

Metaphors in high-stakes language exams

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Introduction

Metaphor is often thought to be difficult for second language (L2) learners, especially because successful interpretation may depend upon a degree of cultural knowledge that L2 learners may not fully share. As Low pointed out already in 1988 (p. 137), however, “it would be helpful to know whether the ways in which learners learn to cope with metaphor are similar from person to person”. This article directly addresses this acknowledged need by reporting on the findings from a corpus-based exploration into manifestations of understanding of metaphor among speakers of L2 Norwegian. The empirical data consists of written texts produced by 22 adults with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, where they respond to a task requiring them to interpret a literary metaphor and incorporate that metaphor in a text about their own lives: a task necessarily involving understanding of metaphor.

This study primarily focuses on the metaphors the learners themselves produced in their responses, as one means of measuring understanding. The texts under investigation were collected in the Norwegian Second Language Corpus, originally produced as part of a high-stakes language examination primarily intended for immigrants to Norway at and around the upper intermediate level of Norwegian language proficiency. The learners were instructed to write a text incorporating their own opinions and experiences of friendship with the message(s) in the Kolbein Falkeid poem *Det er langt mellom venner* ‘It is far between friends’. At the poem’s core is metaphorical simile steeped in the background of culturally specific Norwegian traditions, suggesting that this task might prove particularly challenging for L2 learners.

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Background

Why metaphor and the L2?

My approach is framed by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which holds that metaphor is a fundamental cognitive process defining our understanding of reality: “metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 6). Rather than merely being ornamental elements, the metaphors we produce in language mirror the ways we actually conceive of the world around us. In other words, we understand and experience “one kind of thing (e.g. love) in terms of another (e.g. a journey) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Underlying *conceptual metaphors* – metaphor in thought – are represented by conventional, and usually codified, expressions in language (*linguistic metaphors*). Recent empirical research has confirmed that linguistic metaphors are ubiquitous in both L1 and L2 language (see e.g. Nacey, 2013; Steen et al., 2010a).

Being inherent in human nature, metaphor necessarily plays an important role in language learning. Some scholars further suggest that processing and understanding figurative language may pose particular challenges for L2 speakers of a language, who are less familiar with cultural conventions and connotations, and lack a figurative language repertoire in the target language (e.g. Littlemore & Low, 2006). Pickin notes that this may be particularly true when learners are asked to interpret literary texts, which may “stretch the resources of the language to convey a particular poetic vision” (2001, p. 63). The view that metaphor may be difficult for L2 learners is also reflected in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR), the 2001 Council of Europe document that intends to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (2001, p. 1). Here, metaphor is explicitly mentioned only once, in terms of lexical competence where it is equated with the terms ‘idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms’. These terms, in turn, do not appear on the CEFR assessment scales until the C1/C2 ‘Proficiency’ level, meaning that learners are not expected to utilize metaphors to any real extent before they become advanced users of a language (see e.g. Nacey, 2013, pp. 43-55).

Previous research about metaphor and L2 Norwegian

Earlier research about metaphor and language learners has focused primarily on metaphor comprehension, interpretation and/or appreciation, with L2 studies frequently concentrating on metaphor with respect to vocabulary acquisition and retention. In most previous studies, informants are college-age students, perhaps because they are the most readily accessible to researchers. Further, most studies

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related to metaphor in learner language investigate L2 English; far fewer studies have been carried out on metaphor in relationship to speakers or writers of L2s other than English (see Nacey, 2017 for a more comprehensive overview).

Research related to the potential challenges metaphor may pose when it comes to L2 Norwegian is particularly scarce. The most comprehensive relevant investigation thus far has been Golden (2006, 2010), who focused on comprehension of metaphorical expressions among 400 teenagers: 230 L1 Norwegian speakers and 170 L2 Norwegian speakers. Findings indicate that the L2 Norwegian speakers had greater difficulties with comprehension of metaphor, as a group understanding metaphorical expressions to a far lesser degree than did the L1 Norwegian speakers. Golden concludes that learners' level of linguistic mastery (e.g. lexis, syntax, etc.) and the extent of their background cultural knowledge feature prominently among the major factors that may make reading comprehension difficult for L2 learners.

A later study into metaphor and L2 language focused on learner production rather than comprehension, where Golden (2012) reported a relative overuse of L2 Norwegian metaphorical use of the verb *ta* 'take' when compared to L1 Norwegian writing. A closer look at context revealed, however, that this difference had more to do with context than with metaphoricity. It turned out that the L1 Norwegian informants had been instructed to write about the topic of organ donation, unlike the L2 Norwegian informants, so when they wrote a phrase such as *take my heart*, no figurative use was involved. This (perhaps inadvertent) finding highlights the importance of topic when researching metaphor production.

