

A social constructionist approach to studying frames and metaphors in translation



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Session content

- 1** Cognitivism and metaphor
 - The “contemporary” theory of metaphor
 - Mentalism vs behaviourism
 - Group task 1
- 2** What is social constructionism?
 - Language orders reality
 - Group task 2
 - The social aspect of cognition
- 3** A social constructionist approach to meaning
 - Social constructionism in my project
 - Towards a different approach to metaphor

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- this enormous simplification makes metaphor research attractive → reason for its popularity?

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 - “symbols (e.g. words and mental representations) get their meaning via correspondences to things in the external world. All meaning is of this character”
 - “symbols that correspond to the external world are internal representations of external reality”
- problem: the “objectivist tradition” they attack does not exist – Lakoff et al either do not attribute claims to authors (Jackendoff & Aaron 1991: 321–322) or, where they do, distort their views (Leezenberg 2001: 135–137) (straw man)

Lakoff et al's proposal



Two key assumptions of “experientialism” (Lakoff 1990: xii)

- 1 “thought is embodied: structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it”
- 2 “thought is imaginative: those concepts which are not directly grounded in experience employ metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery – all of which go beyond the literal mirroring, or representation, of external reality”
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- “pre-linguistic concepts” – isn't imagination always based on our (linguistically mediated) experience?

“the imaginative capacity is also embodied – indirectly – since the metaphors, metonymies, and images are based on experience, often bodily experience” (Lakoff 1990: xii).

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- Incomplete or west-centric views often considered universal, e.g. what type of building does “theories are buildings” suppose (“shaky foundations”, but no windows)?

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- “Once upon a time I was falling in love, now I’m only falling apart”

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- major flaw: “a hyper-literal construal of the relationship between metaphoric language and thought” coupled with a “hyper-metaphorical construal of literal language” (McGlone 2007: 122–123)
- quest for universals in metaphor (“anger is a pressurised container”) – reminiscent of language/translation universals?

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- “how can *private* concepts or experiences warrant that people have the same *public* meanings?” (Leezenberg 2001: 141)
- not convincing: ignores social and cultural influences – culturally conveyed concepts must involve language; meaning is more than concepts

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- is “homunculus reasoning” for metaphor comprehension so different from “objectivist” “mind-as-computer” approach?
- language use cannot tell us anything about the mind (McGlone 2007: 115)

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- however: even after 40 years, there is no such consensus!
- “Conventional metaphors really do seem to *reflect* how people think, and people readily recruit one domain to talk about and think about another. Still, some experiments suggest that this may not *always* be the case, and not everyone agrees that embodied experience plays a significant role in the use and understanding of metaphor.” (Thibodeau et al. 2019: 11)

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- “the extent to which the models proposed in cognitive linguistics genuinely reflect the way language works in the mind and brain has remained *empirically unverified*” (Hart 2020: 119).

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- psychology was forced into dichotomous antagonism to Behaviourism → differences on the role of the mind in theory (Sinha 2010: 1268)
- psychology purged the mind from its theory and borrowed “dualistic mentalism” (Sinha 2010: 1268) from Generative Linguistics (e.g. Chomsky’s review of *Verbal Behaviour*)

Basic behaviourism: John B. Watson

Against studying the mind

- criticised tendencies in psychology: “the world of physical objects [. . .], which forms the total phenomena of the natural scientist, is looked upon merely as a means to an end. That end is the production of mental states that may be ‘inspected’ or ‘observed’” (Watson 1913: 158).
- “psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; [. . .] it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation” (Watson 1913: 163)

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Applied to language: why do linguists engage in speculation about the mind when all we have is language data?

Basic mentalism: Jerry Fodor



Language of thought hypothesis (Fodor, Pinker)

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Relevance Theory

precise & literal concepts of meaning are stored in language of thought/mental representations and become distorted in use (Wilson & Sperber 2006: 630, footnote 15).

Mentalist approaches: Chilton (2005)

Chilton & Wodak (2005: xiv)

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- vague definition, crude cognitivist focus
- can we study knowledge by studying the brain, or by studying content in the form of text and talk?
 - confusing cognitive states (e.g. knowledge) with content of cognitive states: “reverse psychologism” (Dartnall 2000)
- if language only becomes meaningful in interaction, isn’t its basis in social contact rather than in the brain?

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Chilton (2005: 22–23)

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- *mind* and *brain* used interchangeably
- somewhat simplistic and reductive view of language
- knowledge affects communication in the form of *shared common ground* (Tomasello 2008: 75) → what goes on in individual minds is hardly relevant until they enter social action

Mentalist approaches: Hart (2020)

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“The meaning of a word or sentence lies in the dynamic mental representation and encyclopaedic knowledge structures that it conjures.” (Hart 2020: 98) It “cannot be reduced to a list of semantic features”. Later states that “meaning in discourse is achieved via processes of conceptualisation.” (Hart 2020: 98)

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- meaning located in individual minds (“dynamic”?)
- difference between “encyclopaedic knowledge structures” and “list of semantic features”?
- if meaning is in individual minds and not in shared space, how can anyone communicate? How do you know what I mean?

