

Metaphoric competence and cognitive style

What this study was about and why it is important

Relationships between the ability to comprehend and produce metaphor (metaphoric competence) in one's first language (L1) and second language (L2), holistic/analytic cognitive style and L2 communicative language ability.

What the researcher did

Participants: 82 Belgian university students, L1 French learners of L2 English (intermediate-to-upper intermediate)

Procedure: Participants completed a series of tests/tasks:

- **Metaphoric competence tests:**
 - L1 & L2 Ability to Find Meaning in Metaphor = mean rating of 25 French (L1) computerised sentences (e.g. "La liberté est un deuxième soleil") and 25 English (L2) computerised sentences (e.g. "Aeroplanes are angry birds") on a scale from '1' (*obviously not a metaphor*) to '5' (*obviously a metaphor*);
 - L1 & L2 Speed in Finding Meaning in Metaphor = mean time taken to rate these same metaphors;
 - L1 & L2 Fluency of Metaphor Interpretation = mean number of interpretations of 5 French metaphors (e.g. "Une armé est une mer vivante") and 5 English metaphors (e.g. "A dog is a walking stick") on a pen and paper test, with scores agreed by two judges;
 - L1 & L2 Originality of Metaphor Production = mean score of 8 French sentence completions (e.g. "Après sa maladie, mon père est devenu sourd...") and 8 English sentences (e.g. "What a beautiful day! The clear sky reminds me of..."), scores agreed by two judges on a scale from '1' (*inappropriate completion*) to '4' (*novel metaphor completion*), a high score meaning preference for original metaphor production.
- **Cognitive Styles Analysis (CSA)** = categorises participants as having an 'analytic' or 'holistic' cognitive style based on whether they were quicker at 'analytic' tasks (i.e., deciding whether simple shape A is contained in complex shape B) or 'holistic' tasks (i.e., deciding whether complex shapes A and B are identical).
- **L2 Communicative Language Ability** = a score given to participants by two interviewers (English native and near native speaker) during a 15-minute oral interview on social, ethical, and moral issues. Participants selected an article to discuss and were given planning time. Scores ranged from '1' (*student unable/unwilling to interact*) to '5' (*high quality interaction: student initiates, maintains and elaborates appropriately in a natural and spontaneous manner*).

What the researcher found

- The four aspects of metaphoric competence were generally not strongly related, but there were some relationships in the L1 (e.g. Speed in Finding Meaning in Metaphor and Originality of Metaphor Production) and, to a lesser extent, the L2 (Originality of Metaphor Production and Speed in Finding Meaning in Metaphor).
- 'Holistic' participants had higher levels of L1 and L2 metaphoric competence than 'analytic' participants, particularly for L1 Speed in Finding Meaning in Metaphor.
- No relationship between the four aspects L2 metaphoric competence and L2 communicative language ability.
- Taken together, the findings suggest that teachers might expect different aspects of their students' metaphoric competence to develop independently and at different rates in different learners.

Things to consider

As the author acknowledged, some of the metaphoric competence tests had low reliability, meaning the relationship between metaphoric competence and communicative language ability may be stronger than the tests could detect. Future researchers are advised to use more test items. In addition, the results may not be generalisable to other ages, language combinations, or other aspects of L1 and L2 metaphoric competence (not measured by the author). Materials available in IRIS: www.iris-database.org.