BRIDGING THE METAPHORICAL GAP/RESEARCHING THE FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract: The paper reviews and analyses the metaphorical constructions in financial texts in business English. Understanding metaphors and figurative language is an important skill in ESP and EAP because they are important tools for communicating ideas in a business context. Students often find difficulties in understanding the figurative expressions. The knowledge of metaphors helps students get an insight into the inner logic of the foreign language. Thus, raising students awareness of the metaphoric structure gives them a new perspective into the way of perceiving the figurative meaning of texts and improve their reading, translating and communicative skills.

The use of the conceptual metaphors in business texts is explored and data is used to give evidence of how business issues are conceptualized and presented to the students. Since metaphors are culturally dependent and have various meanings based on the particular business culture, some cultural considerations behind figurative expressions are also briefly examined.

Key words: figurative language; metaphor; business English; cultural awareness

Teaching Business English has many challenges and the wide-spread use of figurative language (mainly metaphors and idioms) has always been one of them. Figurative language is the language that uses words or expressions with a meaning that is different from the literal interpretation. It uses exaggeration or alteration to make a particular linguistic point. There are different types of figurative language: metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, symbolism. It also includes unusual constructions or combinations: onomatopoeia, idioms, synecdoche, cliché, assonance, metonymy. Figurative language creates visual imagery; it can transform ordinary description into interesting, memorable texts, thus helping students understand the underlying symbolism. The bulk of the business vocabulary consists of metaphors taken from non-economic spheres.

The aim of this paper is to present some of the figurative expressions in the Business English textbooks used at Varna University of Economics and explore the way students perceive them; some common mistakes caused by students’ inability to extract the hidden, opaque meaning of such expressions, reasons for this phenomenon and ways to overcome these situations.

To start with, let me define the term metaphor. According to Macmillan English for Advanced Learners Dictionary a metaphor is “a word or phrase that means one thing and is used to describe something else to emphasize their similar qualities”. Webster’s Dictionary defines a metaphor as “a figure of speech in which a name or quality is attributed to something which it is not literally applicable”. Metaphors are used in the business world on a daily basis so that they serve as
the basis of idioms. If students do not know the connection between metaphors and their actual meaning, however, they may have a hard time to understand the main idea of the content.

“Metaphors have a typical evolution: beginning as something a speaker means on a particular occasion, being picked up by the others, catching on, which means becoming self-perpetuating and spreading through the population: and finally dying and becoming a new lexical meaning or idiom. When dead, what used to be indirectly expressed, is directly expressed” (Wayne A. Davis 2016: 76)

In 1980s Lakoff and Johnson viewed the idea of metaphors differently. They developed a new theory that has become known as the cognitive view of metaphors. According to it, the metaphor is defined as a cognitive mechanism whereby the conceptual domain is partially mapped onto a different conceptual domain, the second one being partly understood in terms of the first one. The domain that is mapped is called the source and the domain onto which it is mapped is the target. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5)

Within the approach of cognitive semantics, the metaphor is seen as basic to human cognition especially in the way we speak about the world; it is more than just an element of linguistic surface structure; it structures human thought and allows students to understand the abstract through the concrete. Furthermore, metaphors have been identified as a useful illustrating tool, a terminology gap-filler and especially effective instrument to convey specialized economic meaning.

Jonathan Charteris – Black thinks that metaphor is in fact an essential characteristic of technical discourse and plays a key role in making it easier to understand. “Meaning may be realized by word choice that differs what is in some sense typical or unmarked, and anything approaching technical language for example, tends to become noticeably more complex if one simplifies it by removing the metaphor “ (Charteris-Black 2000: 159)

In 2000 he carried out a comprehensive language analysis of “The Economist” magazine where he found that the frequency of metaphoric lexis was higher than in other magazines. Of course, readers do not expect an economic text to abound in figures of speech. The use of figurative language in this type of discourse serves different purposes — the greater linguistic variety makes the writing more convincing, memorable, interesting and efficient.

The studies of metaphor in the disciplines of economics and business have been concerned mainly with the types of conceptual metaphors, the discourse-structuring role of metaphor, its communicative function as well as its cross-cultural implications.

The business language is extremely metaphorical especially in terms of a number of repeatedly selected source domains, such as war, sports, marriage, natural elements, animals, human life, illnesses, journeys, etc.

My observations concern mainly the articles from the Business English textbooks which I have been using with my students at Varna University of Economics,

- A great number of figurative expressions in accounting and finance are concentrated around the domain of water, flow and verbs connected with it.

This group comprises:

- Liquidity of assets - they are not physically liquid but in business context it means how easy it is to convert assets into cash.
- to float a loan – to arrange for a loan of money /it doesn’t mean putting money into water and letting it float/; we also have floating interest rate, floating mortgage; to float a company /to sell equity on a public market/, etc.
- to keep o’s head above water – survival in water involves keeping your head above it, nearly the same as in business.
- to be solvent – solvency is a concept usually connected to chemistry, where it means a substance which can dissolve other substances, breaking them into tiny particles. In business context it means “to be able to pay the financial obligations”.
- to go under – business which is in a difficult situation, it can close down for various economic reasons.
- cash flow – in accounting it is the difference in the amount of cash available at the beginning of a period and the amount at the end of that period /opening and closing balance/.
- *wage – freeze – the company has decided not to increase wages for a certain period of time
- cooling – off period - a period of time after a sale contract is agreed during which the buyer can cancel it without incurring a penalty.
- In my view this group of figures does not pose any problems for Business English students at the B1/B2 linguistic levels, mainly because most of the concepts have the same or similar Bulgarian equivalent such as: паричен поток, ликвидност, замръзване на защати, и др. The logic behind the meaning of the idioms in the two languages is similar.

