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Metaphorical conceptualizations of Arab learners of Turkish
Sibel Ariogul\textsuperscript{a*}, Tarik Uzun\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Hacettepe University, School of Education, Beytepe Campus, Ankara, Turkey
\textsuperscript{b} Ankara University TOMER Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Centre, Trabzon Branch, Trabzon, Turkey

Abstract

Metaphor analysis is considered to be a fruitful line of inquiry deserving more attention and application in foreign language instruction. However, the research examining linguistic metaphors used by foreign language learners, especially those learning less common languages, is almost non-existent. The purpose of this study was to investigate the metaphorical concepts used by Arab students of Turkish (N= 42) by tapping into their personal language learning experiences. By systematically attempting to organize abstract thoughts into concrete ones, 40 metaphors were produced in response to the cue “Learning Turkish is like…” Results were organized into four conceptual categories.

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1. Introduction

Although it is a common belief that the metaphor is simply an extraordinary tool for literary imagination, a linguistic attribute per se, Lakoff and Johnson brought a different perspective to the term ‘conceptual metaphor’ in 1980 and refined it in 2003. The authors defined the term as a concept structuring the people’s perception of the world in and of itself and how they relate to each other and ground it in their every day experience. Quoting Narayanan’s neural theory on metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argued that the primary metaphors people use are universal, not accidental in nature, and part of people’s brains because every person has similar physical characteristics in terms of body and brain and lives in basically the similar types of circumstances. Complex metaphors, comprised of primary metaphors, consist of culturally based conceptual frames and underline the cultural variations among groups of people (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Inbar’s (1992) revolutionary work on metaphor generation was carried out with 491 students and 254 teachers from different schools and requested the participants to think about the following four images: “The student is like…,” “The teacher is like…,” “The principal is like…,” and “The school is like….” It led him to argue that “one of the more interesting and effective ways to expose underlying assumptions, premises and predispositions is through scrutiny of metaphorical images… which were the outcome of creative, theoretical thinking attempting to enrich our insight into educational phenomena” (p.77).

A large amount of research on metaphor creation (“A teacher is like…,” “A student is like…,” etc.) has been conducted both in Turkey (Bagc\i & Coklar, 2010; Saban, 2003; 2004; 2010) and internationally (Guerrero and Villamil, 2000; 2002; Mahlios & Maxson, 1998; Martinez, Saulea, & Huber, 2001; Leavy, McSorley, & Bote, 2007; Oxford, Tomlison, Barcelos, Harrington, Lavine, Saleh, & Longhini, 1998; Shaw & Mahlios, 2008) in order to shed more light on educational experience. Studies in Turkey were mainly conducted on pre-service teachers. For instance, Saban compiled a database of conceptual metaphors used by pre-service elementary teachers with several studies and argued that metaphorical images could help teacher educators to better understand and change the prior...
beliefs of teacher candidates in terms of teaching and learning. However, Inbar (1996) cast a certain amount of
doubt on that point, reminding researchers to be cautious as metaphors carry a potential for uncertainty, lack of
generalizability, and inconclusiveness.

The starting point of this research is the authors’ observation of the critical scarcity of metaphorical research
among university level students, unlike the vast amount of research investigating the metaphorical images used by
pre-service and in-service teachers. Therefore, this paper presents the results of a study conducted with Arab
students from Syria and Yemen on metaphorical images related to Turkish language learning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Research Context

The study was conducted with 42 Arab students (6 females, 36 males) at a well-established university owned
foreign language institute in the Black Sea region of Turkey. The participants from Syria and Yemen intend to major
in various undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Turkey. Both groups enrolled in a Turkish-as-a-foreign
language classes since a certain amount of Turkish language proficiency is a prerequisite for university programs in
Turkey.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in Arabic during the fall semester of 2010 and were translated into English. The students
were required to complete a demographic questionnaire (gender, age, educational background, and Turkish language
level) and asked to complete the prompt, “Learning Turkish is like…” Metaphor analysis methodology and steps in
that analysis were partially employed, as described by Guerrero and Villamil (2002). The metaphorical expressions
used by the participants, such as “Learning Turkish is like educating a little child. You have got to make some
sacrifices and spend some time on it.” were initially listed and then broken down into small parts to identify
recurring themes. Some metaphorical images cannot be categorized easily so these images were interpreted by
looking at the extended explanations following metaphorical images. Those metaphors that did not fit any category,
such as ‘Turkish is a great language.’ were discarded. A total of 40 images for each metaphorical statement were
then classified into four conceptual categories, and one image that would represent the category well was selected.
In order to sustain the inter-coder reliability, the first author shared the list of metaphorical expressions with the
second author, and each classified the list into categories. Both lists of categories were compared, and a consensus
was reached by discussing the divergent ones.

3. Results

The metaphors created by participants about Turkish language learning varied and were difficult to categorize.
Forty metaphorical images from Turkish language learning were categorized into four conceptual categories.

