an insight into how native speakers organise their thinking, but this process occurred unconsciously and was of little value in the foreign language classroom. Metaphor, being the less formative structure of language, not reproducible and memorisable through

repetition, non-recursive and unique, was overlooked.

This cognitive approach later evolved into a socio-cognitive one, recognising that language can be learned through social interaction. Real-life usage was now an objective, as it is nowadays. What was different then is that social interaction was considered to be a one-on-one thing, from the mother tongue to the target language. Culture was introduced as the environment where language occurs, but the duality remained (Khramova et al., 2021). The learner, having a specific mother tongue/culture, should be immersed in the target language/culture (hence, intercultural approach to language learning). This implies that the target language/culture was considered superior in comparison to the mother tongue/culture. Of course, other factors contributed to this superiority, especially within the European Union. The languages mostly taught represented the more powerful states, which the less powerful had to (at least) approach by learning the language/culture. Since the teaching of culture now became an objective, the teaching materials, especially for advanced learners, were enriched by literature. And since literature is a playground for figurative speech, learners came across metaphorical structures and metaphorical meaning. That is the historical turning point for the teaching objective of *Sprachbewusstsein* – the German term for ‘language awareness’ that became a popular objective for language policy makers and teachers alike in the 1970s and the 1980s and facilitated the transition from the socio-cognitive to the communicative approach. Although it translates as *language awareness*, it implies the socio-cultural aspects of language. The learner had to become aware of the environment of the target language. Language teaching was considered effective when the learner could approach the native speaker’s way of speaking, thinking and doing. The more aware the learner and the more they could analyse the deep culture embedded in the literary readings, the more they could decipher connotative meaning. ‘*In metaphors we actualise language awareness*’ (Kurz, 1993, p. 73). Regarding the teaching of German as a Second/Foreign Language at the time, metaphor was primarily taught implicitly through working with the literature of the target language/culture, whereas other forms of figurative speech like idioms and proverbs were taught explicitly, as linguistic artifacts of the target culture.

As discussed, *Sprachbewusstsein* remained an objective of the Communicative Approach to the teaching and learning of languages. As such, *Sprachbewusstsein*

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is included in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as an important part of language teaching (CEFR, 2001, p. 134). Although the CEFR is the primary tool for language curriculum and assessment design of European languages, it touches on the subject of figurative language only implicitly and superficially. This does not mean that figurative speech is not given a place in the CEFR and thus in the teaching of European Languages, the curricula, the materials, etc. It rather means that figurative language is included in the competences and thus the levels of language knowledge but not directly described. This has been criticised implicitly regarding descriptor vagueness (Barkowski, 2003) and, lately, explicitly regarding figurative language (Galantomos, 2021). This apparently lead to the incorporation of figurative language and especially metaphorical language in the 2018 and 2020 Companion Volumes to the CEFR, where metaphor is included in the C2-level descriptors for *Analysing and Criticising Creative Texts* (CEFR, 2018, p. 117), *Building on Plurilingual Repertoire* (CEFR, 2018, p. 162) and in the description of strategies like breaking down complicated information (CEFR, 2018, p. 127), mediation of concepts (CEFR, 2020, p.126), and lastly regarding sign language repertoire (CEFR, 2020, p. 146). Both Companion Volumes address the under-description of metaphor and figurative language together by including the use of metaphor in the text mediating activities and the respective descriptor of *Analysing and Criticising Creative Texts*. This allows language teachers and other practitioners to operationalise the teaching and assessment of metaphor and metaphorical usage of language through the incorporation of literary texts at the C2-level. However, some might argue that figurative language is still under-described and that the descriptor *Building on Plurilingual Repertoire* is still vague. What can clearly be observed in the Companion Volumes is that there

is an underlying pedagogical turn towards a more socio-cognitive approach to language teaching, as opposed to the one used before the CA, but through the prism of plurilingualism and not through the duality of target language/target culture. This, in turn, could mean that the distributed and embodied approaches to language are influencing our language pedagogy in a more direct manner, yet still unclear in its implementation.

### 3. METAPHOR AND COMPETENCE

What the CEFR does not propose, and rightfully so, is the categorisation of effective metaphor usage or – more broadly – of effective usage of figurative speech among the known competences (linguistic, lexical, pragmatic competence, etc.). Littlemore and Low (2006a, 2006b) propose the term *metaphoric competence* as the knowledge of, and ability to use metaphor, although the authors themselves use the term in a rather limited sense and only in relation to Bachman's (1990) model of communicative language. One could argue that the term *metaphoric competence* is in itself a metaphor, in order for the reader to think of it in a specific competence-oriented framework and thus consider metaphor a more teachable construct.