- The next big group are the so called colour idioms:
  - red tape /bureaucracy/;
  - white collar worker – someone who works in an office, administrative jobs;
  - blue collar worker – someone working in a manual labour job;
  - grey area / not clearly defined/;
  - to be in the red – to be at a deficit, losing money;
  - to be in the black – profitable, successful;
yellow-bellied – coward;  
a pink slip – a termination notice, received from a job;  
golden opportunity – a very good chance;  
a golden handshake – a large sum of money that is paid to a retiring manager;  
black market – a place where goods are illegally bought and sold for a profit;  
a highly-coloured report – exaggerated, with a biased view;  
to whitewash – to cover faults and wrongdoings;  
out of the blue – suddenly;  
to blue pencil – to censor something.

Though colours are among the basic words in a language which students learn first, their symbolic meaning is prone to cultural specificity. Some of them are common to both languages e.g. to be in the red, whereas others need explanation of meaning, etymological, if possible.

- The next group of figures are those connected with the domain of health and fitness or the lack of them.
  - an ailing company – a company that is in a difficult situation and is becoming weaker
  - bleeding cash – the company is mismanaged and the cash is associated with the life-giving blood
  - health of the economy; casualties; the economy is paralyzed; seek a cure; corporate fitness; a heart- starting espresso
  - Some of these figures are really difficult to be translated though the logic behind them is transparent and it is easy to understand their meaning. Probably, the reason for this is that the language into which the figures are translated lacks the same association between the concept and its lexical expression. A common students’ mistake is that they tend to translate them literally which, of course, causes ridiculous results and leads to misunderstanding.

- Animal group in which one can find a lot of cultural connotations comprises the next group.
  - monkey business – dishonest or underhand behavior
  - horse trading – it implies hard bargaining and tough negotiations
  - top dog – a company that performs better than its competitors
  - red herring – misleading information that leads us to the wrong conclusion
  - lame duck – unsuccessful person/manager who is a liability to an organization
  - eager beaver – an eager beaver is someone who works hard and is full of enthusiasm / here we use another animal /insect/ which implies this idea - in Bulgarian -работлива пчеличка
- to flog a dead horse - If you flog something you beat it or hit it really hard and for a long period of time. If you flog a dead horse it means that you are wasting your time and effort in a futile activity.
- to be fed up with doing all the donkey work - donkey work is the work that is very boring, routine and unpleasant to do.
- white elephant – A white elephant is used to describe something which costs a lot of money but is useless.
- herding cats – denotes a futile attempt to control or organize a class of entities which are uncontrollable or chaotic.

Some more animal figures found in the articles: bull market, bear market, cash cow, fat cats, loan sharks, etc.

This group is a real challenge for students. They do not understand most of them though they are familiar with the animals in the phrase, but cannot make the proper association to extract the hidden meaning. Cultural and historical peculiarities cause problems with deciphering the concept, e.g. donkey in Bulgaria is associated with stupidity or stubbornness, whereas in ‘donkey work’ the association is ‘boredom’; or ”white elephant” which does not offer any similar figure in the Bulgarian language, probably, because, we have never been a colonial nation, historically.

- The last group is the so called miscellaneous:
  - off the shelf – which comes from the domain of clothing and means to buy it as it is, directly from the shop.
  - tailor made – something made by a tailor, they will fit you perfectly, they will be the exact colour and material that you want, probably more expensive, too.
  - relationships can be cemented, forged, they can be stormy, too.
  - career path, career move, career ladder – they all symbolize a way a person progresses in their jobs; the ladder being the hierarchy and its climbing leads to promotion or higher position in the company
  - deadwood – wood that is dead on a tree prohibits its growth, so in the same way the deadwood in a company prohibits the company’s growth. These are employees who do not do their jobs properly and are useless to an organization.

According to Boers, other typical metaphorical themes in economics are: mechanisms and machines, plants, gardening, war, fighting, ships, sports, sailing, etc.

Pure memorization of metaphors and idioms does not help students learn them. I suggest the following steps:

a) Try to extract the meaning of the expression from the context. This will help you get into its logic. Try to see it with your mind, try to imagine it, form a picture of it. If possible explain the etymology of the expression /historical or cultural/.

b) Keep a notebook for idioms and every time you hear one, write it down.

c) Try to form an example sentence with the new idioms
d) Use the expression in your everyday life. Should you be in certain situation do not be afraid to use them.

Conclusion
Metaphoric expressions have played a major role in establishing and transmitting essential economic concepts, and, because of both their abstractedness and the ability to simplify complex ideas, they are a core factor in the very construction of the economic discourse.

Therefore, the knowledge of metaphors helps students get an insight into the inner logic of the foreign language. Thus raising students’ awareness of the metaphoric structure of language gives a new perspective into the way of perceiving the foreign language easier and helps them broaden their overall linguistic capacity.

References


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