3.1. Learning Turkish is like…

The first conceptual category in Turkish language learning was the ‘gate’ metaphor. Participants using that
metaphor appeared to see Turkish language learning as a ‘goal to achieve,’ ‘a path to walk,’ and ‘a bridge to cross
over,’ to help them ‘communicate with the rest of the world,’ ‘understand the Turkish culture and history,’ and
‘eventually get to know their culture and history better.’ While mentioning those metaphors, some of their extended
explanations referred to an ulterior motive in learning Turkish as a foreign language:

“…It is my duty to learn Turkish. The two cultures are getting closer day by day.”
“Learning Turkish is a path for a certain cause. This path will lead to another path that will help me understand
the Turkish culture and history.”
“Transferring [Turkish] culture and language to my country and teaching it are my goals for learning that language.”
“It will also help me become more useful to Syria.”
“Turkish is the language of the future and a passway to Europe.”

At the root of learning, the Turkish language learners appeared to have a strong desire to build a connection with the Turkish people and culture as for the participants, both cultures were regarded as ‘similar’ in some dimensions and to be ‘close’ as nations. Interestingly, as stated in one of the participant’s extended metaphors, learning Turkish was also regarded as ‘a passage’ to the Western world. This tendency might be explained with Cetinsaya’s (2008) argument that “Turkey has become a pivotal country and a regional power in Eurasia and the Middle East since the end of the Cold War, and it has a great potential for constructive role in the Middle East, and also a potential to become a global actor, in terms of its strategic, geographical and historical depth” (p.3).

The second conceptual category was the ‘nature’ metaphor. Turkish language learning was conceived of as ‘a sea to swim in,’ ‘a desert to get lost in,’ ‘an island to reach,’ and ‘a fertile field to sow’ so that the learner can ‘see the diamonds beneath the soil,’ ‘find the right path eventually,’ and ‘produce a good crop every year.’ The extended comments in that conceptual category are as follows:

“Learning Turkish is like an island in the middle of a sea. It’s hard to reach but worth the try.”
“Learning Turkish is [like] climbing to the top of a big tree. One always wants to be at the top and wants to be the best.”
“Learning Turkish is like a flower. The more you [water] it, the more it blooms…”
“Learning Turkish is like gathering roses from gardens. I “gather” Turkish when I have a dialogue with people and ask to my instructors.”

In Guerrero’s and Villamil’s (2002, p.104) article on metaphorical conceptualizations of ESL teachers, some participants used the ‘tree loaded with apples’ image to refer to a learning process. The participants using that metaphor saw learning as ‘receiving input and processing information’. Saban’s (2003; 2004) participant pre-service teachers also generated a ‘flower’ image, and the author explained it as ‘meeting individual needs and interests’ (p.839) and ‘fostering students’ potential capabilities’ (p.624).

The third conceptual category is the ‘artistic’ metaphor. Turkish language learning brought forth images such as ‘a poem to read,’ ‘a picture to paint’ and ‘a musical note to play’ to savor the language artistically. The extended comments in that category are as follows:

“Learning Turkish is like learning to read poetry since it has its peculiar rhythm.”
“It’s [like] a beautiful painting… with beautiful trees and a scenic view.”
“Learning Turkish is like a note in music and it has rhymic lyrics.”

The last and the most popular conceptual category produced by participants was the ‘life essentials’ metaphor. Ten participants who chose that category suggested that learning Turkish was like ‘food’ or ‘drink’ they needed to survive.

“Learning Turkish is like the existence of water...My life and my future will be better with that language.”
“Learning Turkish is [like] drinking water; although I drink, I will always want more and it never ends.”

Inside the ‘life essentials,’ five participants emphasized a ‘child’ metaphor. The ‘child’ metaphor has been summarized as ‘meeting individual needs and interests’ by some other researchers (Saban, 2004, p.624).

“Learning Turkish is like educating a small child. You need to be patient, put some effort into it, and spend some time with him; just as we need time and patience to learn a language.”
“Learning Turkish is similar to a boy who has lost his family and keep looking for a new family and keep looking around the world to learn his own language; the language is influenced by Arabic, English, French and Persian.”

“Learning Turkish is like being a child at the age of one or two since his mind is like a blank slate with no black spots. He cannot even make complete sentences at the beginning, but as time goes by, he will learn everything.”

“It is the language upon which my future depends. One has to be patient and work day and night to succeed… Learning Turkish is [like] a newborn baby’s need for milk.”

From the metaphorical statements with an emphasis on a ‘child’ metaphor, the participants appeared to give the impression that no matter how hard it was for them to learn that new language, they felt optimistic about their language learning.

4. Conclusion

The investigation of metaphorical concepts outside mainstream education is still in its infancy. This study has been a simple attempt to understand the use of metaphors in Turkish language learning. Using a limited number of participants, it aimed to shed light on Arab learners’ perceptions of learning the Turkish language by requesting them to respond to the statement, “Turkish language learning is like…” and tried to bring what they think of that language to the surface. Four metaphorical concepts have emerged in this study: gate, nature, artistic, and life essentials. These metaphorical concepts could be interpreted as suggestive of participants’ positive language learning experiences and a high motivation to learn the language regardless of their initial struggles with it. Because this study used a small sample size, it is difficult to generalize the findings; therefore, the topic of metaphorical conceptualizations of learners of Turkish deserves further research with a larger number of participants. Particular attention should also be paid to a comparative study of Turkish and a more commonly taught language, in regard to metaphors.

References