Primary material and methods

The primary data under investigation in the present study consists of texts written by immigrants to Norway as part of a language examination called *Test i norsk - høyere nivå* 'Test of Norwegian - advanced level', also known as the *Bergenstest*. This test is a high-stakes examination allowing L2 Norwegian speakers to officially document their Norwegian competence and is intended to measure proficiency at and around the upper intermediate level, i.e. the CEFR B2 level. The test is required for foreigners who apply to a Norwegian university or college, for job applicants in Norway, and for anyone else needing to document their Norwegian language skills. These texts were collected as part of a corpus called the *Norsk andrespråk-skorpus* 'Norwegian Second Language Corpus' (henceforth ASK; see e.g. Ragnhildstveit, 2018), and comprise all the essays produced for a task requiring the learners to interpret the same Norwegian poem (22 texts in total).¹ Table 1 presents

1 ASK is available here: <http://clarino.uib.no/korpuskel/corpus-list?collection=ASK>.

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an overview of the texts, showing the ASK text identification tag, L1, country of origin, age, number of years in Norway and sex of the test-taker, as well as text length measured in lexical units² and CEFR rating of the essay (when available).

Table 1. Overview of data: 22 ASK texts

Text ID	L1	Country of origin	Age	Sex	Text length	CEFR rating
h0420	German	Germany	26	F	374	B1+
h0426	Polish	Poland	31	F	464	B2
h0432	German	Germany	20	F	469	B2
h0440	Dutch	Netherlands	38	F	543	not rated
h0444	Polish	Poland	35	F	497	B2+
h0447	Spanish	Spain	46	M	432	B2+
h0453	Polish	Poland	26	F	463	B2
h0460	Spanish	Peru	32	F	359	B2
h0464	English	South Africa	26	F	368	B2
h0466	Russian	Russia	24	F	488	B2
h0468	English	UK	29	M	572	B2+
h0470	English	USA	33	F	461	B2
h0484	German	Germany	22	F	500	B2
h0491	Spanish	Chile	62	F	366	B1+
h0500	English	USA	19	F	570	B2
h0511	Russian	Russia	19	F	454	B1+
h0515	English	USA	44	F	469	B2
h0522	Russian	Russia	35	F	428	B2
h0524	Dutch	Belgium	27	F	483	not rated
h0530	Dutch	Netherlands	28	F	432	not rated
h0538	Russian	Estonia	19	F	511	B1+
h0569	Serbo-Croatian	Bosnia-Hercegovina	35	F	383	not rated

In sum, the informants – mostly female – come from one of 13 different countries and have one of seven L1s: Dutch, English, German, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian or Spanish. Their ages mainly range from 19 to 46 years, with one outlier who is 62; the median age is 28.5 years old, while the mean is slightly higher at almost 31 years old. The present study is thus unique through the inclusion of L2 learners who are not college students, and who have varying L1 backgrounds rather than the same

2 The definition of ‘lexical units’ is discussed on page 291–292.

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L1. Because there are so few texts from each L1, however, it is not possible to distinguish any intragroup differences (between L1s) from intergroup differences (between L1 and L2). As for the texts, they range in length from 359 – 572 lexical units (mean = 558.5 and median = 463.5), for a total of 10,086 lexical units in the dataset as a whole. The texts' CEFR ratings, determined in conjunction with the compilation of ASK, indicate that all fall into the B level (Independent user). The four weakest texts received a rating of a strong B1 (Intermediate), eleven texts received a B2 (Upper intermediate), while three texts received a strong B2 (that is, just slightly below the C1 Advanced level). Because Dutch and Serbo-Croatian texts were not included among those rated in ASK, no CEFR scores are available for four of the texts in the dataset. The texts nevertheless seem to be characterized by roughly similar levels of proficiency.

Metaphor-led discourse analysis

The present study utilizes a metaphor-led approach to discourse analysis, investigating understanding of metaphor through focusing primarily on production of metaphor in written texts. Such analysis, allowing for both a quantitative description of the data as well as a qualitative exploration of metaphor networks, is grounded on the assumption that language, culture and thought is interconnected (Cameron, 2010a). As Cameron (2010b, p. 7) argues,

[t]he attraction of metaphor as a research tool lies in what it can tell us about the people who use it. ... [L]inguistic metaphors in discourse can tell us something about how people are thinking, can indicate socio-cultural conventions that people are tied into or that they may be rejecting, and can reveal something of speakers' emotions, attitudes and values. (p.78)

Metaphor production may thus prove valuable in determining some measure of how the ASK learners understand metaphors they encounter, where “patterns of metaphor use...[may]..suggest patterns of meaning making” (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 69).

Metaphor identification

The texts for this study were first analyzed for their metaphor density, using the Scandinavian adaption of the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (S-MIPVU) to identify all linguistic metaphors (Nacey, Greve, & Falck, 2019). This procedure allows for valid, reliable and transparent metaphor identification in Danish, Swedish or Norwegian: a procedure adapted from the original MIPVU protocol that was primarily created on the basis of, and for, metaphor identification in English (Steen et al., 2010b). The procedure entails determining the metaphor-

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ical status of each of the 10,086 lexical units in the dataset, this being the basic unit of analysis for S-MIVPU. In most cases, the lexical unit corresponds to the orthographic word; for ease of reference, the terms ‘lexical unit’ and ‘word’ are henceforth used synonymously in this article.

S-MIPVU identifies both ‘indirect’ and ‘direct’ metaphor. Indirect metaphors consist of those words where there is a contrast between the basic and contextual senses, and where that difference may be attributed to a relationship of comparison. As an example, consider the verb *støtte* ‘support’ in (1).³

- (1) jeg har venner her som **støtter** og hjelper meg. h0426
‘I have friends here who **support** and help me.’

