Understanding Language Through Metaphor:

A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Language Itself.

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This study provides an analysis of the conceptual metaphors that structure our concept of language. By looking at data from Wikipedia pages that focus on language topics, I use Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to identify and further analyze four conceptual metaphors and one metonymy. Findings from natural language data demonstrate that speakers understand language as a living organism, as part of a family structure, as an object, as a container, and as a tongue. The analysis of these findings shows how we process and experience language with important implications for language education and policy.

KEYWORDS: cognitive linguistics, language, conceptual metaphor, metonymy.

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1. Introduction

Metaphors are at the center of our cognition. They facilitate our understanding of complex and abstract concepts through simple and concrete ones. Life, time, and theories are ideas we would struggle to grasp without the help of more tangible experiences and objects. It is through metaphorical processes that we get to experience life as a journey ("I found myself at a crossroads when I finished my undergrad"), time as money ("We will spend 20 minutes on this presentation"), and theories as buildings ("This theory was supported with evidence"). Fascinatingly, we build and express these concepts through language. But what about language itself? How do we conceive of language? Which metaphorical processes help us understand and experience language the way we do? We may be tempted to think that language is something concrete and tangible since we use it and even see it in the written form everyday. However, it is a nuanced and abstract concept which merits careful analysis.

The purpose of this study is to provide an analysis of the conceptual metaphors that build our concept of language by looking at data coming from Wikipedia pages which focus on language topics. In section 2, I provide some background on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and previous studies of metaphors on language and communication. In section 3 and 4, I present my methodology and provide the analysis of four conceptual metaphors and one metonymy I was able to identify for language. Those are, respectively, LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM, LANGUAGES ARE A FAMILY, LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT, LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER and TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE. In section 5, I interpret my results and

reflect on the importance of doing metaphor research on this topic as well as the implications it

can have for language education and policy.

2. Background

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show how pervasive metaphors are in our everyday life and introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a tool to examine and explain them. According to the theory, the concrete domain from which we draw our metaphorical expression is the 'source domain' while the abstract domain that is understood thanks to those expressions is the 'target domain'. In between them, there is a set of systematic correspondences that connect elements of one domain to elements of the other. We refer to these as 'mappings'.

There are many conceptual metaphors that have been explored throughout the years. To understand the amount of metaphor research one could examine MetaNet, a large repository of conceptual metaphors made available by the International Computer Science Institute (ICSI) in Berkeley, California. A large team of researchers from various universities in California were able to collect what currently are 685 metaphors, ranging from BAD IS STINKY to MONEY IS A LIQUID and PREPARING IDEAS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IS FOOD PREPARATION (ICSI, 2018). This is by no means an exhaustive representation though, because metaphor research extends far and wide, encompassing the limits of language and being present and pervasive also in co-speech gestures and visuals such as images and videos.

Metaphors are fascinating in that they are constantly present in our daily lives, revealing our conception of reality through our thoughts and actions and manifesting through linguistic expression. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, we are rarely conscious of the conceptual system we use to experience reality, yet we can see elements of that system emerge through our linguistic choices (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This is precisely why it is important to do metaphor

research: to reveal hidden thought patterns and make people aware of them, especially when it comes to stereotypes or dangerous assumptions that we may want to challenge or change.

Regarding metaphors on language, the American linguist Micheal Reddy (1979) identified the CONDUIT METAPHOR as a complex metaphor that structures our concept of communication. This is composed of the conceptual metaphors COMMUNICATION IS SENDING, LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS and IDEAS ARE OBJECTS. Some examples that illustrate these metaphors are:

(a) She got her message across.

(b) I am not able to put my ideas into words.

(c) Did you get anything out of that discussion?

Communication is understood as sending a package that is composed of a container and a content. Words are the containers into which we put our ideas in order to communicate with each other. The speaker sends the package to the listener through a CONDUIT, that is, a LANGUAGE.

