

Metaphors and Economy – a Cognitive Linguistic Approach¹

The Role of Metaphors in the Linguistic Representation of the Profile and Operation of Companies

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Abstract

The present paper treats the metaphors in business language in the theoretical frame of functional cognitive linguistics. The early theories in metaphor research have already convincingly demonstrated that metaphor, as a cognitive structure that strongly influences human thinking, attitudes and activities, plays an important role in cognitive linguistics but relatively little attention has been devoted to the topic of metaphors in business language. Through the analysis of several Hungarian, German and English metaphors the paper demonstrates the operation of conceptual metaphors focusing primarily on the mapping between source domain and target domain. Based on the examples presented in the paper, the following ideas can be concluded: metaphors are frequently applied and play an important role in the language of business. Within the metaphors of everyday language it would be productive to devote attention to the metaphors of business language. This would entail research and would result in benefits on different levels of teaching. A practical outcome of studying metaphors is that they can directly influence the choice of our workplace, the choice of services, the relationship between different colleagues at workplaces etc. Furthermore, consciously and adequately chosen metaphors help communication within the company, enhance efficient marketing strategies and shape corporate identity. Linguistic arguments also justify further research in the field of metaphors of business language as they involve newer contexts in the research thus broadening the field of cognitive metaphor studies.

Key words: cognitive linguistics, stylistics, everyday language, business discourse, conceptual metaphor, source domain, target domain.

1. Introduction: the role of conceptual metaphors in human thinking, attitude and activity

Before proceeding with the development of the topic defined in the title, it seems reasonable to briefly present the theoretical frame within which the statements relating to the role of metaphors in the language of business can be interpreted. This frame is the functional cognitive linguistics, a theory which can be characterized as follows (cf. Tolcsvai Nagy 2001, 2006, Geeraerts – Cuyckens (eds.) 2007, Langacker 2008):

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- The methodological approach is the functional description of language, that is, cognitive linguists wish to describe and analyse language in natural (and bigger) structural units.
- Language production and perception is the inherent part of the linguistic system.
- Language is understood as a dynamic system where meanings are flexible and are conditioned by the changing contexts.
- The application of the prototype theory, according to which linguistic phenomena belong to certain categories representing grades; and the borderline among the categories are not necessarily sharp.

Within cognitive linguistics, the analysis of metaphors has always been a central area of research from the beginnings up to the present (cf. the comprehensive study of Lakoff–Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2010; Grady 2010). These studies richly apply and demonstrate the above mentioned principles and theories.

The early theories in metaphor research have already convincingly demonstrated that metaphor, as a cognitive structure that strongly influences human thinking, attitudes and activities, should be the object of linguistic research. This is proved by an early and ever since much quoted example of the analysis of cognitive metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR. (Lakoff–Johnson 1980, 4). This conceptual metaphor appears in the following English expressions: *Your claims are indefensible. He attacked every weak point in my argument. His criticism were right on target. If you use that strategy, he'll wipe you out.* In ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor the attitude of the language user to argument is created in a cognitive frame related to war. The basis of conceptual metaphor is that the understanding of a notion takes place through another notion, and afterwards, the newly understood concept is treated according to the previous one. Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff–Johnson 1980, 4–5) in their previously quoted example invites the reader to imagine another culture where the notion of argument is metaphorically represented differently, thus understood and viewed differently. The parties having an argument are not parties at war against each other, they are not imagined offenders and defenders, but two parties who are in mutual balance and harmony, who are involved in an activity achieving mutual goals. This approach presupposes a different attitude and engenders a different action strategy.

From the above results that the conscious and planned use of metaphors can be an effective factor in every field of life. This has been proved by researches done on various aspects of language use. George Lakoff (1992) for example studied the role of metaphors in political communication, revealing the metaphoric background of the political propaganda during the Gulf War. Olaf Jäkel (2003) studied the conceptual background of the metaphors used in business

communication and texts on economics. But studies treating the effect of metaphors occur in the field of gender linguistics, which borders on social-psychology (Weinreich-Haste 1993).

In the following part of the present paper the metaphors occurring in business language and the language of economics will be studied. Focusing on conceptual metaphors in business English, as part of everyday language use, is also motivated by the fact that till the present day relatively little attention has been devoted to the topic.