The basic meaning of *støtte* ‘support’ (that is, its most concrete, specific and human-oriented sense in the dictionary) is *bære, holde opp* ‘carry, hold up’ as when a (physical) roof is held up by (physical) columns: the first entry in the Norwegian online dictionary *Bokmålsordboka* ‘Dano-Norwegian dictionary’.⁴ By contrast, the contextual meaning is the dictionary’s fourth sense entry, *yte hjelp* ‘extend help’. These two senses are sufficiently distinct (i.e. represented by different sense entries) and are also related through comparison whereby we understand the act of helping someone through a difficult time in terms of physically holding up the weight of something.

In direct metaphors, an underlying cross-domain mapping is triggered through ‘direct’ language use, where there is no contrast between the basic and contextual senses. An example is found in (2).

- (2) I tunge tider skinner de **som sola** h0470
‘In tough times they [my friends] shine **like** the **sun**’

Here we find a simile, signaled by the preposition *som* ‘like’, that is annotated as a metaphorical flag. The following noun is coded as a direct metaphor because there is no distinction between its contextual sense and basic senses even though there is clearly an underlying conceptual metaphor: the topic under discussion is the writer’s friends rather than the earth’s nearest star. Interpretation of this sentence, which directly evokes an ‘alien’ physical source domain unrelated to the

3 Four important points to note regarding the illustrative examples in this article: 1) All translations are my own; 2) The Norwegian examples appear as they do in the main ASK corpus, including punctuation and any mistakes/errors; 3) Metaphor-related words in the Norwegian examples are highlighted in bold script, while metaphor flags (see example (2)) are highlighted in bold italicized script; 4) For the sake of convenience, the English words translating the identified Norwegian metaphors and metaphor flags are also marked in bold (italicized) script.

4 The *Bokmålsordboka* is available here: <https://ordbok.uib.no/>.

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topic at hand, requires the addressee to set up a cross-domain comparison between the referents of the words in discourse.

Text topic

The specific texts under investigation comprise all the essays produced in response to the same given task, where the test-takers were provided a poem written by the well-known contemporary Norwegian poet Kolbein Falkeid, renowned for his philosophical yet approachable style. They were issued with the following instructions:

Les diktet «Det er langt mellom venner» av Kolbjørn [*sic*] Falkeid. Skriv en tekst om vennskap der du trekker inn dikterens budskap, slik du oppfatter det, og dine egne meninger og erfaringer med vennskap.

‘Read the poem “It is far between friends” by Kolbjørn [*sic*] Falkeid. Write a text about friendship where you incorporate the poet’s message, as you understand it, with your opinions and experiences with friendship.’

The poem in focus consists of a metaphorical analogy in five lines, and is presented below. Here, the first row for each line presents the original Norwegian text, the second row presents a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, and the third row presents an idiomatic translation.⁵

Det	er	lang-t	mellom	venn-er.
it	be.PRS	far-AGR	between	friend-PL
‘It is far between friends.’				

Mellom	venn-er	stå-r	mange	bekjentskap-er
between	friend-PL	stand-PRS	many	acquaintance-PL
‘Between friends lie many acquaintances’				

5 While this translation adheres to the Leipzig glossing rules for interlinear morpheme-by-morpheme glosses to ensure complete clarity and transparency (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf>), all other instances of translated text have been rendered idiomatically only.

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Og mye snakk
and much talk

‘and many conversations’

Venn-er ligge-r **som** små lys-ende stue-r
friend-PL lie-PRS **like** small light-PTCP cabin-PL

‘Friends are like small lighted cabins’

lang-t bort-e i fjell-mørke-t
far-AGR away-LOC in mountain.darkness-DET.DEF

‘far away in the mountain darkness.’

Du kan ikke ta feil av dem
you can not take.INF wrong of them

‘You cannot mistake them for anything else.’

The images raised in this poem are cultural-specific, immediately recognizable from Norwegian *hyttekultur* ‘cabin life’: the tradition of enjoying (often) primitive and isolated cabins in the wilderness as a means of temporarily escaping from the demands of daily life. Cabins are often passed down through the generations and families develop close ties to them, perpetuated through nostalgic memories of cabin visits in years gone by: “They can sell their house, but never their cabin” (Stang, 2011).

The poem is essentially an extended metaphor, characterized by the topic incongruity of direct metaphor. While the title of the poem establishes the (abstract) domain of friendship, the text refers to (concrete) aspects of cabin life. The poem thus actually *creates* a similarity between friendship and the experience of wandering in the mountain darkness, encouraging readers to map selected features of the cabin experience onto friendship. So even though no mention of metaphor was made in the assignment, the learners were essentially instructed to interpret and respond to a metaphor, relating it to their own lives. Given the view that metaphor is difficult and should be reserved for advanced language (see page 288), this task is thus ostensibly quite challenging.