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- linguistic practice & linguistic knowledge are equated, both conflated with memory & perception – “the meaning of a word is its use in language” (Wittgenstein, Phil. Inv. 43)
- again, cognitive states and contents of cognitive states are confused
- if language use is the only access to the content of memory or perception, how can it be the same as them?

Meaning as a social phenomenon?



Consider the following statement:

We can deal with texts and their meanings not as psychological but as social phenomena. From this perspective, they would neither be brought about by mental processes [. . .], nor would they be the outcome of a person's intentionality, planned and executed by a conscious mind. Rather, texts would be embedded in discourses, and their meanings could be inferred by their adherence to and deviation from the conventions underlying the discourse to which they belong. All we are concerned with are the texts once they are entered into the discourse. (Teubert 2010: 246)

Group task 1

Discuss in groups of 4

- Which implications would Teubert's (2010) view have for translation?
- How would questions like “what did the author want to say here?”, commonly asked in translation activity, fare in this view? Example: in *Mouse or Rat*, Umberto Eco discusses how he talks at length to *his* (!) translators, explaining what exactly he meant in particular places in his book. Are these then still translations of the published book or are they translations of a new work, i.e. including added discourse by the author? Would a reader of the original, who hasn't got the book explained to him by the author, read the same text as those who read the translation?

Individual task

Added question

Claim: Eco here constructs an idealised Italian discourse community for himself who correctly understand all the meanings, explicit and implied, and for whom the translators should translate, but such a community is hardly realistic and so spoils the translation. Do you agree?

The sociology of knowledge

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- ideology: not a specifically political issue, but “a general problem of epistemology and historical sociology” (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 21)

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- “this ‘knowledge’ constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist” → the social construction of reality
- casual conversation maintains reality – it can “afford to be casual” because it refers to routines of a taken-for-granted world. Loss of casualness signals a threat to subjective reality. (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 172)

Language orders reality

Language orders reality: objectivation

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- “while our personal meanings and understandings of the world can never be identical to those of any other individual due to the idiosyncratic nature of experience, language serves as a common denominator of interpretation that makes it possible for communication to take place at all.” (Kiraly 2000: 4) (cf. CMT definitions of meaning above)

Language orders reality



Language orders reality: detachability

- “Signs and sign systems are objectivations in the sense of being objectively available beyond the expression of subjective intentions ‘here and now’” (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 51–52)
- language is “detachable” from the immediacy of a face-to-face situation.

Language as access point to our minds

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- even in imagination or dreams, language orders our reality as we “‘translate’ the non-everyday experiences back into paramount reality of everyday life” (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 40).

Group task 2

Discuss in groups of 4

Think about the notion of objectivation with reference to the idea of “untranslatability”.

- to what extent do you agree that “language orders reality”?
- do you think it’s impossible to translate or, indeed, imagine certain things, if we have no way of referring to them linguistically?
- consider Wittgenstein’s statement *Die Grenzen meiner Sprache sind die Grenzen meiner Welt* (‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world’) in this context.

A socially situated view of cognition

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- social constructionism: meaning arises through social practice
- the subject is only constituted through social contact (cf the notion of encounters in Ahmed 2000: 7)

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- shared intentionality in conventional communication makes humans “conceptualise the world in terms of different potential perspectives on one and the same entity” (Tomasello 2008: 344)
- cognitive representations are “perspectival”: they’re not “given at birth, but are actually constructed by children as they participate in the process of cooperative communication” (Tomasello 2008: 344)

A socially situated cognitive linguistics



By representing reality in discourse, we create it for ourselves and invite others to take part in it → meaning arises in this intersubjective aspect of cognition.

Socially situated cognitive linguistics

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- need not resort to a mentalist focus on the individual mind or analogies to computers
- is based on a fundamentally social constructionist perspective on linguistic communication, essential to explaining the evolution of human language itself

Kiraly (2000)



Social constructivist approach to translator education

Don Kiraly is critical of the (mentalist) assumption that “by having subjects verbalise what they were thinking while translating, it would be possible to identify cognitive strategies as if they were fixed routines, artefacts of the mind that could be extracted, dissected and perhaps even distributed to translators-in-training.” (Kiraly 2000: 1–2)

Question

With this in mind, consider well-known TS terms such as “think-aloud protocol” or “verbalisation” in the sense of “saying what’s on your mind” with your neighbour. Which view of thinking and speaking do they imply?