2. Conceptual metaphors and the “organizational ideal” of corporations

Kövecses (2010, 25) noticed that economy is usually comprehended via metaphor:

“Its most commonly used source domains include building, plants, and journey (movement, direction), as shown by the examples:

*Germany built a strong economy.
the growth of the economy
They pruned the budget.
China's economy is galloping ahead.”*

The basic function of metaphors, that is to guide and purposefully shape human cognition and activity, consciously appears in economic and business life. A paper on economics for example states the following about the role of metaphors: “People need to be involved and made enthusiastic! We have to make people want to work for us. Metaphors and generally language can be incredibly powerful tool. Language can form and restructure our environment (Ridderstrale–Kjell 2011, 191). Obviously language can serve other purposes than persuade people to work with a certain company. It can also be used to serve other economic-business purposes. It can present a company in a positive context for example and can persuade people to buy the products or the services of the respective company, etc.

Based on some examples by Huber–Heineken (2006) let us have a closer look at how certain companies typically express their profile and operation through metaphors:

*company is a family (das unternehmen ist eine familie)
company is a network (das unternehmen ist ein netzwerk)
company is a barrack (das unternehmen ist eine kasernr)
company is a cathedral (das unternehmen ist eine katherdale)
company is an orchestra (das unternehmen ist ein orchester)*

The German authors (e.g. Huber–Heineken 2006) describe similar metaphors as an organizational ideal (Leitbild) and believe that they have strong effect. Huber (2008) in his work entitled *Metaphorik und Handeln*, based on extensive empirical research examines three types of conceptual metaphors in details. *das unternehmen ist ein team (mannschaft), that is company is a team, das unternehmen ist eine machine that is company is a machine, das unternehmen ist ein garten that is company is a garden*. In his study Hubert managed to prove that these conceptual metaphors have an important influence on how certain situations are understood and consequently dealt with in the company.

Several similar conceptual metaphors can be found in English as well in conceptualizing businesses:

the company is an organism
the company is a racing team
the company is a forest

Let us have a closer look at the two latter metaphors. The operation of the metaphor *the company is a racing team* is presented by Bob Roitblat, founder and principal business consultant of Mainsail Consulting Group as a yacht competition:

As a metaphor for managing a business, yacht racing is strong and effective. Both share common, fundamental elements: a team of people using speed, tactics, strategy, timing and multiple resources to reach a destination and achieve a goal while facing a fleet of opponents. Yacht racing is different from all other types of racing because each of the boats in the race sails a unique course. The race [...] has a defined beginning and end, but in between, each boat can sail a widely different route and distance. A business may have a defined beginning and a goal, but its race is on-going and often over multiple racecourses simultaneously. The environment that each operates in is constantly changing – the physical environment of wind, waves and weather; the competitive environment; and the economic and regulatory environment. Both the business owner and boat skipper must exercise choice and control over some elements and adjust to those elements over which they have no control. Good business managers, like good sailors anticipate when conditions are about to change. The skipper best able to anticipate changing conditions and effectively adjust for them is the one that comes out ahead. Company and crew each have to develop a short-term strategy for each individual race, a medium-term strategy for a weekend regatta, and a long-term strategy for the entire season of racing. Without a clearly articulated strategy, a boat or business merely reacts to whatever comes along. Businesses and race boats also require leadership, teamwork and rapid decision-making to be successful. Innovative problem-solving, clear goals and effective communications are also necessary.²

² Source: <http://www.mainsailcg.com/about.html>. Retrieved: July 20, 2015.

Similarly, a Hungarian p2m Consulting Company Ltd. uses another target domain, namely car racing, to build its own metaphor. This company conceives its potential customer, the *company as a car racer*, and considers itself as *a team who helps the company*:

Race with time, race with demands and other competitors on the market. The road seems to be an endless and lonely ordeal. The race, however, is not merely a struggle, it is also a constant improvement, the assessment of one's capacities and skills, the widening of one's potentials. And why do you have to be a lonely racer in coping with the difficulties as long as a team is available to help you cope with the challenges? Although the racer drives his car alone, there can be a well-qualified team behind him, who ensures the driver to get over the difficulties in front of him. Thus the driver is able to concentrate solely on driving and to do is best.³

This metaphor is also embodied in the visual representation (see Figure 1 and Figure 1 2) of the company:

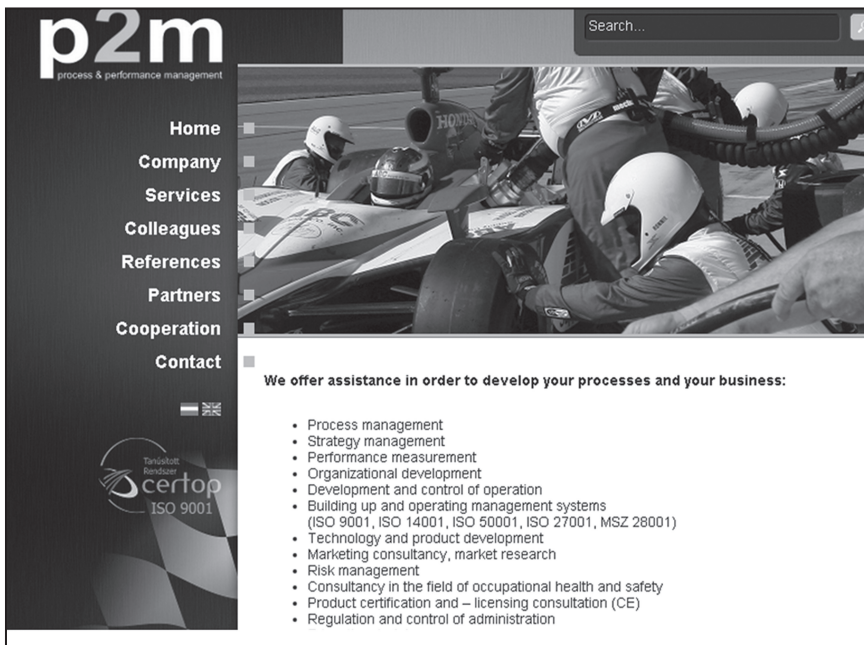


Figure 1

3 Source: <http://www.p2m.hu/cegunkrol>. Retrieved: July 20, 2015.

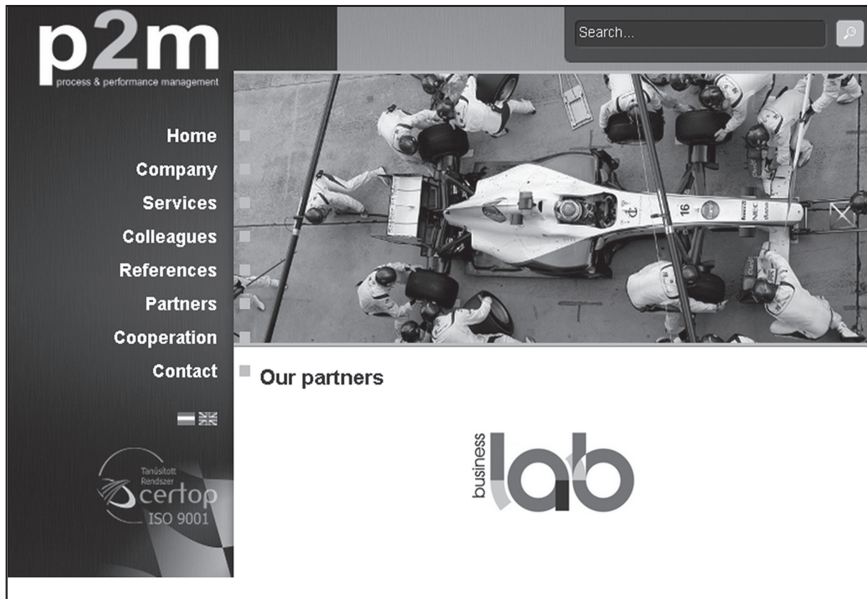


Figure 2

Let us examine the operation of the metaphor *THE COMPANY IS A FOREST*. This metaphor is examined in a semantic analysis produced by Benczes (2006, 131–135), which seems to be productive in our case as well. Benczes, in her analysis of the expression *chainsaw consultant* ('consultant hired specifically to reduce employee headcount, thus allowing the company's top executives to remain blameless') sets off to develop a metaphor theory based on blending.