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Metaphor clusters

Determination of the metaphorical status of every lexical unit in the data allows for the calculation of the metaphor density per text (that is, the number of metaphor-related words per total number of lexical units). Yet metaphor density necessarily varies throughout a text, with some areas having a relatively low metaphor frequency and other areas containing higher frequencies. Stretches of discourse characterized by such concentrated bursts of metaphor, known as ‘metaphor clusters’, are particularly good candidates for further investigation because clusters have been found to serve important communication roles, including key explanatory and conceptual functions (see e.g. Littlemore & Low, 2006, pp. 135-143).

Identification of metaphor clusters was accomplished through a series of time analyses, one per text, following Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, & Turner (2014):

A span size of 20 words was selected, and the metaphoric density across the words in this span was calculated. The result was placed at the mid-point (the 10th word). The span was then shifted one word down, and the metaphoric density calculated for the next 20-word span. The result was placed at the mid-point (the 11th word), and so on until the end of the text was reached. (p. 123)

This time analysis procedure allows for the production of charts illustrating the moving metaphor density, such as those shown further on on pages 300-301, where anything greater than 40% metaphor density is considered a cluster.⁶ In essence, each moving metaphor density chart provides individual metaphor portraits for each text. This approach allows for relatively simple comparison of how metaphor usage varies in each of the 22 texts under investigation. Localized areas with particularly high metaphor density may prove informative for subsequent qualitative analysis, by providing indications of where analysts could focus attention.

Findings

Metaphor density

The average metaphor density of the 22 ASK texts under investigation ranges from a minimum of 12.3% to a maximum of 31.4%, with the exception of one outlier at 45.4%. The mean metaphor density is 21.5%, while the median is 20.1%. The overall metaphor density in these ASK texts is thus fairly high when compared to

6 All figures in this article were created using the R environment for statistical computing and graphics. The analyzed data (in text file format) and R code is available at Dataverse Network Norway (DataverseNO): <https://doi.org/10.18710/HTCX4Y>.

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figures reported in previous research. Steen et al. (2010b, p. 195), who used MIPVU to identify all metaphors in approximately 200,000 words from the British National Corpus, report metaphor densities of 17.5% for academic texts, 15.3% for news, 10.8% for fiction and 6.8% for conversation. Nacey (2013, p. 138) reports figures of 15.5% for 20,000 words of Norwegian L2 English in argumentative texts written by college students and 13.3% for 20,000 words of L1 English texts written by British A-level students. When it comes to Norwegian texts, Nacey and Greve (2018) investigated five years' worth New Year's Eve speeches (L1 Norwegian) and find an average metaphor density of 23.0% in the Norwegian King's speeches. No previous study has looked into metaphor density in L2 Norwegian texts.

The present findings thus provide further support concerning the ubiquity of metaphor in language, also in an L2. That said, metaphor density clearly depends on text type, with certain types triggering more metaphorical language than others. Among the most metaphorical of the text types hitherto reported on are the Norwegian King's speeches, where he typically rhetorically weaves a figurative image into the text as a whole. While the metaphor density of the ASK texts is lower than in the King's speeches, it is nevertheless higher than in the Norwegian L2 English texts that have been investigated. These findings suggest that text types that are arguably 'more metaphorical' may contribute to increased metaphor frequency in texts – that is, one may generally expect more metaphor in e.g. a reader response to a poem than in an argumentative essay about a given topic. Moreover, some topics may also trigger more metaphor than others. The CMT predicts that this would be true particularly when the topic is abstract, as is the case in the present study. The texts under investigation here concern friendship, which previous research indicates is a complex concept drawing on many different conceptual mappings (see e.g. Kövecses, 1995, 2000).

Understanding

This study analyzes the ASK texts by searching for evidence of understanding on the basis of Gibbs' (1994, pp. 116-118) view of the concept, decomposing it into four separate components: comprehension, recognition, interpretation and appreciation. 'Comprehension' is the immediate and ongoing process of creating meaning from utterances by linking context with linguistic input such as lexis, syntax, phonemes, etc. 'Recognition' refers to the conscious identification of an utterance as a particular type, e.g. recognizing metaphor *as metaphor*. 'Appreciation' involves an aesthetic judgement of the utterance, i.e. some sort of qualitative evaluation: is it any good? Finally, 'interpretation' involves analysis of the products of comprehension by, for instance, expanding upon the entailments of a given metaphor.

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Gibbs explains that much of what is involved in the understanding of figurative language is comprehension – that is, grasping the intention of utterances. The remaining three steps are later, and optional, products of understanding. The comprehension component, however, leaves few tangible traces in the produced texts. That said, there are no indications in any text of comprehension difficulties with regard to e.g. the lexis or syntax of the poem. As a consequence, the following subsections focus on whether the three remaining (and optional) components are evidenced in the data, and if so how.

Recognition

Given the nature of the corpus data at hand, recognition of the poem as a type may only be identified on the basis of written traces in the texts. Lack of any such evidence does not however prove that the writers did *not* recognize the metaphor as such, but if they did then they chose not to include that information in their texts – something that would not be unexpected considering that the assigned task asked them to write about friendship rather than to analyze the poem.

Although no ASK text in the material included any explicit mention of words or phrases such as ‘metaphor’, ‘similar’, ‘figurative expression’ and the like, six of the 22 texts did include some degree of analytic language arguably associated with literary commentary. We see one example in (3) which contains overt signs of recognition through discussion of the symbolism in the poem.

