Metaphor in academic discourse

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Review of Metaphor in academic discourse

Reviewer: Jill M. Hallett
Book Title: Metaphor in academic discourse
Book Author: J. Berenike Herrmann
Publisher: Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics / Landelijke (LOT)
Linguistic Field(s): Discourse Analysis
Discipline of Linguistics: Sociolinguistics
Issue Number: 25.3614
Review:
Review's editor: Helen Arister-Dry

SUMMARY


Chapter 1, “Metaphor in Academic Discourse” (15-50), opens with an illustration of metaphor by means of a Woody Allen quote, followed by an introduction to conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) as a jumping-off point. Herrmann questions the role metaphor plays in academic discourse, which is sometimes erroneously thought to be too rigid for figurative language. She sets out to examine academic writing vis-à-vis fiction, news, and conversation for metaphoric frequency across these genres as well as by word class. Gaps in metaphor studies, such as the lack of large-scale metaphor samples, inclusion of lexico-grammatical features, and variation across academic prose, are briefly mentioned. In situating the background amid controversies in metaphor theory, such as mapping and classification versus comparison, Herrmann presents the following research questions (37ff):

1. How is metaphor distributed among the four main registers of English?
2. How are particular linguistic features of metaphor such as word class and metaphor type distributed in academic discourse as opposed to other main registers of English?
3. What discourse functions can be inferred from the analysis of linguistic forms of metaphor in academic discourse?
4. How is metaphor type (in terms of function) distributed across the four academic subregisters of academic writing, fiction, news, and conversation?
5. Do contextual factors such as the domain of discourse and expert knowledge play a role in the processing of academic metaphors?

In Chapter 2, “The Linguistic Analysis of Metaphor in Academic Discourse” (51-89), Herrmann provides background on the corpus linguistic research from which her data are culled, in an attempt to “arrive at a global profile of metaphor use in the academic register in contrast with other registers” (52). Biber’s (1989) classification of registers through multidimensional analysis complements the quantitative analyses of word count and class among the registers. The author hypothesizes that academic discourse is less explicit than other genres in its use of metaphor (69).

As explained in some detail in Chapter 3, “MIPVU: A Manual for Identifying Metaphor-related words” (91-108), Herrmann’s data source is a subcorpus of the British National Corpus (BNC) containing almost 200,000 words, annotated according to the procedures outlined in the Pragglejaz Group’s (2007) metaphor identification procedure of Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. This procedure involves cross-checking lexical units with their most basic use as determined by their explication in the Macmillan Dictionary, and tagging word classes according to the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Each metaphor-related word (MRW) is further given a ‘direct metaphor’ tag if it may be explained by cross-domain mapping [as in “the campsite was like a holiday village” (105)], an ‘implicit’ tag if it is used for lexico-grammatical substitution, as in the case of a pronoun [as in “Naturally, to embark on such a step is not necessarily to succeed immediately in realizing it” (105)], or an ‘MFlag’ tag if it is a signal of an impending MRW, as in “conceive of and others (92ff)]. Herrmann elaborates the appropriate procedures to follow when tags are in question, assuring the reader that the resulting data are reliable. In Chapter 4, “Metaphor Identification in Academic Discourse” (109-126), Herrmann offers a glimpse of her results. There are not as many simile-like expressions used as she expected, and “[d]irect use of lexical units related to metaphor may frequently be related to a didactic function in academic discourse...” (125).

