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Understanding Metaphors: Problems for Chinese Readers

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Introduction

Reading international articles is an important part of English classes for Chinese learners, particularly at an advanced level. In many of these articles, metaphors are included on the assumption that they will clarify readers' understanding. The source of such metaphors is varied, but they often draw on historical events common to the intended readers. Our study takes as its starting point the fact that although advanced learners want to read articles designed for native speakers; they are likely to have difficulty in understanding metaphors. Littlemore (2001) believes some learners are unaware of their misinterpretation of metaphors. Therefore, the study investigated L2 learners' understanding by asking them to translate sentences into the L1 chosen from *the Economist*.

Literature Review

Figurative expressions are widely used in various contexts (e.g., Boers, 2000; Levorato & Cacciari, 1992; O'Brien & Martin, 1988), yet the challenges they pose to L2 learners are substantial (Carrol, Littlemore, & Dowens, 2018). As Lasserre (2018, p. 159) expresses, "a lot of cultural and contextual bits have fallen off the language cart during the translation process". Metaphors, as one of the forms of figurative expressions, have been described as both "non-literal uses of words, and a life-force of language" (Peters, 2004, p. 346). Sometimes they become so much a part of a language's idiom that, as Peters points out, they can be seen as dead metaphors. Idioms are described by Winkler (2012, p. 213) as "expressions that are not slang... [but] set combinations of words whose individual meanings do not add up literally to their understood meaning". Previous studies of metaphors have mainly focused on metaphoric awareness (e.g., Boers, 2000; Chen & Lai, 2012) and metaphoric competence (e.g., Chen & Lai, 2015; Littlemore & Low, 2006). However, as Chen and Lai (2012, p. 245) argue, "being aware of figurative expressions does not guarantee comprehension".

The difficulty of idioms for learners of English is acknowledged in publications such as *Collins cobuild idioms dictionary* (Sinclair, Hands, Walter, & Woodford, 2012), which indicates that comprehension of metaphors can present problems (O'Brien & Martin, 1988). Littlemore, Chen, Koester, and Barnden

(2011) propose ten inadequate-response categories based on learner metaphor interpretations including “unclassified, neglected, wrong grammar, mistargeted, stay in source, unmotivated, wrong/ commonplace, wrong/ non-commonplace, over-specified and under-specified”.

Researchers have conducted various experiments to test the impact of metaphors on vocabulary learning (e.g., Boers, 2000; Lazar, 1996), the use of metaphors in L2 writing (Littlemore, Krennmayr, J. Turner, & S. Turner, 2014) and the understanding of metaphors used in lectures (e.g., Low, Littlemore, & Koester, 2008). In particular, metaphors are a stumbling block in reading English as a second language, since the image used in the L2 could be absent in the L1 (Larson, 1998). However, only limited research has examined the question of reading idioms and metaphors in English. Zuo (2008) studied the processes used by Chinese learners at a science and technology university as they aimed to understand English idioms met in their reading. Based on learners’ think-aloud reporting, it was concluded that they used one or more of the following strategies: inferencing, literal translation, and various forms of analysis such as examining cohesive devices, using their grammatical knowledge, meta-analysis (asking, for instance, “Is this likely to be a positive or negative statement?”) and finally guessing. The influence of L1 and culture has also been reported as a strategy to understand metaphors (e.g., Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Cooper, 1999; Kövecses, 2001; Taki & Soghady, 2013).

Our choice to use translation as a measure of learners’ understanding of metaphors is based on similar studies. Mahmoud (2006) proposed several benefits of using translation to assess reading comprehension. Ahrari and Jamali (2018), from an Arabic language background, experimented with teaching figurative language through translation tasks. Angelelli (2009) emphasized the importance of using scoring rubrics to assess translation ability because rubrics allow for a more holistic and systematic grading. Therefore, we use translation to assess learners’ comprehension of sentences containing metaphors and score with rubrics.

Research Design

Research Questions

The study was organized according to three questions:

1. Do metaphors affect sentence comprehension?
2. Is there a gap between learners’ subjective and objective understanding of metaphors?
3. How do learners tend to understand and translate metaphors?

Participants and Instruments

80 first year postgraduate Engineering learners from a Chinese university participated in this study. Learners were Chinese native speakers and had studied English for an average of 12.7 years ($SD = 1.883$). All learners passed CET 6 (College English Test-6), which demonstrated a similar proficiency in English.

Ten sentences, five from each of two passages, were selected from *The Economist*. One article reported on how many European countries look at their history as they think about their international relationships today and the other dealt with Italy’s love of and pride in pizza. Each sentence contained one metaphor [See Appendix].

Following a trial phase, we simplified the wording of the instructions, provided references for pronouns such as “they” and gave literal meanings of unfamiliar words in the sentences.

In the pilot study, 21 postgraduate Chinese learners participated, and it was found that some learners did not follow instructions to underline difficulties. In response to this, one metaphor per sentence was underlined beforehand. Additionally, one item of the sentences was found to be excessively ambiguous

and was replaced. A Cronbach's alpha was calculated and showed a good level of reliability of 0.834 for 10 items.

