

***Metaphor across Languages: A Case Study of  
Algerian Students as Recipients of Five English  
Metaphors***

BENNEGHROUZI Fatima Zohra  
Université de Mostaganem

ABSTRACT

It becomes nearly a norm that when recipients of metaphor belong to a different cultural enterprise, its reading can be significantly fashioned by the sum of the cultural considerations of its interpreters. Following this, what triggers my intellectual concern, is whether the option of intercultural easiness in metaphor comprehension is germane to the scale metaphors are entrenched in physical experiences. The present research has been in reality the immediate corollary of unprompted observations of the manner students interpret metaphors, more particularly those reportedly universal through relying heavily on their mother tongue's reference frame by way of translation, getting sometimes to a distinct construal. In this spirit, this paper examines the way five English metaphors, ranging from notionally cross cultural ones to culture dependent, are interpreted by fifty Algerian students. In view of that, the works of (1) Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) and Lakoff and Turner (1989), (2) Dobrzynska (1995), (3) Mandelblit (1995), and (3) Boers (2003) altogether sustain the platform on which this paper is founded. Within the confinement of this research, I come to conclude that the comprehension of English metaphors in default of their source context is fundamentally processed by Algerian students having recourse to their mother tongue's frame exploiting it to its fullest potential, and recruiting the metaphors at work in this target context by way of translation, in the midst of many conceptual and linguistic mismatches. Surprisingly enough, even those physically entrenched metaphors, supposedly universal, are laden with cultural peculiarities. Eventually, the role of the source context is chief in piloting metaphors through the fitting readings. At this juncture, the recipients, after passing by conceptual ambiguities, have the opportunity to fine-tune their interpretations in an attempt to bring them off effectively.

## 1. Introduction

When reading Aristotle's *Poetics*, it becomes highly significant that metaphor usage comes to subsume under its heading every use that imparts about *deviation*. Aristotle states: "‘By exotic’ I mean loan-words, metaphors, lengthening and anything that diverges from the standard." (Quoted by Silk, 1999:125). From the very outset, Aristotle opposes metaphorical meaning which is confined to particular uses, to ordinary which is used by everybody. Such stand proves to be manifestly erroneous with the omnipresence of metaphor in everyday interactions nevertheless, more particularly with Lakoff and Johnson's monumental *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Lakoff and Johnson propounded a chain of metaphors through which we conceptualize abstract experiences. It follows that *business* and *argument* are talked about as if they were *warfare*. By the same token, time has a convoluted conceptualization that starts with the nucleus metaphors *Time Is Space* or *Time Is a Resource*. In this spirit, metaphor is not a cognitive surplus. Rather, it contributes to the cognitive meaning of discourse as it is requisite, not only to philosophical discourse, but to ordinary, even more, scientific discourse.

Lakoff and Johnson's contemporary theory of metaphor is actually the stepping stone of this paper as the insights it offers into metaphor production and comprehension are of a significant merit. Metaphor conceptualizations and classifications are in effect definitely open to cultural considerations and its interpretation is '*strongly culturally conditioned*'. Dobrynska (1995,598-9). Metaphor construal fits into both fluid environments and existing social conventions.

The present field work consists in examining the way five English metaphors that are interpreted in a zero (unsupported) context then an English (source) one. The experiment is conducted to inspect the roles conceptual metaphors play in rendering easiness of comprehension and how much the cultural make up impinges on metaphor comprehension. The participants are fifty Algerian students in the English department at Mostaganem University (Algeria), level 3, all of them being foreign learners of English. They are run in small groups of 10.

The participants are asked in both parts of the experiment to sustain the metaphors with the interpretations they find the more apposite and to describe the manner they arrive at those interpretations. In tandem with the two parts of metaphor, the findings are run in two tables wherein show the metaphorical expressions, the participants' interpretations which can go from naught to four for each expression, and the diverse percentages of the participants' reference to the Algerian Arabic reference frame, the English reference frame then to an independent, predominantly experiential reference frame.

## **2. The Present Research**

The experiment undertaken here, aims at examining the similarities as well as the differences involved in the interpretation of five English metaphors by Algerian students of English. The objective is to see how the participants' background knowledge and cultural membership steer them away from certain interpretations, get them notice others and

decisively play a crucial part in the manner participants internalize their experiences.

### Method

The participants are fifty Algerian students in the English department at Mostaganem University, all of them being foreign learners of English.

### Materials

The materials consist of the interpretations that the students are asked to assign to ten metaphorical expressions. The participants are also asked to sustain these interpretations with a brief description of the mental processing set behind.

### Procedure

The participants are run in small groups.  
The metaphorical expressions are listed as follows:

- a- Look beyond the end of your nose.
- b- Bang your head against a brick wall.
- c- From under your nose.
- d- Be a hard nut to crack.
- e- Cut one's coat according to one's cloth.