The presentation of Herrmann’s results begins in earnest in Chapter 5, “A Distributional Profile of Metaphor in Academic Discourse” (127-176). Here she examines her corpus (BNC Baby) for metaphor distribution among word classes in each register; the roles played by indirect, direct, and implicit metaphor in academic prose versus in news, fiction, and conversation; and variation among four subregisters of academic prose: humanities and arts, natural sciences, social sciences, and politics, law, and education. She finds that the academic register has the highest percentage of metaphor-related words at 18.5%, followed closely by news at 16.4%. Furthermore, there is a “relatively stable proportion of metaphor-related words across all word classes in [academic prose] in direct cross-variety comparison” (144). Prepositions and verbs account for the most MRWs, although noun MRWs are most prevalent in academic prose. Herrmann also finds that academic prose is situated toward the explicit reference end of Biber’s Dimension 3 (as opposed to the situation-dependent end), and at the abstract information end of Biber’s Dimension 5 (as opposed to the non-abstract end) (157). The data also show that indirect metaphor is overwhelmingly more prevalent than direct or implicit metaphor, especially in academic prose, which the author attributes to indirect metaphor’s highly conventional nature, suitable for academic texts (162-163). Finally, we learn that indirect metaphors comprise 16.6-18.8 of the lexical units in the four subregisters of academic prose, with the highest percentage in social science and the lowest in natural science.

Where Chapter 5 presents a macroscopic approach to metaphor in academic discourse, Chapter 6, “Metaphor and Word Class in Academic Prose: Detailed Interpretation” (177-258) provides a microscopic analysis of the functions of the linguistic elements at hand. Specifically, the author is interested in the specific use of metaphor per word class, and the relationships among metaphorical, lexical, and semiotic attributes and functions (177). For this portion of her study, Herrmann, aided by the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al. 1999), seeks to determine whether linguistic features can be functionally categorized as ideational, textual, personal, interpersonal, contextual, or aesthetic for the purpose of understanding how MRWs in each word class behave in academic prose (181). She finds that “lexical variation in MRWs reflects by and large the pattern of lexical and functional word classes generally” (251), although, as evidenced in the previous chapter, nouns seem to be more conducive to metaphorical interpretations in academic prose. Additionally, Herrmann determines that noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition MRWs function ideationally, whereas adverbs can also function interpersonally; all word classes may exhibit textual functions as expected given the source of data. MRWs for aesthetic functions, as for stylistic conventions such as variation of vocabulary and avoidance of repetition through use of synonyms, are largely abandoned in the academic register (251-253). An additional interesting takeaway from the data in this chapter is that academic prose seems to make metaphorical use of more word classes than do the other registers (255); however, it is apparent that certain subclasses of words, namely prepositions, verbs, and nouns, are more conducive to metaphor-related use (257).
Chapter 7, “Testing the Influence of Expertise on Metaphor Processing” (259-298) is a departure from the corpus-based studies in previous chapters. In this chapter, the author is interested in exploring alternatives to metaphor theories of cross-domain mapping (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2002). To that end, Herrmann runs two experiments with human subjects based on Bowdle and Gentner’s (2005) “career of metaphor” theory, which relates expertise to grammatical processing as it differentiates categorization (in the form of metaphor) from comparison (in the form of simile). Herrmann aims to understand the linguistic conventionality shown by metaphor use in academic subdisciplines (here, psychology), and the role of expertise with respect to such discourse. She hypothesizes that experts would process domain-specific figurative language as conventional metaphor, where novices would resort to strategies of comparison due to their lack of familiarity with the canonical figurative language in their field (268-269). A scalar grammatical preference task was constructed for categorization (A is B; for canonized figurative language in psychology, the predicted choice for experts) versus comparison (A is like B; for canonized figurative language in psychology, the predicted choice for novices in the field). In Experiment 1, Herrmann selected two groups of subjects with different levels of expertise in psychology, and found no significant effect of expertise on technical figurative language: all preferred categorization. Experiment 2 involved the training of novices; Herrmann hypothesized that subjects would prefer the comparative form for unstudied items and the categorative form for studied items, in effect positing that repeated exposure canonizes technical figurative language. Again, this hypothesis was not confirmed. The results were described as “tentative and exploratory” (296) with respect to the effect of expertise on grammatical form.