By treating metaphor in second/foreign language teaching for what it is, a complex construct rooted in cognition, requiring socio-cognitive approaches to teaching and learning, we move away from metaphoric competence as a language ability that can be taught and trained. Instead, we need to view metaphor from a distributed point of view, as having an ecosystemic existence (Cowley, 2011). It combines cultural, linguistic and semiotic symbols that instigate specific cognitive functions. Acquiring and/or mediating – as in the CEFR – metaphor in the second/foreign language is not a mere competence but the outcome of a complex universal cognitive process that draws upon cultural, linguistic and semiotic resources, and thus varies from language/culture to language/culture (Kövecses, 2005). This paper tries to elaborate further on this notion by utilising experimental data based on the work of Bachman (1990).

## 4. THE STUDY

### 4.1. Premise

The aim of the study was to assess two things: first, whether multimodal (visual and textual) stimuli containing metaphoric information were mediated by speakers/learners of German as a Second Language in German in the same way as in their mother tongue,

Greek, and secondly, how culture-specific variations influenced the two languages in the metaphors examined, and what degree of similarity lay between them. The survey also aimed to discover whether culture-specific variations influence the identification of metaphor by the speakers/learners in their second language, and whether this influence occurs in the identification of metaphor in the mother tongue. More specifically, the aim was to see if metaphoric information in German, the second language, could be identified in the same degree as in Greek, the mother tongue. The framework to compare the identification and mediation of metaphor in Greek and German is Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory.

#### 4.2. Participants

The participants were 45 undergraduate students, ages 20-23 (M=22, F=38) of the Department of German Language and Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece). All participants reported that they were native speakers of Greek. All have been accredited the C1-Level of German through either in-university procedures or examinations by independent yet internationally certified organisations. The membership of the group was determined by the socialisation conditions in which the students acquired German as a Second Language. Undergraduate students of the Department of German Language and Literature are immersed in the second language/culture by being lectured in German, studying in German, interacting with staff and colleagues in German, and more importantly, are immersed in German through literature and analysis of literary texts. All participants have studied literary

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texts in German extensively and have a working knowledge of how to mediate metaphorical content from between one language and the other, as far as their textual competence is concerned. This last parameter could offer an insight regarding the description of metaphor use in the CEFR Companion Volumes. The outcomes of the study could show to what extent language immersion through literature in the second language guarantees the identification of metaphor in this language.

#### 4.3. Materials

Five multimodal stimuli were presented to the participants, all containing visual and linguistic metaphors. Both modalities were represented equally in each and every stimulus and therefore modality-specific errors were minimised. Each multimodal stimulus contained 2 visual and 2 linguistic metaphors in total, that anchored semantically to one another in a 1:1 ratio. The textual information of all stimuli was removed. All stimuli were political cartoons (see Figure 1) that depicted contemporary real-life situations, so that the world knowledge parameter could be minimised as well. The stimuli were shown to the participants in paper form with no specific exposure time limit.

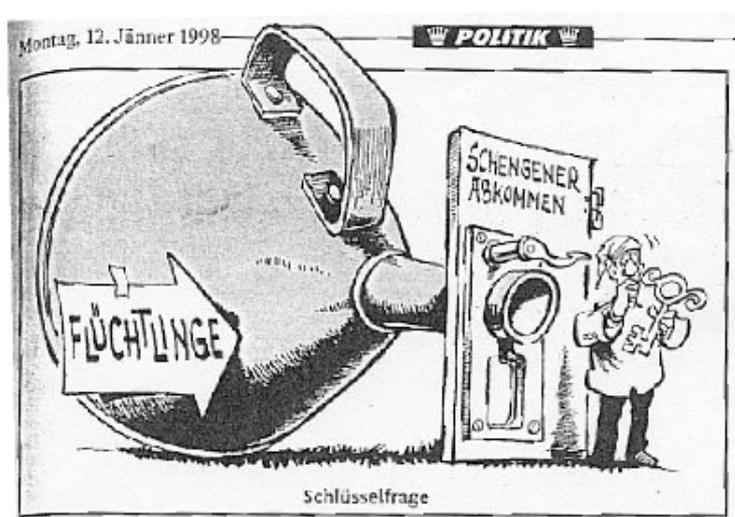


Figure 1. Stimulus A (visual and textual)