The mapping for this metaphor can be seen below:

Source: CONDUIT	⇨	Target: LANGUAGE
package	⇨	message
container	⇨	words
content/object inside the package	⇨	ideas expressed by words
sending a package	⇨	communicating a message
sender	⇨	speaker

receiver	⇨	listener
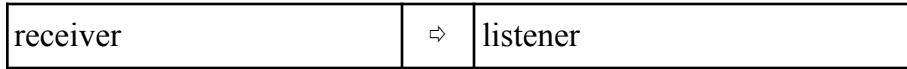
Other influential research that target language metaphors includes Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of ARGUMENT IS WAR (1980) and many other studies by scholars who particularly focused on the target domain of COMMUNICATION and the source domain of MOTION (Goosens et al., 1995; Sweetser, 1987; Traugott & Dasher, 2002). Semino (2005) further explores the target domain of COMMUNICATION through the source domains of MOTION, PHYSICAL TRANSFER, PHYSICAL CONSTRUCTION and PHYSICAL SUPPORT.

Based on the preponderance of metaphorical research cited above, it should be clear that past studies have placed importance on interrogating the act of communication/speaking rather than the concept of language itself. This research is different in that it aims at investigating language as an entity, which can both be seen generally as a tool for human communication, as well as specifically through particular realizations of it (e.g. our concept of 'English' or 'Italian').

In the next sections, I will provide my analysis of the conceptual metaphors that structure our conception of language.

3. Methodology

In the Spring of 2021 I scoured Wikipedia pages relating to language concepts and built a miniature corpus. This is composed of a select group of ten Wikipedia pages which focus on the concept of language itself, specifically: "Code-switching," "Endangered language," "English language," "Extinct language," "Indo-European languages," "First language," "Italian language," "Multilingualism," "Translation" and "Translanguaging." My rationale for choosing Wikipedia over specialized language articles or alternate resources was that the website is an innately collaborative work. As opposed to simply presenting a scholarly discussion, the site offers a window into publicly shared language about language which allows the identification of commonly understood expressions. Given that the data was exclusively in English, all conceptual metaphors are specifically English related. After collection, language sentences were analyzed with Conceptual Metaphor Theory methods, finding mappings and entailments connected to each conceptual metaphor that I identified.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

By analyzing the data collected, I was able to identify four conceptual metaphors and one metonymy that build our conception of language. These are: LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM (section 4.1), LANGUAGES ARE A FAMILY (section 4.2), LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT (section 4.3), LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER (section 4.4) and TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE (section 4.5).

4.1 LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM

According to the metaphor LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM, language is a living being that can live, grow, and die. It is alive when it is spoken, and it is dead when it loses its speakers. In between its birth and death, language develops and changes because of usage, contact with other languages, socio-economic and cultural influences, and so on. Language is a human faculty but in these terms it can be seen as a human being itself. It has some sort of agency and conducts a life of its own.

1) *The Indo-European family is divided into several branches or sub-families, of which there are 8 groups with languages* **alive** *today.*

2) *In contrast, a* **dead** *language is "one that is no longer the native language of any community," even if it is still in use, like Latin.*

3) *English* **has developed** *over the course of more than 1,400 years.*

According to this frame, language can be elaborated as a human being or, even more generally, it can be seen in terms of a 'species.' As if it was a population of organisms, the

language spreads around the world and evolves over the course of time. When just a few people are using it, it can be endangered and at risk of extinction. Linguists have the role of "care-takers" in this scenario, where they can try to revive an endangered language through documentation, language education and protection.

4) *Old English **evolved** into Middle English, which in turn **evolved** into Modern English.*

5) *Modern English **has been spreading** around the world since the 17th century by the worldwide influence of the British Empire and the United States.*

6) *(6) More than 50% of the world's **endangered** languages are located in just eight countries.*

7) *(7) The general consensus is that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages currently spoken and that between 50% and 90% of them **will have become extinct** by the year 2100.*

8) *(8) Hebrew is an example of a liturgical language that **has successfully been revived** for everyday use.*

The mapping for this metaphor can be found below:

Source: ORGANISM	⇨	Target: LANGUAGE
organism is alive	⇨	language is spoken
organism evolves/develops	⇨	language changes and transforms through language use, contact, etc.
organism spreads	⇨	language is being spoken across a bigger area

organism is endangered	⇨	language is spoken by only a few people and risks disappearing
organism is dead	⇨	language is no longer spoken
organism is revived	⇨	language is promoted in order to increase the number of speakers
organism is extinct	⇨	language is no longer spoken or used, it doesn't exist anymore

4.2 LANGUAGES ARE A FAMILY

According to this conceptual metaphor, our understanding of LANGUAGES is tied to our conception of FAMILY. Each member of a family is a different language that shares some linguistic features with the other members of the language group. As we previously mentioned, every language changes over time for various reasons. These changes can eventually lead to the creation of new language varieties and over time we are able to see a genealogical tree of different languages related to one another. The original, older version of a language is the ancestor language while the new varieties are the descendant languages coming from the former.

9) ***Membership*** *of languages in the Indo-European language **family** is determined by **genealogical relationships**, meaning that all members are presumed **descendants** of a common **ancestor**, Proto-Indo-European.*

*10) These shared innovations show that the languages **have descended** from a single common*

*   **ancestor** called Proto-Germanic.*

11) On the other hand, Corsican (a language spoken on the French island of Corsica) is

*   closely **related to** medieval Tuscan, from which Standard Italian derives and evolved.*

Language members can be generally referred to as relatives to one another but we also have the ability to define them further. Since we conceive of a language as being able to originate a new one, the relatives we talk about are all conceived of as female. We talk in fact about mother languages, daughter languages and sister languages, as those are the people able to procreate and give birth to new ones. We also talk about adopting a language as if it was a child.

12) The Frisian languages, which together with the Anglic languages form the Anglo-Frisian

*   languages, are the closest living **relatives** of English.*

13) They are not in any sense "dialects" of standard Italian, which itself started off as one of

*   these local tongues, but **sister** languages of Italian.*

*14) Italian **was adopted** by the state after the Unification of Italy, having previously been a*

*   literary language based on Tuscan as spoken mostly by the upper class of Florentine*

*   society.*

The mapping for this metaphor can be found below:

Source: FAMILY	⇨	Target: LANGUAGES
family	⇨	group of languages that share some linguistic features
member of the family	⇨	language
genealogical relationships	⇨	linguistic relationships

ancestor	⇨	earlier version of a language
descendant	⇨	later version of a language
relatives	⇨	languages that share some linguistic features
mother	⇨	immediate previous version of a language
daughter	⇨	language resulting from changes to its immediately previous version
sisters	⇨	very similar languages that are the result of different changes to a common original language

4.3 LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT

This metaphor is a very typical and frequent example of ontological metaphor through which we use a three dimensional object in order to understand an abstract concept (Kövescses, 2010). According to the metaphor LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT, language is a tool we can possess and use. When we know how to speak a language, we have a language, as if it was an object that can be owned. When we are in the process of learning a language we can say we are acquiring it, as if we were in the process of buying or obtaining an item. Once in our possession, we can use a language as a tool for our communication purposes.

*15) One can **have two or more native languages**, thus being a native bilingual or indeed multilingual.*

*16) The individual **acquired the language** in early childhood and **maintains the use of the***

language.

As with any other tool, language needs to be mastered, we need to achieve knowledge and control over it in order to have successful communication. In some cases, someone might have multiple tools at their disposal and this could allow them to switch among them for getting the best result. This is the case for bilingual or multilingual people who possess and have at their disposal multiple languages they can leverage.

*17) Most of the time, English is **used as a communication language**, but in multilingual*

*countries […], it is common to see employees **mastering two or even three of those***

languages.

*18) The speaker would presumably **have complete knowledge and control over the***

languages and thus sound like a native speaker.

19) The third alternative represents the phenomenon of "code-switching" in which the

*productively bilingual party to a communication **switches languages** in the course of that*

communication.

The metaphor LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT conveys the idea that languages are bounded entities, clearly separated one from the other.