The FANTAME project



- Principal Investigators: Mario Bisiada & María Aguilar
- funded by Spanish government, 2020 – 2024

Research objectives

- identify frames of migration in contact zones of migration in Spain and Germany
- investigate whether particular frames can be observed cross-linguistically → cross-nationally identifiable discourse patterns or narratives on migration?
- analyse how these frames shape narratives of migration and of translation that are observable in both individual agents working in contact zones of migration and in organisational processes of translation in those zones

The FANTAME project

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- shifting limits of acceptability of discourses towards a xenophobic consensus
- media play a key role in shaping the discourse on migration, but how are frames introduced and established cross-linguistically?
- language and translation as mediation that allows migrants to navigate and participate in everyday life deserve more attention

Migrants as “strangers”

Linking migrants' experience to socially situated cognition:

- “contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness” (Ahmed 2000: 13)

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- “contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness” (Ahmed 2000: 13)
- the encounter with a stranger is not characterised by an encounter with the unknown, but precisely with the “already known”, the *re-cognition* (“knowing again”) of an Other through ways of distinguishing the strange and the familiar (Ahmed 2000: 21–23)

A feminist critique of mind/body dualism

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- basis of this distinction is mind/body dualism: the idea that both can have a separate existence
- feminist theory's refusal to privilege mind over body and recognition that the body as such cannot be transcended makes it "a philosophy which emphasises contingency, locatedness, the irreducibility of difference, and the worldliness of being" (Ahmed 2000: 41)

A social constructionist view of metaphor

While cognitive approaches look for structures in the mind as reasons of continued racism, we

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- are less interested in making assumptions about people's mental states from what they say
- try to avoid confusing cognitive states with contents of cognitive states (exit polls: statements can be misleading about actual content of cognitive state or process, especially in impassioned issues)
- evaluate and interact with people based on what they share in the discourse

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- alternative: discourse objects are used to characterise or symbolise (aspects of) other discourse objects
- do we really need to differentiate between literal and metaphorical?

Literalness vs metaphoricity

Early critic: Bühler (1934)

- metaphors in composite words: *Fingerhut* ('thimble' (sowing), 'foxglove' (plant), lit. 'finger hat'), *Handschuh* ('glove', lit. 'hand shoe'), *Tischbein* ('leg of a table')

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- aware of the omnipresence of metaphor, "because every linguistic composite is metaphorical to some degree and the metaphorical is no extraordinary phenomenon" (Bühler 1934: 343, my translation)

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- “sentences containing context-dependent expressions cannot even be assigned a ‘literal meaning’ or propositional content in isolation from a context” (Leezenberg 2001: 175)

Theory by Leezenberg (2001: 249)

- critique of the notion of “metaphor”: Aristotle speaks of “the transfer of a word from elsewhere”, which may mean a process or the result – most authors tend towards the latter understanding (Leezenberg 2001: 33–34, 185–186)

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 - metaphorical interpretation turned into a thing
 - long search for specific syntactic/semantic properties of metaphor as a word/sentence type
 - fruitless because there are no such properties that distinguish literal from metaphorical language
- “Metaphor is not a syntactic construction or a semantic object of a specific nature; it is a *mode of interpretation*” (Leezenberg 2001: 186)

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- CMT: metaphorical mappings between decontextualised domains ← universal/cross-culturally consistent cognitive processes
- may result partly from specific social/cultural factors
- Vygotsky’s (1986 [1934]) concepts out of social interaction, not egocentric speech

A social constructionist conceptual theory

Alternative conceptual theory

For metaphorically used expressions, cognitive agents “construct an *ad hoc* concept, which applies to both its ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’ referents in virtue of some contextually determined feature” (Leezenberg 2001: 285).

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Five differences to other conceptual accounts

- 1 *ad hoc* rather than regular concepts
- 2 contextual perspective is essential
- 3 concepts can be applied if context permits, irrespective of theoretical correctness (“my job is a jail”)
- 4 similarities for metaphorical transfers can be based on folk theories (“he is a gorilla”)
- 5 need not presuppose a view of concepts as abstract, well-delineated and discrete (=scientific)

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“the metaphorical attribution of features, then, relies less on individual cognitive conceptualisations than on socially constituted and reproduced theories” (Leezenberg 2001: 289). These, then,

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- need not be systematic or consistent, just socially accepted or legitimised
- are taken for granted, but can be challenged at any time
- are thus rather like practices, i.e. discourse

Wrap-up question



Individual question

Take the dichotomy “meaning as individual mental concept vs meaning as product of social interaction” and try to apply it to your thesis topic. Which of the extremes do you tend to agree more with, which would work better for your methodology, what kind of implications does this issue have for your study (if any)?

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