- (3) Et lys i mørket har **en veldig symbolsk mening** h0444
‘A light in the dark has **a very symbolic meaning**’

Other texts explicitly mention a comparison or discuss the images in the poem in terms of Falkeid’s having drawn or presented a (figurative) picture, one that is e.g. explained in text h0420 as representing the abstract concepts of hope and faith.

Appreciation

Appreciation involves an aesthetic evaluation of an utterance. It is manifested in 11 of the 22 ASK texts, in one of three ways: in terms of 1) agreement, 2) admiration or 3) both agreement and admiration; see (4).

- (4) **et vakkert dikt som jeg er veldig enig i** h0470
‘**a beautiful poem that I very much agree with**’

Expressions of agreement with the poet or (metonymically) with the poet’s message

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are typically usually phrased with the conventional Norwegian wording *jeg er enig i* ‘I agree with’ [lit: ‘I am agreed in’], which is sometimes modified with respect to the extent of agreement (e.g. *helt* ‘completely’ (h0432), *veldig* ‘very much’ in (4), *stortsett* ‘largely’ (h0468)). Ways of expressing admiration vary more than do ways of expressing agreement. Sometimes the writer simply likes something, with no proffered justification. But some informants add more detail: the poet’s words are *veldig kloke* ‘very wise’ (h0426), the poem is *vakkert* ‘beautiful’ in (4), a turn of phrasing or comparison is *veldig pent uttrykket* ‘very nicely expressed’ (h0524) or accomplished *på en veldig fin måte* ‘in a very nice way’ (h0468). Moreover, two texts express both agreement and admiration, such as we find in (4). For some writers, positive appreciation of the poem may have been a deliberate tactic in the belief that complimenting the poem would help ensure a passing grade.

Interpretation

Interpretation involves a stage of understanding where a hearer/reader explains or embroiders upon the meaning of an utterance to “consciously create an understanding of a text or utterance as having a particular content” (Gibbs, 1994, p. 117). A bottom-up analysis of the ASK texts results in the following six-fold ‘interpretation’ taxonomy:

- No interpretation
- Repetition
- Non-metaphorical interpretation
- Metaphor expansion
- Alternative metaphor
- De-metaphorization

The strategy of ‘no interpretation’ is a stand-alone strategy, meaning that it by definition cannot appear in combination with any of the remaining interpretation strategies. By contrast, the remaining strategies may overlap, such that a single text may include instantiations of more than one strategy.

No interpretation

Four of the 22 texts make either no or hardly any reference to Falkeid or the poem, even though the texts’ main theme is friendship. To the extent that the learners have followed the task instructions of incorporating the poet’s message in their own essay, they seem to have used the poem only as inspiration for a general discussion about friendship. Lack of reference to the Falkeid poem does not seem to have affected the determination of proficiency level of the informants. While one of the texts was not evaluated for CEFR level (see pages 290–291) and one was

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judged as a strong B1, the two remaining texts received scores of a strong B2 – the highest score awarded for the texts as a whole. Although the evaluation criteria are undocumented, we may thus assume that there was no requirement for writers to have explicitly discussed the poem itself because texts that solely dealt with personal experiences of friendship received high marks.

Repetition

Four of the 22 ASK texts repeat one or more lines from the poem, accompanied by some sort of metacomment but without any explanation of what the citation could mean. By way of example, consider (5).

- (5) “Mellom venner står mange bekjenskaper og mye snakk,” – skriver Kolbjørn Falkeid. Og hvis det er virkelig sånn, da er det viktig for hvert vennskap. h0538
“Between friends lie many acquaintances and much talk,” – writes Kolbjørn Falkeid. And if it is really like this, then it is important for every friendship.

Here the writer apparently has a particular interpretation in mind, but this is rendered only with the word *sånn* ‘like this’. Exactly what ‘this’ is, is left to the reader to decide. While this strategy links the ASK text more closely to the poem than does the strategy of ‘no repetition’, it is hardly more informative with respect to the learner’s understanding.

Non-metaphorical interpretation

Two of the texts offer interpretations of (parts of) the poem using language that is largely non-metaphorical. We find an example of this in (6), where the writer proffers an explanation concerning the underlying message of the title and first lines of the poem.

- (6) Å ha kontakt med mange personer og snakke med dem om forskjellige ting betyr ikke å være venner. Den påstanden treffer vi i diktets overskrift (“Det er langt mellom venner”) og videre i diktet (“Mellom venner står mange bekjenskaper og mye snakk”). h0522
‘To have contact with many people and talk to them about different things doesn’t mean that you’re friends. We meet this claim in the poem’s heading (“It is far between friends”) and further in the poem (“Between friends lie many acquaintances and much talk”).’