The mapping for this metaphor can be found below:

Source: OBJECT	⇨	Target: LANGUAGE
having/possessing an object	⇨	knowing a language
acquiring an object	⇨	learning a language

using an object	⇨	speaking a language
having mastery/knowledge/control over an object	⇨	being fluent in a language
switching objects	⇨	speaking more than one language and changing between them while speaking

4.4 LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER

LANGUAGE is seen as a bounded entity with clearly defined boundaries and as such it can be

conceived of as a CONTAINER. The boundaries allow for the distinction between one language

and another and allow us to name them and categorize them. The contents of this container are

sounds, words, sentences, and all other types of linguistic features connected to a specific

language. This metaphor clearly connects to the CONDUIT METAPHOR illustrated in section 2

as linguistic expressions are conceived of as containers that hold ideas.

As we are dealing with a container, the English prepositions we mostly find in connection to this

concept are from, to, in and into. We conceive of a language as a box from which we can take

things out of and put things into. As we take elements from a box and put them into another, we

are translating content from one language to another. Another linguistic phenomenon that is

conceived through the CONTAINER source domain is the borrowing from one language to

another. In this case elements from one language box are incorporated into another language box.

20) *The Renaissance era, known as il Rinascimento ("the Rebirth")* **in Italian***, was seen as a time of "rebirth," which is the literal meaning of both renaissance* **(from French)** *and rinascimento (Italian).*

21) *Translation of material* **into Arabic** *expanded after the creation of Arabic script in the 5th century, and gained great importance with the rise of Islam and Islamic empires.*

22) *A translator always risks inadvertently introducing source-language words, grammar, or syntax* **into the target-language** *rendering.*

23) *The* **incorporation into Italian** *of learned words* **from its own ancestor language, Latin***, is another form of lexical borrowing through the influence of written language, scientific terminology and the liturgical language of the Church.*

Interestingly, we can also talk about the fact that someone can be immersed in a language or they can learn a language by immersion. This happens when someone learns a language by being in a country or community that has that language as official or native. In this case language is specifically seen as a liquid container where one can be submerged. This is an elaboration of LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER in which language is both the container and the liquid that is present inside it.

24) *The person qualifies as a "native speaker" of a language by being born and* **immersed in the language** *during youth, in a family in which the adults shared a similar language experience to the child.*

The mapping for this metaphor can be found below:

Source: CONTAINER	⇨	Target: LANGUAGE
content of container	⇨	language sounds, words, sentences
passing the content from one container into another	⇨	translating
incorporating elements of one container into another one	⇨	linguistic borrowing

4.5 TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE

A very common metonymy for language is TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE. This metonymy is an example of the PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT type and it originates because our conception of PRODUCER and PRODUCT are closely related to each other (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Although the producer in the classical sense would be the speaker producing the language, our tongue can be seen as a co-producer of language. This comes from the fact that our tongue is the part of our mouth that articulates sounds and hence produces language. The word tongue is used to refer to language in a wide variety of cases. It is used to refer to the language we receive from our parents as in native or mother tongue. National or state tongues are used to refer to the official language of a country or state. We can also refer to a specific language family, as in Semitic tongues or refer to a language that is mutually intelligible by different populations as in common tongue.

25) *Bilingual or multilingual students in higher education who study in their **native tongue** and the medium of instruction used at their institutions are studied to determine how to reform primary and secondary education.*

26) *Even in English-speaking countries immigrants are still able to use their **mother tongue** in the workplace thanks to other immigrants from the same place.*

27) *This tendency is especially pronounced when, even though the local language is widely spoken, there is a reasonable assumption that all citizens speak the predominant **state tongue** (e.g., English in Quebec vs. Canada; Spanish in Catalonia vs. Spain)*

28) *If a song is not written in a **common tongue**, then it is usually written in whatever is the predominant language in the musician's country of origin, or in another widely recognized language, such as English, German, Spanish, or French.*

29) *The root system that Arabic shares with other **Semitic tongues** such as Hebrew is capable of expanding the meanings of words using structured consonantal variations: the word for airplane, for example, has the same root as the word for bird.*

The structure of this metonymy can be found below:

PRODUCER	for	PRODUCT
tongue	⇨	language

5. Interpretation

By analyzing this data I was able to identify four different conceptual metaphors and one metonymy that form our conception of language. These all help us understand language in unique ways, although through different attributes and entailments. We can group these attributes into two different views.

