

Béla Lukács: The role of L1 in figurative language production by Hungarian learners of English

Abstract

My dissertation investigates how Hungarian as a mother tongue influences the production of English figurative language among Hungarian learners of English. By exploring this area, this dissertation aims to provide the background for developing effective teaching/learning strategies for figurative expressions in English.

Researchers have understood the concepts of metaphor and idiom in several ways over time. The theoretical background of the dissertation is Cognitive Metaphor Theory, which proposes that much of our abstract thinking and language is based on metaphorical mappings between concrete, embodied experiences and abstract concepts. Moreover, I present some models of idiom processing, from which the most relevant ones from my dissertation's viewpoint being: Graded Saliency Hypothesis (Giora 2002), Dual Idiom Representation (Abel 2003), and Literal Saliency Model (Cieślicka 2006). According to Langlotz (2006), idioms are bipartite semantic structures including a literal and a figurative meaning as well. In my dissertation, I consider these structures multi-word and fixed to some extent, and probably known to the language users of a language.

During the research I used two methods: essay analysis and idiom testing. The essay analysis aimed to explore what types of errors occur in L2 essays by Hungarian students, and to what extent L1 transfer can explain the errors. To answer these questions, I had to establish how to identify and classify the errors in the expressions used metaphorically. I used a taxonomy of errors based on James (1998), Littlemore et al. (2014) and Iaroslavtseva and Skorczynska (2017). During the process of metaphor identification, I adhered to the principles outlined in MIPVU (Steen et al. 2010) regarding metaphors (Lukács 2022). Finally, I relied on Nacey's classifications (2010, 2013), which rely on in James (1998). In analyzing metaphorical language in English essays, I conducted a study involving 15 students who wrote essays on the impact of COVID-19 on their lives (Lukács 2022). These essays, composed under supervision without external resources, enabled me to investigate the types and frequency of errors my Hungarian subjects made. Using an error taxonomy based on MIPVU and James (1998), I searched lexical elements which the essay writers used incorrectly and at the same time intended

to have metaphorical meanings. I analysed each essay word-by-word according to parts of speech, metaphors and error types.

After the essay analysis we can see that grammar errors emerged as the most common, followed by misspellings (Lukács 2022). The study revealed that errors were most prevalent at the B2 level, supporting Littlemore et al.'s findings (2014) that this proficiency level exhibits the highest incidence of L1 influence. Knowing that that mother tongue has the highest influence on metaphoric language use at B2 level may help teachers in designing what to teach their students.

Following the essay analysis, I conducted some research with idiom testing. My idiom experiments focused on the production, predictability, and motivation of idioms known to the subjects. Through a pilot study followed by a major study, I investigated how these factors affect students' English idiom production. Based on the literature, I established five idiom types and selected ten idiomatic expressions into each category based on their literal and non-literal similarity. In the experiments inspired by Carrol et al. (2018), I used English cued-completion tasks with a two- to three-sentence context. Also, I employed idiom-rating on a 7-point Likert scale. The subjects were asked to write English idioms into the gaps of the cued-completion tasks, and, for each idiom, to rate the degree to which the English idiom was familiar to them (familiarity), the degree to which they perceived a link between the literal and figurative meanings (motivation) and the degree to which they thought the figurative meaning could be predicted from the literal meaning (predictability). The results show a strong correlation between the motivation and predictability of idioms and the production of idioms, i.e. the average of the scores of each idiom in the cued-completion tests. Higher motivation and predictability significantly increased idiom production, with the effect being most significant among advanced learners.

The idiom tests provide us with a strong evidence that motivation and predictability play critical roles in producing idiomatic expressions in a second language. These observations emphasize the importance of developing educational strategies that take idiom motivation and predictability into consideration to enhance figurative language mastery in the L2. By understanding the influence of L1 on L2 learning, educators can better support students in overcoming the challenges of L2 figurative language, which may lead to more effective language acquisition.

Keywords: familiarity, idioms, metaphors, motivation, predictability

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