

Eliciting and measuring second language metaphoric competence

What this research was about and why it is important

When we say 'The driver was fuming' or 'He was hot under the collar', we are using a metaphor, that is, treating one thing (here ANGER) as if it were another (here FIRE). A large number of words in daily language can be considered metaphor, and people use metaphor for many important reasons (e.g., to persuade others, blame shift, give/understand medical diagnoses, make jokes/maintain relationships). It is therefore crucial for second language (L2) learners to develop their metaphoric competence (i.e., their ability to comprehend and produce metaphor). To help with this general aim, this study developed several reliable, metaphoric competence tests. Also, using adult L2 learners at UK universities, they explored the kinds of sub-competences that L2 metaphoric competence can be broken down into.

What the researchers did

Process for developing the metaphoric competence tests:

- Previous metaphoric competence tests were checked; it was found that their reliability and/or validity were generally low.
- A set of metaphor-related skills and competences that seemed 'testable' and 'measurable' was selected.
- Draft tests were administered to: 3 first language (L1) Mandarin learners of L2 English; 4 L1 English speakers, who discussed the learners' responses; 2 L1 English speakers who took the tests; 10 more L1 Mandarin L2 English speakers; 4 more L1 English speakers. The tests were improved at all stages.

Main administration of 16 metaphoric competence tests (9 comprehension, 7 production, total 236 items):

- **Participants:** To take the tests, 112 L1 Mandarin L2 English learners. To help with scoring, 31 L1 English speakers.
- **Tests:**
 - The comprehension tests mainly used four option multiple-choice questions (e.g., *Schools usually break _____ (stop) for the summer in the middle of July*: options = *away, down, off, up*). There were also some questions with acceptability ratings and some asking learners to 'explain the meaning'.
 - The production tests required participants to fill in a gap using their own knowledge.
- **Analysis:** The researchers (1) removed any test items that did not work well (e.g., were unreliable), to produce shorter, final/optimal versions of the tests, (2) identified key sub-components of L2 metaphoric competence, by finding which tests clustered together to produce similar scores that seemed related to each other.

What the researchers found

- The final and optimal L2 metaphoric competence tests (about 60% shorter than those seen by participants) had high reliability and were generally good at differentiating between the metaphoric competences of different participants.
- Metaphoric competence, as measured, could be broken down into the following core components:
 1. Producing metaphor for helping others understand and act on information (Productive Illocutionary Metaphoric Competence);
 2. Creatively playing with metaphor (Metaphor Language Play);
 3. Recognizing appropriate idea combinations (Topic/Vehicle Acceptability);
 4. Using fairly standard metaphor structures, such as phrasal verbs (Grammatical Metaphoric Competence).

Things to consider

- More studies are needed to (1) test aspects of metaphoric competence not measured in this study, and (2) understand the relationship between metaphoric competence and other aspects of language competence (e.g., vocabulary knowledge, general proficiency).
- Given the many varieties of English, it was often difficult to determine what qualified as a 'good' use of metaphor.
- The possible influence of participants' L1 (as a help or hindrance when doing the tests) was not analyzed.
- The findings may not generalize to participants of different proficiencies, ages, L1s etc.
- **In your context:** Have you ever tried to develop your learners' use of metaphor? Could you use the test items developed in this study (available on [IRIS](http://iris-database.org)) to (1) develop classroom tasks and activities, (2) check your learners' metaphoric competence?

Materials and data available on <http://iris-database.org>

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