Note that the statement in (6) *does* contain metaphor-related words, but simply because metaphor is ubiquitous in language and cannot be avoided. An example

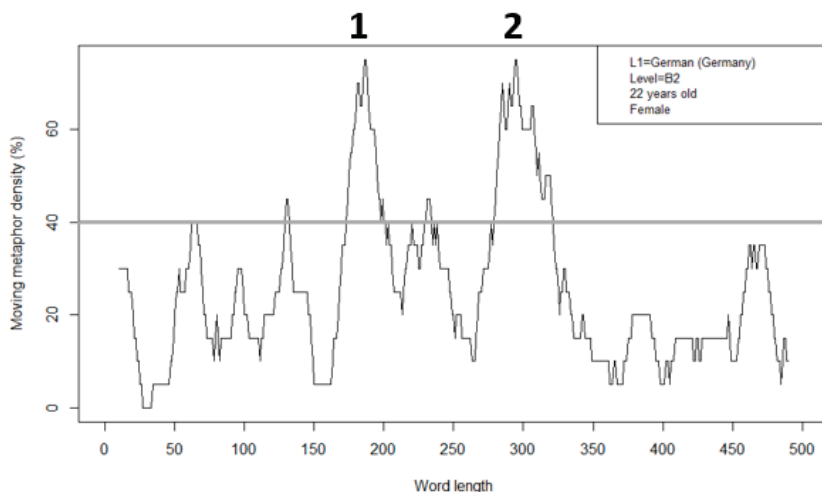
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is the indirect metaphor *kontakt* ‘contact’ involving a contrast between the basic and contextual senses (physical versus emotional/social links). Such use of metaphor, however, appears incidental rather than intentional metaphor expansion.

Metaphor expansion

Thirteen of the 22 ASK texts expand upon Falkeid’s metaphor by providing metaphorical entailments beyond those included in the poem. In this way, the writers take advantage of the poem’s underlying metaphor(s) by adding coherent corresponding sets of metaphorical expressions. Such entailments involve further analogies that often stretch over several lines of written discourse, manifested as direct metaphors that form a metaphor cluster. An example of this strategy is found in text h0484, where metaphor analysis reveals two metaphor clusters; see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Moving metaphor density chart: ASK text ID h0484



Here we find two pockets of concentrated metaphor: Cluster 1 including words 163 – 213 and Cluster 2 including words 267 – 330. In both, the writer builds upon Falkeid’s metaphor in ways that are different from, yet consistent with, the original images. Example (7) presents Cluster 1 in full, written by a 22-year-old woman from Germany.

- (7) Og den siste setningen som sier at “du ikke kan ta feil av dem”, virker ikke så veldig beroligende når man prøver å **forestille seg** de **stue**ne i **fjellmørket** som kan **berge alt mulig rart**. Jeg ville **i hverfall ikke stikke innom** hvert **stue** som **møter meg på** min **vandring i fjellets mørke**. h0484 ‘And the last sentence that says “you can’t mistake them for anything else”

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doesn't seem so reassuring when you try to *imagine* the **cabins in the mountain darkness** that can **contain all sorts of strange things**. I know that I wouldn't **drop by just any cabin** that I **come across** on my **wanderings in the mountain darkness**.'

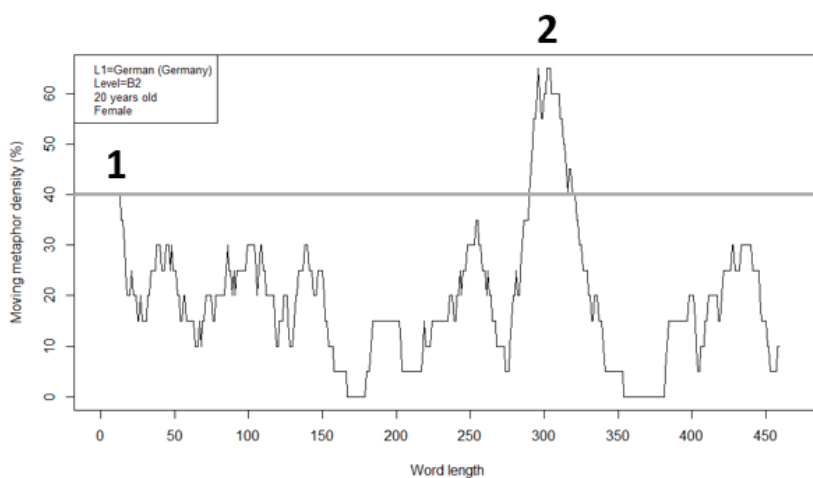
In this expansion, the writer adds details wholly absent from the poem, speculating upon what may be found inside mountain cabins and adds a healthy dose of skepticism regarding the wisdom of entering a stranger's property.

Metaphor expansions found in other ASK texts elaborate on the nature of mountain walks (e.g. you can easily go the wrong way (h0466)), discuss added possibilities (e.g. the cabin might be locked, so it is good to have your own tent (h0470)), and describe the Norwegian landscape in more literal and figurative detail (e.g. dark and threatening (h0468)), etc. In all cases, the writers enrich Falkeid's given metaphor by mapping characteristics from the source domain(s) of cabins/mountains/light to the target domain of friendship, all of which reflect conscious reflection upon and engagement with the meaning of the poem.

