Metaphor in L2 English: Error or creativity?

Prodromou (2007: 21) observes that "What is considered creative in the mouth of an L1-user is often seen as deviation in the mouth of even the most advanced successful bilingual user of the language." Judgment of acceptability is thereby attributed to who has the authority to say something rather than what is said, a standard that ipso facto bars foreign language learners from ever being perceived as creative in their L2. Yet presupposing that creativity is a general aspect of human intelligence that may be realized in 'everyday' prose rather than the language of poets and bards only (Carter 2004), it follows that L2 writing may be creative as well.

This paper explores the dividing line between 'difference' and 'deficiency' in the written language of EFL learners by focusing on the complex concept of metaphorical creativity and its identification (see e.g. Nacey forthcoming: 157-203). Creativity merges the known with the familiar; metaphor—according to cognitive theorists—links disparate semantic domains to illuminate a less familiar (often abstract) concept in terms of a more familiar (more concrete and/or embodied) concept (see e.g. Steen 2011). The products of the creative process are new, and in some sense extraordinary. The prototypical metaphor—according to the traditional view—is vibrant and novel, provoking new insight (see e.g. Black 1981). Metaphor and creativity would thus seem to go hand in hand. Indeed, L2 language users, who per definition have access to two or more languages, may also produce manifestations of 'bilinguals' creativity' resulting from the 'mixing' of languages (Kachru 1985; Kumaravadivelu 1988: 313 and 316).

This corpus-based study examines all occurrences of metaphorical language in roughly 20,000 words of argumentative texts written by advanced Norwegian students of English that meet (at least) one of three oft-mentioned criteria of creativity: novelty, significance (i.e. the deliberate 'crafting' of language), and appropriateness (i.e. intelligibility) (Boden 2004: 43; Cameron 2011; Kövecses 2010: 664; Pitzl 2009, 2012; Semino 2011; Steen 2008); the potential role of the L1 is also investigated. The overarching goal is an evaluation of these criteria as valid measures of creativity, in an attempt to tease apart "what looks like a mistake but is in fact poetry" (McArthur, cited in Rubdy & Saraceni 2006: 23) in L2 learner language.

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