In the case of the chainsaw consultant the mapping between the source and target domains is the following:

| Source domain | Target domain |
|---|-------------------------------|
| forest | company |
| tree | employee |
| reason for felling trees | reason for reducing workforce |
| tree felling | sending employees away |
| people cutting down the trees | executives |
| means by which tree-felling is carried out (chainsaw) | consultant |

Figure 3

(Based on Benczes 2006, 133)

Several studies highlight that the Hungarian literature on economics is about to realize the importance of conceptual metaphors, although comprehensive studies have not yet dealt with the issue of conceptual metaphors in this field. A study written by Károly Barakonyi (2007), among other ideas, presents the importance of the “Darwinian metaphor” in building corporate strategy. According to the principle of *business is natural selection* “Those products and companies will survive who are able to meet the consumer’s needs better!” In building corporate strategy, this metaphor focuses on the ability to adapt to the ever changing social and economic environment. (...) Those companies which are unable to react in a right way and to the right extent to new challenges sooner or later will go bankrupt or will merge into stronger companies. So those companies whose philosophy is based on the Darwinian metaphor are ready to face challenges, and in their long-term and short-term strategy willing to adjust to the changing business environment (Barakonyi 2007, 2–3).

Based on Yoffie and Cusumano, Barakonyi (2007) presents the way how the judo metaphor structures the elements of business strategy. The source domain consists of the following basic characteristics and activities:

- Speed: meaning to avoid the hits of your adversary by being swift, thus avoiding direct arguments.
- Flexibility: meaning to be ready to make temporary retreat if necessary.
- Harness the power and the energy of your adversary so that they should be contra-productive.

In the target domain, in economy, these metaphors mean the following principles:

- Penetrate into those sectors where there is not yet competition in order to avoid direct clash.
- Be flexible; in case of attack avoid the clash with stronger companies.
- Use transmission; ensure that the weight and power of your adversaries will turn against them.

In order to prove the operation of metaphors, I propose the analysis of a short text from the website of Develor Consulting Joint stock company, a “performance management consulting” company. The text offers a training course for companies on the European Union economy.

With Hungary’s accession to the EU, Hungarian companies have to prove their vitality in such a field where experienced, swift forwarders and strong defenders safeguard their position. It would be an illusion to think that at the moment of our accession the old EU-members would politely step back to give way to our wobbling steps.

The countdown has already started. (...) Undoubtedly, in order to meet the desirable same timing, besides the circle of top executives, the preparation of the middle corporate leaders is also necessary. Only those companies are off to a good start which are able to integrate in their company culture the skills, knowledge, attitudes, capacity to action expected by the membership. DEVELOR Consulting Joint stock company, a leading training and consulting company in Middle-Europe in the past 10 years, considers its major task and mission to support its partner-companies in the preparation phase. The product developer team of DEVELOR joint stock company consisting of EU experts and EU lawyers, was the first who has devised an EU – training package for domestic training market.

The trainings will provide the answer to the following questions related to your company:

- *In what ways will your corporate management be affected by the strengthening economic competition?*
- *How shall we analyse the new market and the position of the new competitors?*⁴

In constructing meanings, the above text makes use of the following conceptual metaphors: *business is competition, company is a sport team*.⁵ These metaphors unfold in the whole text; however, certain phrases are obvious in this respect: *field, experienced, swift forwarders and strong defenders, count down has already started*. In the conceptual frame described by the above expressions, business activity is conceived in the conceptual frame of team sports.

The detailed presentation of the intended mental and psychological effects are beyond the scope of the present paper, but obviously concepts belonging to the frame of sports are activated such as *dynamism, success-oriented, solidarity*.

4 Source: http://www.archive-hu-2013.com/hu/d/2013-02-26_1511090_78/Develor-Sz%C3%B3viv%C5%91-tr%C3%A9ning/. Retrieved: July 2, 2015.

5 From the point of view of the receiver, it can be somewhat embarrassing that the writer switches among different sub-domain of sports. At the beginning of the quotation the source domain refers to sports in general and soccer in particular (*field, experienced, swift forwarders and strong defenders*), later on athletics and car race form the frame of the source domain (*count down has already started*).

3. Conclusion

In my paper I tried to formulate some ideas in connection with a relatively new and so far little investigated field of linguistics. Based on the examples presented in the paper, the following ideas can be concluded: Metaphors are frequently applied and play an important role in the language of business and economy. Within the metaphors of everyday language it would be productive to devote attention to the metaphors of business language. This would entail research and would result in benefits on different levels of language teaching. A practical outcome of studying metaphors is that they can directly influence the choice of our workplace, the choice of services, the relationship between different colleagues at workplaces, etc. Furthermore, consciously and adequately chosen metaphors help communication within the company, enhance efficient marketing strategies and shape corporate identity.

A linguistic argument also justifies further research in the field of the metaphors of business language as it involves newer contexts in the research thus broadening the field of cognitive metaphor studies.

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