Alternative metaphor

Four of the 22 ASK texts introduce alternative metaphors to that given by the poet. Like metaphor expansions, these are identified as clusters because they typically consist of figurative analogies across a span of words. An example is found in text h0432, which begins with Cluster 1 extending from words 1-23; see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Moving metaphor density chart: ASK text ID h0432



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The alternative metaphor in Cluster 1 reads as follows:

- (8) “Venner er *som stjerne* på *himmelen*: *noen ganger* kan du *ikke se* dem; men *husker*: de er *aldri borte!*” h0432
“Friends are *like stars* in *the sky*: *sometimes* you cannot see them; but *remember*; they are *never gone!*”

The writer goes on to explain that she received this brief poem from a girlfriend once when she was in a bad mood, and that was the first time she truly understood what it meant to have friends. Here we thus find a metaphor that parallels Falkeid’s poem, used as a means of opening a wider discussion about friendship. The three remaining texts offering alternative metaphors compare friendship to a plant (h0569), cite what the writer refers to as a ‘foreign expression’ that life is like walking over a mountain (h0538), and write that the poet’s images are reminiscent of a lighthouse that illuminates the night and helps us navigate (h0468).

De-metaphorization

The final strategy is instantiated in five of the 22 ASK texts. In such cases, the metaphorical distance expressed in Falkeid’s poem is ‘de-metaphorized’, as in (9) with an interpretation of literal distance.

- (9) jeg tror at dikterens budskap er ganske klar og tydelig. Jeg tror at når han snakker om at det er langt mellom venner, at han mener at vi kan bo langt fra hverandre men allikevel være venner og kanskje sanser ting “på avstand”. h0440
‘I believe the poet’s message is clear and obvious. I think that when he says that it is far between friends, he means that we can live far away from each other, but still be friends and sense things “at a distance”.’

Revisiting the poem presented on pages 293-294, we see that that there can be little doubt that the poet alludes to figurative distance in the first line, *Det er langt mellom venner* ‘It is far between friends’. While the source domain is (literal) geographical distance, the target domain is metaphorical distance. Note that there is nothing about the poem’s first line that definitively precludes the text from being about physical distance between friends. However, this would be a marked way of doing so because of the blanket nature of the statement (that is, that *all* friends are far from each other) combined with what we know about prototypical friends – that they are, or at some point have been, close in physical proximity. Had the initial statement been somehow specified (e.g. *det er langt mellom vennene mine* ‘it is far between **my** friends’), then a literal interpretation would have become

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more understandable. But as it stands, it is difficult to justify any such de-metaphorization, entailing that a statement such as that in (9) could likely result from *misinterpretation*.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest three main points. First, metaphor triggers metaphor, something recognized on pages 295-296 showing the relatively high metaphor density in the ASK texts taken as a whole, when compared to previous findings about frequency of metaphor in different text types. The use of metaphor-related words is, of course, partially due to the fact that the informants are human and as such, the CMT tells that they are cognitively wired to view the world in terms of metaphor. Some degree of metaphor in the language they produce is therefore unavoidable. On top of this, however, we find that these test-takers frequently respond to Falkeid's metaphor by producing metaphors of their own – either as alternative metaphors or, more commonly, through added metaphorical entailments. Both of these strategies, meeting metaphor with metaphor, provide manifestations of their interpretation of the poem. Such interpretation is, in turn, a product of their comprehension of Falkeid's message and provides clues concerning their overall understanding of the poem.

Second, as discussed on pages 302-303, five of the test-takers de-metaphorize Falkeid's image, interpreting his figurative distance as literal distance. Consideration of the co-occurrence of the observed instantiations of recognition, appreciation and interpretation in these five ASK texts indicates a possible pattern. More specifically, three of these five texts contain no real engagement that unambiguously demonstrates how these learners' interpreted the poem, i.e. these texts contain no instance of either 'non-metaphorical interpretation', 'metaphor expansion', or 'alternative metaphor'. Rather, one text combines de-metaphorization with 'appreciation' of poem (h0464), one with the 'repetition' strategy of repeating a line (h0530), and one with both repetition and appreciation of the poem (h0440). This suggests a possible correlation between recognition and/or appreciation, and de-metaphorization. In sum, a test-taker may say they 'like' or 'agree with' the poem and may even cite a line or two, but then proceed to (arguably) misinterpret the poem. The five texts instantiating de-metaphorization appear in addition to the four texts that offer no interpretation whatsoever of the poem (thereby offering no clues as to learners' interpretations). Two such 'no interpretation' texts also contain instances of appreciation (h0460 and h0524); although these learners write that they like the poem, their understanding of the poem is never proffered. By contrast, writers who engage with Falkeid's metaphor in a more substantial way are less likely to produce either an anomalous or no interpretation.

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Third, the ‘strategy’ of de-metaphorization deserves a closer look. As alluded to in the discussion of de-metaphorization on pages 302-303, one view of such literal interpretations in these five ASK texts is that they are ‘wrong’ in the sense that (most) L1 Norwegians would interpret the poem as referring to figurative distance, i.e. that the poem has been misinterpreted. However, given the life situations of the ASK informants, all of whom are immigrants to Norway living away from their own countries of origins and childhood friends, it is only natural for their thoughts to turn towards physical distance upon reading Falkeid’s poem. ‘Misinterpretation’ could thus better be termed ‘contextually-related interpretation’. The ASK informants interpret the poem in terms of their own context and backgrounds, rather than from a context ostensibly more closely aligned with that of the poet.