On one hand, our concept of language is structured by the metaphors LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM and LANGUAGES ARE A FAMILY. According to these metaphors, language is seen as a living entity provided with agency that can make its way around the world and be part of a family. These two metaphors are consistent since they provide a scenario connected to our life as humans: we live, we grow, we die, we are agents of our lives and we are part of families. This conception carries an affective view of the concept of language because we, as humans, care about our fellow humans and other species of the world. In the same way, we care about the diversity and well-being of our languages. Since we conceive of language as a person or as a species, this has important consequences for language preservation. When talking about language loss, we suffer for the disappearance of a language just as if we were witnessing the extinction of an animal or botanical species, or more intimately as the loss of a person who is part of our family.

We are so deeply connected to our language that the metonymy TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE can be added to this affective view towards language too. According to this, losing our language is like losing a part of ourselves. Losing the ability to speak is like losing one's voice or limb. Evidence of this can be seen in the sentence "Can you explain this to me or have

you lost your tongue?", in which the addressee is thought to have lost their tongue since they are not able to talk.

Experiencing language through these metaphors makes us understand and feel how precious languages are for our world. This shed light on the reason why we feel so strongly about languages and hence linguists, scholars, language community members and so on, make efforts to protect languages and revitalize endangered ones.

On the other hand, our concept of language is also formed by the metaphors LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT and LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER. According to this frame, language does not have agency, it is instead a tool that people use in order to communicate. We lose the affective response to language that was inherent in the previous group since we have moved away from discussion of living beings and instead refer to lifeless objects.

In this interpretation, every language is conceived of as a bounded entity, clearly separate from the others. In this way we are able to put labels on each of them, such as 'French,' 'Mandarin,' 'African-American Vernacular English,' 'Venetian.' Exceptions arise the moment we try to analyze mixed languages such as 'Spanglish'. Do we conceive of it as two boxes or a unique box? Is the box divided equally in two parts? It would seem that in this case we tend to have a more 'fluid' conception of languages instead of seeing them as objects or containers. We are not able to quantify them and see them as separate entities but rather as two liquids that mix together and their boundaries are hard to distinguish. We can see these different conceptions operating in the theory behind the linguistic practices of 'code-switching' and 'translanguaging'. In code-switching, languages are seen as bounded objects that can be swapped by the speaker in

the same conversation. In translanguaging, however, different languages form a unitary pool of linguistic features from which a speaker can select the ones they want to use in a conversation (Otheguy, García & Reid, 2015).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I collected data from Wikipedia pages focused on language topics in order to identify the metaphors we use to build our concept of language. The metaphors which I identified and explored are LANGUAGE IS AN ORGANISM, LANGUAGES ARE A FAMILY, LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT, LANGUAGE IS A CONTAINER and TONGUE FOR LANGUAGE. I provided an analysis for each of them and showed how they can be further grouped into two consistent views we have on languages. One view sees language as a person or as a species with agency that lives a life and has a family of its own. The other view sees language as an object that can be used by people as a communication tool.

Given that the literature base was lacking much explicit analysis of the metaphors used to conceive of language itself, there is an enormous capacity for future research. A key limitation that this approach faced was simply the fact that it looked at a small slice of the vast number of articles and resources which discuss language, and so further explorations could expand the scope to more fully cover other methods of discussing language. Such approaches which could analyze a larger amount of data may find more metaphors, mappings and entailments and shed more light on the way we experience and think of language. It seems particularly relevant for language scholars to be aware of the ways in which we use metaphors to structure our conception of language itself. Through interrogating the dichotomy between seeing language as a bounded object or as a fluid, we can understand the operation of linguistic practices such as code-switching and translanguaging. When we are conscious of the ways in which we see

languages as an organism, it is easier to see why we attach such importance to the preservation of languages on the verge of extinction.

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