Apart from the multimodal stimuli (in its visual form), participants were given textual material for each stimulus both in German and in Greek. All textual material mediated the content of each stimulus. For each stimulus each participant was given 3 short texts (2 sentences) in German and 3 short texts with equal-length sentences in Greek. One text mediated the visual stimulus in a metaphorical way, one in a literal way and one text was a filler, which means that it did not mediate the visual stimulus. Both the Greek and the German

texts were presented at the same time together with the visual stimuli. Participants were then asked to choose which short texts (one in Greek, one in German) mediated the information of the visual stimulus appropriately and precisely, that is, they were asked which wording was the best to express the situation they saw in the cartoon. The role assigned to each short text (metaphorical, literal or filler) was not identifiable by the participants. The task had no specific time limit, but no participant exceeded the norm ( $\approx 15$  minutes) (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Short texts for Stimulus A*

GERMAN	
Metaphorical mediation of meaning	EU an Flüchtlinge: 'Besser wenig als gar nicht!'
Literal mediation of meaning	EU an Flüchtlinge: 'Schlussendlich werden wir eine geringere Anzahl von Flüchtlingen empfangen als erwartet'.
Filler	EU an Flüchtlinge: 'Die Migration bringt unangenehme Folgen an sich'.
GREEK	
Metaphorical mediation of meaning	ΕΕ προς πρόσφυγες: 'Απ' τα ολότελα, καλή και η Παναγιώταινα!'
Literal mediation of meaning	ΕΕ προς πρόσφυγες: 'θα δεχτούμε εν τέλει μικρότερο αριθμό προσφύγων απ' ότι περιμέναμε'.
Filler	ΕΕ προς πρόσφυγες: 'Η προσφυγιά προκαλεί δυσάρεστες συνέπειες'.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

The analysis was conducted in two parts. The first part included a quantitative measurement of the short texts chosen. The assessment process measured which stimulus the participants chose for which text (the metaphorical, the literal or the filler) in each language as the most appropriate way of conveying the meaning of the cartoon. In the second part of the analysis, only the metaphorical expressions in the two languages were grouped under their source and their target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Then, this set of data was qualitatively reviewed to establish the degree of similarity and within-culture variation between the two languages. The second part of the analysis drew upon the results of the first part to justify why some short texts mediating the metaphorical meaning were not chosen.

#### 4.5. Study results

By conveying the meaning of the same stimulus, the study aimed to show if the participants adopted a metaphorical or a literal way of mediating in their mother tongue and in their second language. If the metaphorical short text in the second language was chosen over the literal short text in the second language as a more appropriate way to convey metaphoric meaning, this implies that the participants could identify metaphoricity appropriately.

This was the case in less than half of the participants. 20 out of 45 participants chose the literal short text in their second language as the most appropriate to match the visual stimulus. The literal mediation of meaning was preferred as far as the second language was concerned.

The opposite was to be seen in the short text chosen in Greek. 39 out of 45 participants chose the metaphorical short text as the most appropriate to mediate the content of the stimulus. This implies that metaphoricity in the mother tongue is considered more identifiable and thus more appropriate than the literal meaning, when the participant is confronted with a genre (political cartoon) where metaphor is visually depicted. 39 out of 45 participants matched the visual to the textual metaphor, when the latter was in their mother tongue, while 20 out of 45 did not match the visual to the textual metaphor, when the latter was in their second language.

The qualitative analysis served as a confirmation or not of the quantitative results. As discussed, the qualitative analysis based on the framework of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) grouped the metaphoric short texts in Greek and German – whether chosen by the participants as most appropriate for mediating the visual metaphor or not – according to the source and the target domain of the given conceptual metaphors in Greek and German. As both Littlemore and Low (2006a) and Wright (1999) describe, the target domain of a conceptual metaphor represents the semantic field under discussion and the source domain the semantic field that is being used to describe, understand and evaluate the target. In all cases where Greek had a metaphorical expression, German also had a metaphorical expression. This means, that the perception of a concept was similar in both languages. German, the second language of the participants, shares the same metaphorical expressions for a conceptual metaphor as Greek, the participants' mother tongue. Cognitive universality is present in the metaphors analysed. The question that arises here is whether the demonstrated similarity in the conceptualisation between the two languages in the metaphors examined is in itself an indicator that cultural variation is minimal to zero or if it is the sole indicator. Kövecses (2005) extensively dealt with this question and argued that one must distinguish between cross-cultural and within-culture variation. This perspective allows us to suggest, based on study results, that similarity between the metaphorical expressions analysed in German and in Greek occurs cross-culturally, which means cross-cultural variation is minimal to zero.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Universality of conceptual metaphors across languages has been empirically proven in the past. For example, Pérez (2008) found the conceptual metaphors