Metaphor across Languages: A Case Study of Algerian RML8, 2013  
Students as Recipients of Five English Metaphors

Part one: Findings

The metaphorical expressions	The participants' interpretations	Percentage			
		Of the participants' interpretations	Reference to (Algerian)Arabic	Reference to English	Independent or experiential frame of reference
Looking beyond the end of your nose	1-Be thoughtful, careful, and have a long term futuristic vision	97%	90%	----	7%
	2-Be disappointingly curious	3%	----	3%	----
Bang your head against a brick wall	1- Of a person who counts for less and whose opinion is unimportant	80%	80%	----	----
	2- Unsuccessfully attempting to do something	20%	5%	2%	13%
Have (sb) under one's feet	1-Exercise a passive control over (sb) by enslaving him/her	90%	88%	----	2%
	2- Treat (sb) as inferior	10%	7%	----	3%
Be a hard nut to crack	Difficult to influence or control	97%	97%	----	----
	Rebel	3%	----	----	3%
Cut one's coat according to one's cloth	Be practical and sensible	100%	100%	----	----

## Results and discussion

Metaphors are highly culture-charged and inextricably bound up to the beliefs, values, and stereotypes working within the social fabric of a given community. This can be instantiated in the way English and Algerian Arabic metaphorise about the term *nose* as relating it to their different beliefs. An expression like *Looking beyond the end of your nose* gets different interpretations as we transfer it from its source context (English) to the target one (Algerian Arabic). In English, the argument would run, this expression passively links to *someone who is interested in other people's affairs*. *Nose* in English is stereotyped in so far as it *disapprovingly* points out at *someone's curiosity*. It follows that all the ensuing metaphorical expressions send, in one way or another, to this trait. This is further explicated as we consider other metaphorical expressions which involve the term *nose*.

Nevertheless, this is quite different when we appeal to the Algerian frame of reference where *nose* is stereotypically connected to *short-sightedness*. Hence, the dissimilar value judgments at work in these two cultures are responsible for the manner experiences are internalized (Boers 2003). This is clearly shown in the first part of the experiment so that ninety-seven per cent of the recipients of the metaphorical expression *Looking beyond the end of your nose*, interpret it in relation to the connotation *short sightedness*. Ninety per cent of them make reference to Algerian Arabic. In their explanation, they employ expressions such as “*remind me of*”, “*send me back*”, or “*just like in Arabic*”. Some underwrite “*my mother says this expression*”, or “*it is commonly used by our parents*”. Of course, they process either by referring to the equivalent

expression in Arabic or by negating the commonplace expression in Arabic, /j□uuf □iir □and niifak/ that may be translated in English as ( looking just under his nose), meaning being *short-sighted* or by referring to the other well-known expression /j□uuf □iir □and kar□iih/ ( looking just under his feet). “*The nose is so close to the eyes*», says one, and the person who looks beyond the end of his/her nose must be very thoughtful. Only three per cent make reference to English and interpret it in terms of *passive curiosity*. At this particular juncture, one can say that the interpreters’ background knowledge forcefully dominates their mental processing.

It is worth retrieving that reference to Arabic is vividly suggested in the comprehension of these metaphors. The same frame of reference is activated when interpreting the metaphorical statement *To bang one’s head against the brick wall*. The Arabic expression /xbat raasak □la ?al□iit/ (bang your head against wall) is the founding stone on which the interpretation of this English metaphorical statement is construed. “*When addressing a person whose opinion counts for less, we typically employ the aforementioned expression,*” explain the participants. Among the overall participants, a small albeit not a meager number, ascribed the meaning of *unsuccessfully attempting to do something* to this statement. Notwithstanding the conceptual similarity holding among these last interpretations, the participants, although not largely, still invoke Arabic as their frame of reference (five per cent) which is more important than English (two per cent). Admittedly, it is the activation of the experiential pattern which occurs at this stage. The construal of the second interpretation conjures up the idea of *somebody who while harmfully hurt him/herself by*

*banging his/her head against a brick wall (difficult situation)  
scarcely damages it (changes it).*

By the same token, computing the expression *To have somebody under one's feet* involves from the very outset, the underlying metaphor *Passive Is Low*. Consequently, inferences such as *To negatively exercise power over someone* and *To treat somebody as inferior* are overwhelmingly processed by the participants, some highlighting the position of *feet* in relation to the *body* and others making a direct reference to the Algerian Arabic expression /ta□t kra□ah/ (under one's feet). All in all, these associations and correspondences altogether foreground the meaning of *enslaving someone to whatever is possible by smashing him*. The meaning of *making someone inferior by ill-treating him/her* is also invoked, strongly, relating to the initial inference.

The comprehension of these English metaphors is fundamentally processed by having recourse to the Arabic frame of reference in default of an English context. In other words, isolating these metaphors from their source context prompts to the recruitment of the Arabic context. While interpreting the first class of metaphor is prone to result in a mismatch when moving across different contexts, such mismatch is likely to disappear with the forthcoming class.