Whether most L1 Norwegians would indeed interpret Falkeid’s distance figuratively rather than literally is a claim that could be empirically tested through analysis of similar texts written by L1 Norwegian speakers from a comparable corpus. ASK does indeed contain such a corpus, which makes sense given the main motivation for the compilation of the ASK corpus of allowing for empirical studies of Norwegian as a second language as well as of second language acquisition generally (Tenfjord, Hagen, & Johansen, 2009, p. 53). Inclusion of L1 Norwegian texts neatly adds the possibility of contrasting linguistic features between the target language and the various learner varieties of Norwegian, so-called ‘interlanguages’ such as English L2 Norwegian, Polish L2 Norwegian, etc. The problematic issue with respect to the present study is topic: the L1 Norwegian ASK texts include no essays responding to the identical Falkeid poem (or indeed, to any poem), making it impossible to contrast responses between the native and interlanguage groups in a valid way. The findings in the present article therefore have important implications for design of comparable corpora and reinforce the findings of Golden 2012, discussed on page 289, concerning the crucial factor of topic in contrastive metaphor studies.

Above and beyond topic, of course, are additional important factors such as writing conditions. For immigrants to Norway, the *Bergenstest* is a high-stakes examination determining their future, i.e. whether they will qualify for employment or higher education in the country. A situation infused with such significance might therefore influence the content and type of language produced in the ASK essays. A deliberate decision to praise the poem in the hope of positively affecting the final evaluation would constitute one example where writing conditions influence content. When it comes to metaphor, Littlemore and Low (2006, p. 70) explicitly warn learners to take extra care with the metaphors they produce in high-consequence situations, where ‘correctness’ may have a crucial impact. They contrast this with low-consequence situations, where they advise learners to take a chance on possibly sounding ‘foreign’, and to rely on feedback to judge the acceptability

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of their production. By contrast, L1 Norwegian informants who are asked to contribute texts to a corpus such as ASK are not under the same pressure to produce polished texts. Even if it were possible to raise the stakes for them in some way, such as assigning a grade, their future would not rely upon successful completion of the task at hand. Writing conditions may therefore also contribute to increased challenges associated with compiling comparable corpora. That said, it should also be noted that ASK contains no metadata about the Norwegian L1 texts or informants, such that researchers availing themselves of the data have no information about writing incentives, allowed time, use of reference aids, age of informants, etc. Lack of such documentation also contributes towards limiting the usefulness of the L1 ASK subcorpus when it comes to comparability with the L2 ASK subcorpora.

Concluding thoughts

This study has explored the ways in which L2 speakers of Norwegian manifest their understanding of metaphor when confronted with a poem about friendship whose essence relies on a figurative extension of images associated with cabin life, a decidedly Norwegian cultural phenomenon. In this way, it sheds light on a hitherto under-researched area of metaphor understanding and production 1) in cases when the target language is something *other* than English, and 2) by informants who are *not* college students. The findings indicate that, contrary to previous hypotheses regarding the difficulty metaphor may present for foreign learners of a language, these test-takers produce texts that are coherent with the poem's figurative message and, in many cases, build upon it by expanding the given metaphor or offering an alternative metaphor expressing a parallel message. In many cases, the significance of a shared cultural background in interpreting the poet's distinctly Norwegian voice may play a backseat role, a thought expressed in (10) by an American ASK informant when discussing the extent to which the poem's message applies to her.

- (10) Selv om jeg ikke er norsk og ikke har det norske fjell i meg fra barndomsben, kan jeg deler forfatterens budskap. h0515
'Even though I am not Norwegian and don't have the Norwegian mountains in me from childhood, I can share the author's message.'

That a handful of informants interpret the poem's message (at least partially) in a literal rather than metaphorical sense raises the question of what may be considered a 'legitimate' interpretation of a poem, given both the poet's Norwegian context

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and the ASK informants' immigrant context. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the observation of a possible correlation between those who provide a literal interpretation but do not otherwise engage with the poem's metaphor stems from a small dataset: any conclusions must therefore be viewed with caution.

Further investigation is warranted into the extent to which L2 learners of different L1 backgrounds and ages interpret Norwegian metaphors as literal language, both in general and with respect to the Falkeid poem in focus here. Research involving comparable L1 Norwegian texts could also shed light on the degree to which any such interpretations are shared (or not) by Norwegians steeped in the cabin tradition by virtue of their cultural heritage, thereby providing more definitive evidence about the possible role of cultural knowledge with respect to understanding of metaphor. A further avenue of future research involves the exploration of the effects of writing conditions, to shed light upon the possible influence of the high stakes involved on metaphor production and appreciation of the poem: comparison with L2 texts written about the same topic but under less pressing circumstances could prove valuable in this regard. Corpus-based studies should ideally also be complemented with investigations involving other types of data allowing for triangulation of findings concerning L2 understanding of metaphor. Such investigations could range from technical eye-tracking studies to qualitative analysis through focus interviews. Given that there is currently so little research about metaphor comprehension or production in L2 Norwegian, myriads of directions may be pursued in the future.

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