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INTERPRETATION OF METAPHORS IN SONG LYRICS BY EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: *This study focuses on the process of co-construction of meanings of metaphorical expressions in a song lyric by EFL students. Think-aloud protocols were recorded and analyzed qualitatively. The analysis showed that while readers discussed the lyric in groups, they could identify a conceptual metaphor underlying conventional metaphorical expressions.*

KEYWORDS: *metaphor, cognition, song lyrics, face-to-face interaction, LE teaching*

0. Introduction

The present article aims at presenting real data showing how EFL students make sense out of metaphorical expressions found in a song lyric called “White Flag” by Dido.

1. Review of the literature

Metaphors were linked only to literature in the past and they had just an ornamental and rhetoric function. They were seen as a linguistic oddity, present only outside the centre of people’s occupations (Steen, 1994). The cognitive turn starts in the late 70s with landmark publications of Ortony (1979), and “Metaphors we live by” by Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Later, other scholars continued developing the cognitive approach, such as Cameron & Low (1999), Gibbs (1999), and Cameron, (2003) which have given to metaphors a more cognitive concept. According to Cameron, “metaphor is (...) a phenomenon of human thought processes (...) Understanding how metaphor is used may help us understand better how people think, how they make sense of the world and each other, and how they communicate (Cameron,2003:2).

Researchers on metaphors have given different meanings to

them. However, Lakoff & Johnson provide the definition of metaphor to which this study subscribes, i. e., “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (1980: 5).

Metaphors have been studied as being part of our “everyday language and thought” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: ix) because ordinary people use metaphors unconsciously, automatically and without noticing them. Lakoff and Turner (1989: xi) state that “metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice it”.

Metaphor is basically a cognitive process, which requires reasoning for its interpretation. In addition, it is beyond language. It involves energy, effort and creativity (Reddy, 1979/1993). Naturally, unconsciously, and automatically metaphors come to our minds when we are communicating or listening to someone or reading. They are part of human communication and are present in our everyday language (Lakoff, 1993).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) attempt to explain how we understand metaphor. In their example of a conceptual metaphor: “LOVE IS WAR” (conceptual metaphors are always written in capital letters), Lakoff and Johnson state that the reader understands the domain of *love* (the target) in terms of the domain of *war* (the source). In the texts or in oral speech, that conceptual metaphor is expressed through linguistic expressions such as: “he is known for his rapid conquests”, “she fought for him, but his mistress won out”, “she pursued him relentlessly” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 49) and others. The two domains of *love* and *journey* are crossed and the linguistic expressions such as the ones cited above are examples of how this conceptual metaphor is manifested in language. They are the surface realization of such cross-domain mappings. The term “metaphor” refers to the conceptual mapping and the term “metaphorical expressions”, to individual linguistic expressions.

The conceptual metaphor “LOVE IS WAR” also underlies the verses in the song “white flag”: *I won't put my hands up and surrender/ There will be no white flag above my door/ I know I left too much mess and destruction*. In the examples cited, words for “war” are used to describe a love relationship as well. In the data analysis section, the reader is invited to read the senses the participants of this research made out of this song lyric.

While reading metaphorical expressions, such as *there will be no white flag above my door*, readers may draw inferences according to the

experiences they had already had about a white flag. The same does not happen when they read non metaphorical, or figurative expressions, or paraphrases of such expressions, such as when they read for example: "I will not surrender". "People draw inferences while reading metaphors. People don't draw inferences when comprehending literal paraphrases of idioms (...)" (Gibbs, 1999: 147). The inferences made have to do with readers' past experiences, which are all connected to their cultural world, past and present. "Important parts of metaphoric thought and language are as much part of the cultural world as they are internalized mental entities in our heads" (Gibbs, 1999: 146). These mental entities are abstract concepts that are metaphorical in nature like the concept of LOVE, which can be understood as being a WAR. "Metaphors play a role in people's mental representations of many abstract concepts" (Gibbs, 1999: 147).

Conceptual metaphors are motivated culturally and cognitively (Kovecses, 2003). They are automatically retrieved during the process of reading, even if the linguistic expressions are different in two languages. Kovecses states that a conceptual metaphor may be expressed linguistically in much the same way in two languages sometimes. The linguistic expressions of a conceptual metaphor may be influenced or shaped by differences in culture. Taking examples again from the song "white flag", we have two expressions: *And I won't put my hands up and surrender / There will be no white flag above my door*. In Portuguese, if someone puts his/her hands up, it means the same as in English: the act of surrender, giving up. And a white flag signals peace in both languages. Thus, there is no difference in meaning, which makes it easier for ESL/EFL learners understand them. Metaphors as such are based on universal physical experiences (Kovecses, 2003, Boers, 2003), and thus easily comprehended. However, unfamiliar metaphors that are culture-specific, may be of a harder understanding. Boers (2003: 234) states that "(...) the culture-specific nature of certain figurative expressions may (initially) be a stumbling block for foreign language learners.