Metaphor interpretation might also reveals about a well neigh complete match or conformity as we move from the target context to the source one. The activation of either or both contexts count for less since congruency is the corollary of whichever stimulated context. Importantly, such metaphors



which amount to the same conceptual pattern may sometimes engender surface differences overt in different metaphorical images or expressions. This does not preclude the easiness and efficiency whereby the participants compute those metaphors however. One such metaphorical image is *To be a hard nut to crack* which unavoidably yields the participants into the Algerian Arabic metaphorical image / □dam qaasa□ / (be a hard bone). Such efficiency in interpretation results from the underlying conceptual entrenchment which sees *hard* as *difficult*. In a similar fashion, *Cut one's coat according to one's cloth* prompts the participants to conjure up the Algerian Arabic idiom /kul waa□ad juwlad biida □la qaddah/ which may be translated literally as ( everyone should lay his/her own sized egg) and which sees *practicality* in terms of *size*.

The second part of the experiment witnesses the tipping of the balance from the most preferred interpretations to the most relevant ones, more particularly with those metaphorical expressions that amount to different cross cultural conceptualizations. No doubt, the interpretation processes of the students involved in the experiment is highly amenable to the source context which is a pivotal element in navigating through the range of possible interpretations.

## Part II

This part consists in having the same method and materials, yet, the procedure differs for the participants are now asked to process the same metaphors while being hypothetically contextualized, in their source context, in the form of dialogues. Here, the first class is to be examined.

## Dialogues

1) Similar metaphorical expressions with different underlying metaphors

a. Look beyond the end of your nose.

*Context: place: home, speech agents: Laura and Kim, social roles: sister and brother, topic: Laura and her boyfriend Jim's shaky relationship*

Dialogue:

*Kim: did you go to Sara's party?*

*Laura: yes I did.*

*Kim: I suppose Jim went too.*

*Laura: (desolately) No, he didn't.*

*Kim: How come?*

*Laura: Why do you always look beyond the end of your nose?*

b. Banging your head against a brick wall.

*Context: place: laboratory, Speech agents: Pamela and Jonathan, social roles: researchers, topic: Pamela's latest experiment on developing a new medicine for HIV*

Dialogue:

*Jonathan: Anything wrong?*

*Pamela: Indeed, I'm crest fallen because this experiment like its predecessors hasn't lead up to any satisfactory results.*

*Jonathan: You know persistence is the key towards success.*

*Pamela: But I feel as if I'm banging my head against a brick wall.*

c. Have someone under your feet.

*Context: Place: an advertising agency, speech agents: Jerry and Hugh, social roles: employer and employee, topic: a new recruit Adam's unwanted presence.*

Dialogue:

*Jerry: How is work?*

*Hugh: It could be much better.*

*Jerry: How is that?*

*Hugh: Whenever I work on a new idea I find Adam under my feet.*

d. Be a hard nut to crack

*Context: place: a travel agency, speech agents: Ruth and Philip, social role: work mates, topic: Philip's supervisor Deborah's intention to override his suggestion of an important overseas business trip*

Dialogue:

*Ruth: (surprisingly) That's a pity that you will not be able to take over the deal.*

*Philip: Of course I will.*

*Ruth: What will you do of Deborah? I heard she is in favour of Martin.*

*Philip: It's just that she wants to boss everybody around. But, I'm a hard nut to crack.*

e. Cut one's coat according to one's cloth.

*Context: place: a car exposition, speech agents: Alex and Nick, social roles: friends, topic: Nick's burning ambition to get a strong powerful vehicle.*

Note that length is expressed by the doubling of the vowels, i.e., /aa/ ; /uu/; /ii/.

### Consonants

/p/ (only in loanwords and cases of assimilation)	17.	/□/
/b/	18.	/t□/
/t/	19.	/d□/
/d/	20.	/l/
/k/	21.	/r/
/g/	22.	/w/
/ʔ/	23.	/j/
/m/	24.	/□/
/n/	25.	/x/
/f/	26.	/□/
/v/ (only in loanwords)	27.	/□/
/θ/	28.	/□/
/ð/	29.	/□/
/s/	30.	/□/
/z/	31.	/q/
/h/		

## ***References***

- BLACK, M. 1962, (1955), *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, NY, pp.25-47.
- BOERS, F. (2003), Applied linguistics perspectives on cross-cultural variation in conceptual metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol, 18*, 231–238.
- DOBRZYNSKA, T. (1995), “Translating Metaphor: Problems of Meaning”. *Journal of Pragmatics 24*, 595-604.
- LAKOFF, G & JOHNSON, M.(1980), *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago/London: The University Of Chicago Press.
- LAKOFF, G & M, TURNER (1989), *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago/London: The University Of Chicago Press.
- MANDELBLIT, Nili,(1995), “The Cognitive View Of Metaphor and Its Implications For Translation Theory.” In: *Translation and Meaning PART 3*. Maastricht: Universitaire Press, 483-495.
- SILK, M. (1999), "Metaphor and Metonymy: Aristotle , Jakobson , Ricoeur, and Others ", in Tilley Ch (ed), *Metaphor and Material Culture: Ancient thought and modern revisions*, Oxford, pp. 113-147.
- SPERBER, D & WILSON, D (1982), “Mutual Knowledge and relevance in theories of communication” in Smith, N (ed.). *Mutual Knowledge*, Academic Press, London, pp.61-85.