for *heart* showed similar target and source domains in French, Italian, Spanish, English and German. What makes the results of this study interesting in their interpretation is that, although the conceptual metaphors analysed had a very high degree of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural similarity, the participants found the metaphorical mediations of the visual stimuli far less appropriate in their second language than in their mother tongue. Since the qualitative analysis showed that the conceptualisations of the specific metaphors had no significant cross-cultural variation, the number of participants that chose the metaphorical mediated text in German should have been equal to the number who chose the one in Greek. This means that some other factor is at play: either at a cognitive level (in this case a frame semantics analysis could prove fruitful) or at a level of within-culture variation, e.g., at a social, (sub)cultural, ethnic, or regional level (Kövecses, 2005), and that, again, further research is in order.

Another reason might be that there are semiotic discrepancies in the visual stimuli that trigger different cognitive resources in the minds of the participants and set the stage for them to not identify the metaphorical mediation in their second language in reference to the specific visual stimulus. In this case, the similarity in conceptualisation between Greek and German of the metaphors analysed could mean that universality was incited by the medium. Political cartoons – especially those that refer to socio-political situations in the same geographical region, in this case Europe – aim at including semiotic symbols that can be interpreted in the same way by a wide audience. Cognitive universality, as observed here, could be due to semiotic universality.

Lastly, one must not overlook the fact that, in the competence sense, a third reason may be that the level of linguistic knowledge of the second language (C1) prompted the participants not to identify the metaphoric mediation of some visual stimuli in German and hence choose the metaphoric mediation in their mother tongue. So, although the specific group of participants was accustomed to literary texts and conveying literary meanings in the second language, the participants fell behind on the identification of metaphor because they did not possess the C2-level of linguistic competence in this language. This empirically supports the CEFR descriptor choice to include the mediating of metaphors regarding creative texts at the C2 and not at the C1-level, although both are considered within the scope of advanced knowledge and proficiency. Overall, the findings of this study support the notion that acquiring

and/or mediating metaphor in a second language is a much more complex process than linguistic ability on its own would suggest.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The main finding of the study was that target and source domains of the examined metaphors were similar in the mother tongue (Greek) and the second language (German) of the participants. But this similarity did not lead to the participants identifying the metaphor in German with the same degree of appropriateness and precision as the metaphor in Greek for the same stimulus, as expected. On the contrary, less than half of the participants identified the German metaphor as more appropriate and precise to convey the meaning of each visual stimulus, while more than half – and almost all – participants identified the metaphor in Greek as more appropriate than the literal meaning. This means that although semantic cross-cultural similarity was very high, metaphoric meaning in the second language was less identifiable than literal meaning in the same language. As discussed, this is a strong indicator that within-culture variation is present and that dimensions of within-culture variation for the examined metaphors should be further analysed. One next step of the study will therefore be to construct a framework of analysis that includes the within-culture parameters illustrated in Kövecses (2005).

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The discussed incongruity in the findings could also be due to cross-cultural differences in semiotics. Gupta-Biener (2015) recently proposed a methodological framework for the analysis of semiotic differences between languages/cultures, while criticising the fact that the semiotic perspective of culture had been neglected in past empirical cross-cultural analyses. A cross-cultural semiotic analysis of the visual/textual stimuli used, triangulated with the findings presented in this paper, could offer more elaborate results. In this case, not only the medium (political cartoon) will play a role but also the ethnological environment of the medium. Political cartoons can be seen as ethnographic material whose syntagmatic connections (Greimas & Courtés, 1982) could undergo semiotic analysis. Such an analysis should take into consideration that the stimuli examined here derive from German language sources, which should in turn be taken into account upon triangulation of the results.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that within-culture variations build – together with cross-cultural variations – the cultural environment of a given metaphor in a given language, with within-culture variations being the inner shell of the metaphor. The results of this study suggest that inner and outer shell of a metaphor may not influence each other since cross-cultural variation was minimal in the metaphors examined while within-culture variation was substantial.

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EVELYN VOVOU

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens | 13A Navarinou Str., 10680 Athens, Greece  
evovou@gs.uoa.gr