



# The role of metaphor and metonymy in EFL proficiency

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I report the findings from a Cambridge ESOL-funded research project (Cambridge ESOL Funded Research Programme Project number 17092010), which investigated how an ability to use metaphor and metonymy contributes to successful performance in the written component of Cambridge ESOL examinations. Learners are significantly more likely to do unusual things with metaphor at the First Certificate level. They do this in response to the very particular requirements of the examination. For these reasons, I argue that, at FCE level, it is important to adopt a tolerant attitude towards uses of language that some may refer to as 'creative' but which others might simply describe as 'wrong'. I also outline the different things that learners need to do with metaphor and metonymy at each level, illustrating my points with short examples taken from essays written by students who have been successful in their examinations.

メタファー（隠喩）とメトニミー（換喩）を使いこなす能力と、Cambridge ESOLのライティング試験における成績との関連性について、Cambridge ESOLが資金提供する調査プロジェクト結果を報告する。First Certificate (FCE) レベルでは、学習者がメタファーを使って独特の表現をする傾向がはっきりと見られるが、この傾向があるのは、かなり特定の試験課題に対してである。したがって、FCEレベルでは、「独創的」あるいは単なる「間違い」と意見が分かれ得る言語使用に対して、寛容な態度を持つことが重要であることを論じる。また、学習者それぞれのレベルに応じたメタファーやメトニミーの様々な扱い方について概説し、試験で好成績を収めている学生の書いたエッセイから短い例を引用して、重要と思われる点を述べる。

**M**etaphor involves describing one thing in terms of another, such as when Hamamatsu is described as an important industrial *hub*, or when The Tomei Expressway is described as the main *artery* through the Chubu region. Metonymy is a related trope which involves a kind of figurative shorthand, such as when Hamamatsu is described as the *City of Music* or when the Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments is described as having a *hands-on* room where one can play many different types of instruments.

Studies of metaphor and metonymy have shown that they perform key functions, such as the signalling of evaluation, agenda management, mitigation through humour, irony, and euphemism, reference to shared knowledge, the building of rapport, and discourse-community membership (Cameron, 2003; Littlemore & Low, 2006). An ability to use metaphor and metonymy appropriately can thus contribute to a language learner's communicative competence. One might therefore expect an ability to understand and produce metaphor and metonymy to contribute to language proficiency.

At this year's JALT conference, I will be presenting research that I have conducted, in collaboration with a number of colleagues, into the use of metaphor and metonymy by language learners. In particular, I will be reporting the findings from a research project, funded by Cambridge ESOL (Cambridge ESOL Funded Research Programme Project number 17092010) (Littlemore et al., 2012a), in which we looked at how an ability to use metaphor and metonymy contribute to successful performance at the different levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as measured by the written component of the Cambridge ESOL examinations. These include the Key English Test (KET), the Preliminary English Test (PET), the First Certificate in English (FCE), the Cambridge Advanced Certificate in English (CAE), and the Cambridge Proficiency in English test (CPE). In this study, we found that the amount of metaphor that learners produce increases as each level, very much as one would expect. However we also found that learners are significantly more likely to try to do 'strange things' with metaphor around the First Certificate level; it is at this level where they start to try new things out, make mistakes, and transfer metaphor from their own language, as well using

much more open class metaphor. They do this in response to the very particular requirements of the FCE test and the CEFR can-do statements that the test is aligned to. For these reasons, I will argue that, at FCE level, it is important to adopt a tolerant attitude towards uses of language that some may refer to as 'creative' but which others might simply describe as 'wrong'. Our findings for metonymy are much less systematic, but interesting nonetheless.

I will also outline the very different things that learners need to be able to do with metaphor and metonymy in each of these examinations. For example, while for the KET examination, one would not expect learners to do much more than use metaphorical prepositions and fixed expressions, whereas for First Certificate, one would expect learners to use metaphors with an evaluative function as well as what might be called 'creative' metaphors for dramatic effect in order to support their points of view. When learners reach CAE and Proficiency, one would expect them to be able to use metaphors to show relationships between their ideas and to reinforce their evaluations, to express abstract and complex issues, highlight salience, and write emotively about topics that they feel strongly about. It is at this level where one would hope to see learners producing metaphor clusters that have a degree of coherence, and to use these clusters to make their writing vivid, memorable and persuasive. In the talk, I will expand upon and exemplify these ideas, illustrating my points with short examples of figurative language use taken from essays written by students who have been successful in their examinations.

I will then go on to discuss the role of metaphor in *spoken* interaction and present preliminary findings from a study funded by the British Council (Littlemore, et al., 2012b), in which we investigated the ways in which metaphor contributes to successful spoken interaction between native and non-native speakers of English. Qualitative analyses of conversations between native speakers of English have shown that when a metaphor is working in a conversation, it will often get refined and elaborated upon and tossed backwards and forwards between speakers, but if it is not working, it is swiftly replaced by another one (Cameron et al., 2009). An ability to pick up on the metaphors that are used by

one's interlocutor and refine and develop them is therefore an important interactive skill. In addition to this, an important aspect of spoken communication that differentiates it from written communication is that it can involve gesture, and research has shown that a substantial amount of gesture involves metaphor (Cienki, 2008), especially when abstract concepts are being discussed. Metaphor and metonymy have been shown to work together very closely in discourse, with the same words being used literally, metonymically, and metaphorically over the course of the conversation (Cameron, 2011; MacArthur & Littlemore, 2011). Moreover, metonymy has also been found to play an important role in gesture and is arguably at least as pervasive as metaphor in this respect (Mittelberg & Waugh, 2009). I will therefore provide examples from our study showing how a learner's use of metaphor and metonymy (in both language and gesture) can contribute to, or in some cases detract from, their spoken communicative competence.

Finally, I will argue that learners need to be able to make subtle changes in their use of metaphor and metonymy according to genre and register, and that the ability to do this is a real mark of the 'communicatively competent' learner. In order to support my case, I will provide linguistic evidence from authentic settings involving different discourse communities, which illustrates how a 'one size fits all' approach to figurative language is simply not appropriate (Deignan, Littlemore, & Semino, forthcoming). I will demonstrate how genre and register features shape figurative language use in important ways, and argue that language learners need to be made aware of this. I will use these data to show how ability to adapt one's use of figurative language to different forms of communication is a key component of language proficiency.

At various points in the talk, I will discuss the psychological processes involved in the production and comprehension of metaphor and metonymy, emphasising the respective roles played by declarative and procedural knowledge in the development of metaphoric/metonymic competence in a foreign language, arguing that it is important to view metaphor and metonymy as both cognitive processes and linguistic products used in real communicative situations. Through-

out the talk, I will emphasise the high degree of variation across different learners and different contexts of use. Finally, I explain why future research in this area could usefully include: a greater focus on metonymy; more consideration of the role of gestural metaphor and metonymy; and an increased appreciation of the ways in which patterns of metaphor and metonymy use vary across different registers and languages.

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