Wrapping up the research presented, Chapter 8, “Discussion and Conclusion” begins with the reminder that “[m]etaphor use is not only specifically frequent in academic prose in comparison with other registers of English, but is pervasive in academic prose in that it is relatively evenly spread across academic subregisters/disciplines,” and furthermore that “concreteness and conventionality of metaphorically used words are predictors of grammatical form preference” (299). The chapter reiterates how the studies presented in the book take into account conventionality, conceptualization, and discourse functionality of metaphors; such integration of seemingly disparate approaches inspired the author’s experiments on the relationship between grammatical form preference and processing behavior, especially as such relationship corresponds with expertise. Herrmann suggests that her corpus study supports CMT theory (308), and while her data do not correlate with the results of Bowdle and Gentner (2005), she posits that other factors, such as lexicalization, may have affected her results with respect to grammatical processing. Finally, Herrmann notes the significance of the annotated Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam Metaphor Corpus (VUAMC) as a major contribution to corpus linguistic research. She calls for further research on metaphor and other linguistic patterns, especially as they relate to variation in discourse and style, and also calls for more attention to metaphor and processing, as well as investigation of spoken academic prose.

**EVALUATION**

Metaphor in Academic Discourse is quite successful in taking a multimethodological approach to metaphor research. As the field of linguistics is becoming more and more specialized, I find it appealing to read work that integrates scholarship from several subfields, in this case corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics (particularly discourse analysis). The author is explicit in laying out her aims, and she addresses them satisfactorily. Where previous scholarship seeks polarity, Herrmann situates her work in such a way that seemingly incompatible views inform her research.

My problems with this book are fairly trifling, but worth a mention as a reader unfamiliar with the particulars of the ongoing research at VU Amsterdam. First, I lamented the dearth of examples in context; inclusion of more examples and from where they were culled would have aided in illuminating some of the coding strategies for those outside the VU sphere. I was, however, pleased that the author included in the appendix examples of figurative language used for the grammatical form preference tasks. Second, Herrmann’s explanation of the results from the processing tasks struck me as somewhat unconvincing; she did not get what she had expected, but made multiple attempts to defend the theory quite staunchly anyway. Reading this publication as a dissertation contextualizes adherence to the theory despite its lack of support by these data.

Regardless of the minimal aforementioned issues, I found the book to be a solid example of painstakingly detailed research into metaphor in academic discourse on levels both micro- and macro-analytical. I was fascinated by the human subjects experiments on expertise, and am quite curious to see similar methods applied to different fields, with more levels of expertise. Further research in this area would certainly elucidate the results found by Herrmann, and give insight into how language is canonized institutionally. I would recommend “Metaphor in Academic Discourse” to those working in the subfields of corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics who would be interested in seeing an example of work that not only successfully integrates these three areas, but illustrates how such integration produces a holistic body of data.
that is greater than the sum of its parts.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

Jill Hallett is an instructor of English as a second language at Illinois Institute of Technology, linguistics at Northeastern Illinois University, and curriculum and instruction at University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, specifically American and world Englishes, urban pedagogical discourse, language in the media, linguistic identity in literature, and second dialect acquisition. Research from her dissertation, “African American English in Urban Education: A Multimethodological Approach to Understanding Classroom Discourse Strategies”, recently earned her the 2014 Founders’ Emergent Scholar Award from the International Society for Language Studies and the Language Studies Foundation.

Abstract The purpose of the following paper is to show a practical solution for analyzing metaphors in political discourse in accordance with the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff 1980) integrated into teaching an L2 upper-intermediate academic class. In view of the fact that the lesson was developed and conducted with military students, the material for analysis was chosen from President Obama’s 2013 speech on Syria. Students’ task was to formulate metaphors on the basis of metaphorical expressions distinguished in bold in the speech by the teacher. As a result, orientational, ontological View Grammatical Metaphor Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. In the last decades there has been considerable work on academic literacy practices in schools. To examine the discourse patterns of the spoken language of schooling, 8 teachers teaching Turkish to different grades at different schools were video-recorded in their classes with their students. These recordings have been fully transcribed verbatim into scripts and analyzed in term of nominalization use.