2. Method

The participants chosen for this study are 4 EFL high school students from a public school in Florianópolis/SC (age range 14 -16 years old). It was decided to observe the participants performing reading tasks through a kind of introspective procedure. Students were asked to verbalize their thoughts while reading the metaphorical expressions. Thus, the data consists of the introspective moments, also called the think

aloud protocols. These protocols were gathered from one group of four students. A video camera and tape recorders were used to record students' voices. In line with Vieira (1999), the group protocols provided the opportunity to observe how the students made sense of the texts read in the two classes. Additionally, Vieira (2004) states that "applied linguists (...) [and] foreign language researchers, are realizing that to get to understand and to explain their research participants' behavior, or (...) to get answers for questions (...) as how students learn, or why they do not learn, they have to look at personal processes. (...) introspection is a feasible way and a methodological tool to visualize our learners' processes" (Vieira, 2004: 8).

3. Data analysis

The verbal protocols were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. The analysis of the data focuses on particular moments related to the comprehension of metaphorical expressions encountered in the song "White Flag". The analysis here will be concentrated in parts of the verbal protocols related to the comprehension of parts of the lyrics in which there are some metaphorical expressions. These parts are in italics.

White Flag (By Dido)

I know you think that I shouldn't still love you,
Or tell you that.
But if I didn't say it, well I'd still have felt it
where's the sense in that?
I promise I'm not trying to make your life harder
Or return to where we were

Chorus

*I will go down with this ship
And I won't put my hands up and surrender
There will be no white flag above my door
I'm in love and always will be*
I know I left too much mess
And destruction to come back again
And I caused but nothing but trouble
I understand if you can't talk to me again
And if you live by the rules of "It's over"
Then I'm sure that that makes sense

Chorus

And when we meet

As I'm sure we will
All that was then
Will be there still
I'll let it pass
And hold my tongue
And you will think
That I've moved on
Chorus

A white flag symbolizes an acceptance of defeat or giving up on something according to Cambridge dictionary. Thus, if in the song lyrics it is said that *there will be no white flag above my door*, it probably means that she (the woman in the song) will not give up or surrender while there is still some hope or chance in making up with the person she loves. She refuses to wave a “white flag”, or to “abandon the ship”. She hopes the man she is in love with can forgive her, and she would do anything, and she would not give up on her love. In brief, in battles or wars, a white flag signals surrender. By stating that there will be “no white flag”, she indicates she will not give up on the relationship. She is willing on having an agreement and a chance to communicate. Thus, the conceptual metaphor underlying the song “white flag” is LOVE IS WAR, where the target domain is LOVE and the source domain is WAR, thus, the concept of LOVE is understood through the concept of WAR. Next, part of a protocol where the participants are discussing about the referred metaphorical expressions is presented:

1. **Zui: (xxxxx) Ela, ela tá lutando contra alguma coisa e ela, ela disse que ela não vai levantar. (xxxxx). Ela disse que ela não vai levantar a bandeira branca.**
2. Herc: Try to speak in English.
3. Zui: Não vai desistir.
4. **Herc: She won't give up. (xxxxx)**
5. Afro: *I will go down with*
6. Zui: Tá, essa daqui eu acho que é assim ela vai continuar.
(xxxxx) // Que ela vai continuar com aquilo ali,
7. Herc: // *I will go down with this ship.*
8. **Zui: //vai continuar insistindo e não vai levantar as mãos, tipo, que ela não vai se render.**
9. **Herc: // Eu não vou afundar com este navio.**

10. Zui: Não, não, eu vou, eu vou afundar com este navio, vou até o final. (xxxxx)
11. Herc: Não vou desistir, vou até o fim.
12. Zui: Tá mas assim essa parte da mão, é não se render, não levantar as mãos seria não se render. (xxxxx) + Ó, essa parte da mão, não haverá nenhuma //bandeira branca
13. Afro: //Aqui o que que é então?
14. Zui: Ela vai até o final com o navio, e que ela não, tipo é uma figura de linguagem.
15. Spo: Ela não vai desistir dos objetivos dela.
16. Zui: É ela não vai se render + pra alguém, né. (xxxxx)
Não haverá bandeira branca, tipo, ou seja, não haverá acordo. Seria uma paz né, tipo, um acordo, né. Não haveria um acordo. Ela ia continuar. //Ela tá apaixonada.

