

Development of L2 metaphorical competence from ages 10-19

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Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory advances the view that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive process defining our understanding of reality: "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing [e.g. love] in terms of another [e.g. a journey]" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Such metaphors in thought (conceptual metaphors) are reflected as metaphors in language, i.e. by the words and expressions we produce (linguistic metaphors). Empirical research has since confirmed that linguistic metaphor is ubiquitous in language (see e.g. Nacey, 2013; Steen et al., 2010). As a consequence, metaphor necessarily plays a central role in language learning, including all aspects of communicative competence in a second language (L2) (see e.g. Littlemore & Low, 2006).

This investigation details a pseudo-longitudinal corpus-based exploration into the development of metaphorical competence of L2 learners as they progress through their school career. The particular focus here is on the written production of linguistic metaphors in L2 English written by parallel groups of pupils from the ages of 10-19 in Norway, where the subject of English is obligatory from the first grade (at age six). The Norwegian government defines English as one of three 'core' subjects (along with Norwegian and mathematics), and considers it as both a key language subject and as a subject for the personal growth and development of pupils (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013).

The particular objectives and methods are adapted from a Littlemore *et al.* (2014) investigation into the metaphor use of Greek and German-speaking learners of English with varying degrees of English proficiency. More specifically, the MIPVU metaphor identification procedure will first be applied to 180 texts (20 per grade level), to identify all linguistic metaphors in these texts (see Steen et al., 2010). The main objective is to measure how the metaphorical density varies per grade level - that is, variation in number of linguistic metaphors per lexical unit. A second goal is to compare patterns for open-class versus closed-class metaphors across grade levels, to identify whether any particular level at which the use of the former overtakes the latter as has been observed in previous research (Littlemore et al., 2014). A third goal is to examine whether the distribution of metaphor clusters varies across levels, as clusters have been found to serve important communicative functions and might therefore be expected to increase with improved proficiency (see Cameron & Low, 2004).

The empirical data is retrieved from the "Tracking Written Learner Language" corpus (TraWL), a compilation of authentic texts written by Norwegian pupils. TraWL is a longitudinal corpus, currently under compilation as part of a wider, ground-breaking project into the development of L2 writing in the Norwegian school system. The corpus consists of texts written in L1 Norwegian, L2 English, L2 Spanish, L2 German and L2 French, which are being collected from schools in differently populated geographical regions in Norway, ranging from the capital city to rural municipalities. All texts have been submitted as class work by pupils from the fifth grade in primary school to the final year of upper secondary school.

Compilation of TraWL began in the fall of 2016 and will continue for the foreseeable future, to accommodate longitudinal studies of writing development of either individuals or groups, in the L1 and in the L2(s). As of this writing, however; AP only allows for cross-sectional (pseudo-longitudinal) studies of learners at various stages of development, starting from the fifth grade. The present investigation therefore represents an initial exploratory look into the metaphor production in second language writing from different groups of pupils from nine different grade levels, from the primary through the upper secondary school levels. This investigation is innovative, since no previous work has tracked the development of metaphorical competence from such a young age (from age 10) and over such a wide age range (until age 19).

References:

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