The cultural meaning of *white flag* is automatically retrieved by the participants of this study who share the same cultural background. They understood that a *white flag* is a symbol of peace and surrender. In turn 16, Zui understood that a *white flag* is a symbol of peace. Thus, there was not a misinterpretation since the metaphor “white flag” is shared in the Brazilian and in the English culture. As Littlemore (2003: 273) states, “Metaphors are typically culturally-loaded expressions, whose meaning has to be inferred through reference to shared cultural knowledge”. Zui’s background knowledge (cultural and lexical knowledge) in referring to “White Flag” in Dido’s song, was enough for her to make an appropriate sense. Zui seems to be the most engaged one in the discussion. She assumes her role as the leader or the speaker of the group, although she refuses to speak in English. She feels more comfortable using her mother tongue to express her thoughts. And the group accepts the idea of having Zui doing most of the talking, in spite of the fact that the other participants also gave some contributions. In turn 1, Zui talks about fighting, in turns 8, 12 and 16 she talks about surrender, she insists on saying that the girl will not surrender. She repeats this word four times in order to convince herself and the group that the girl will not give up. Another participant, Herc, agrees with Zui in turn 4 by saying “She won’t give up”. Afro seems confused with the verse *I will go down with this ship* in turn 13, but in turn 14, Zui explains to Afro the meaning of the verse metaphorically, without translating. Herc had provided the translation already in turn 9, and in turn 11, Herc had provided a metaphorical interpretation as well. Spo also contributed by saying in turn 15 that the woman in the song will not give up on her objectives.

The students understand that LOVE is like a WAR where there is a conflict between two parts that fight one another and where somebody has to give up, thus, there must be a winner. Finally, in turn 16, Zui decides that “ela não vai se render pra alguém, né. Não haverá bandeira branca, tipo, ou seja, não haverá acordo. Seria uma paz né, tipo, um acordo, né. Não haveria um acordo. Ela ia continuar. Ela tá apaixonada”, that is, the woman will not stop fighting for her love, she will not give up and will go till the end. When she says that the woman will go till the end, she is referring to: *I will go down with this ship*. Zui understands that, if someone goes down with a ship, it means that s/he will go until the end of a conflict or situation. The same was said in turn 11 by Herc. Their representation of “going down with a ship” is part of their schemata. “Schemata are the representations of the world that we already have in our minds, and which we use to understand and interpret incoming information” (Cook, 1997, apud Littlemore, 2003: 280). The students appeared to have no problems accessing the relevant underlying metaphor of LOVE IS WAR, due to the fact that the presence of clues in the surrounding context were useful to aid students interpret the metaphors. Additionally, the fact that they could activate relevant schemata, means that they did not have to pay attention to every detail of incoming information, and could therefore process it more rapidly (Littlemore, 2003: 280).

4. Answering the research question

Answering the research question, *how students make sense of metaphorical expressions they encounter in a text such as song lyrics*, it can be observed in the data analysis in the preceding section, that the participants had to translate to Portuguese the unfamiliar words they encountered in the metaphorical expressions first, before drawing any inferences from the lyrics. After solving lexical problems, they automatically retrieved metaphorical meanings also using their mother tongue. Naturally, the readers gave support one to another in order to co-construct their senses. It can be concluded that the assistance given among the participants was a primary condition for understanding the meanings of metaphors. This assistance gave students the opportunity of listening to different meanings before deciding on one sense only, and this finding corroborates Vieira’s (1999) findings.

5. Conclusions

The reading task in groups gave students the opportunity of verbalizing their own readings of the verses in the lyrics. Based on that, it

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can be concluded that this activity gave the participants the chance to speak for themselves about the verses without the constant support of the teachers providing their interpretations; co-construct meaning in a collaborative manner; play different roles: the role of the leader or the speaker of the group; the role of the listeners, i. e., the students who did not feel comfortable in speaking and preferred to listen or not to take part in the discussion. Additionally, the participants used some strategies in order to make some plausible senses: they translated the verses, i. e., they had to find out the meaning in Portuguese of the unknown words before making a figurative interpretation; they used their classmates' senses to co-construct other senses based on the former, and they used their mother tongue in the discussions.

If the senses made by the participants are right or wrong, this is not the case here. The major point here is to analyze the process in which they get engaged in order to interpret the metaphors, and as Tourangeou and Sternberg (1978) assert, "there is not always some reasonable interpretation of a metaphor".

Appendix 1 – Transcriptions conventions

(xxxxx)	inaudible speech or irrelevant part omitted
//	overlapped speech
Zui, Her, etc.	participants' names' initials
<i>Italics</i>	indicate reading passages
+	pauses

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