Method

The study's learners were informed they would be tested on their comprehension of metaphors. They had a training session about literal and metaphorical meanings of Chinese and English examples which included a story adapted from Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

The instructions were provided in Chinese and a summary of these two articles was given along with one example. The learners were asked to translate all the sentences first and indicate if they considered the underlined metaphors difficult to understand. Also, they indicated their comprehension of the sentences by rating each item on a scale of 1 (*non-comprehension*) to 5 (*full-comprehension*). Coding of responses was completed by an English language teacher trainer. The figurative meanings of the metaphors were translated into Chinese and responses were examined and rated on a scale of 1 to 5 in a similar fashion to Angelelli's (2009) study which focused only on the source text meaning rather than style and cohesion or translation skill. A score of five indicated a detailed understanding of all themes of the source text. The number of correctly interpreted metaphors was also calculated.

Results

First, the descriptive statistics of all variables in this study that would be used for further analysis were examined.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	
						Statistic	Std. Error
DifficultMetaphor	80	0	10	2.40	1.907	1.484	.269
CorrectMetaphor	80	0	7	2.63	1.363	.314	.269
ComprehensionAve	80	2.5	5	3.73	.599	-.015	.269
TranslationAve	80	2.1	4	3.04	.365	-.243	.269
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	80						

Note. DifficultMetaphor: the number of metaphors learners consider difficult; CorrectMetaphor: the number of correctly interpreted metaphors; ComprehensionAve: average score of sentence comprehension rated by learners; TranslationAve: average translation score rated by the authors.

Table 1 shows that there is no missing data and the valid *N* is 80. The total number of underlined metaphors is 10. The results show a large difference in learners' sentence comprehension. On average, learners correctly interpreted fewer than 3 metaphors ($n = 2.63$) and their translation score of the sentences is 3.04. Skewness values of most variables are between -1 and 1. However, DifficultMetaphor at 1.484 is extremely skewed. Therefore, DifficultMetaphor was changed from scale to ordinal in SPSS in order to increase the accuracy of further calculation. The distribution of other variables is approximately normal.

The data was analyzed in order to find answers to the aforementioned research questions.

Do metaphors affect sentence comprehension?

To investigate the first research question, a one-way ANOVA was computed to test the interaction between the number of metaphors learners self-reported as difficult and their self-reported ratings of sentence comprehension. The Levene's test was not significant so that equal variances were achieved.

TABLE 2

Relationship Between the Number of Difficult Metaphors and Sentence Comprehension

ComprehensionAve	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.794	9	0.866	2.951	.005
Within Groups	20.546	70	0.294		
Total	28.340	79			

Table 2 shows an overall $F(9, 70) = 2.951$ is significant ($p < .05$), which demonstrates that learners who clicked higher numbers of difficult metaphors had lower rated sentence comprehension compared to those clicked fewer. Importantly, these results are based on learners' own assumptions. Therefore, the next step was to investigate the relationship between the number of correctly interpreted metaphors and learners' translation score which indicated learners' actual comprehension of sentences. A regression of translation score (dependent variable) on the number of correctly interpreted metaphors (independent variable) was undertaken.

TABLE 3

Relationship Between the Number of Correctly Interpreted Metaphors and Translation Score

DV	IV	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	R ²
		B	Std. Error	Beta			VIF	
TranslationAve	Constant	2.591	.069		37.779	.000		.414
	CorrectMetaphor	.172	.023	.644	7.429	.000	1.000	

Note. DV: dependent variable, IV: independent variable

Table 3 shows a $t > 1.96$ and $p < .001$, which means the null hypothesis can be rejected and the number of correctly interpreted metaphors is a statistically significant predictor of translation score. The relation is positive; therefore, having more correct metaphors is generally associated with a higher translation score. $VIF < 10$ means that this model does not entail collinearity and an $R^2 = .414$ implies that 41.4% of the variance in translation score can be predicted by the number of correctly interpreted metaphors.

These results indicate from both subjective and objective perspectives learners with different difficulty levels in understanding metaphors tended to have different levels of sentence comprehension.

Is there a gap between learners' subjective and objective understanding of metaphors?

The number of metaphors learners self-reported as understood and the number of metaphors learners translated correctly were compared to test if there was a gap between learners' perception and comprehension.

TABLE 4

A Comparison Between the Numbers of Assumedly Understood and Correctly Translated Metaphors

	0~1	2~4	5~7	8~10	Total
Number of Assumedly Understood Metaphors	1	4	25	50	80
Number of Correctly Translated Metaphors	16	58	6	0	80

Table 4 shows few learners considered they failed to understand most metaphors and 50 learners believed they successfully understood 8-10 metaphors. However, only 6 learners correctly comprehended 5-7 metaphors and no one understood more than 7 metaphors. The result is interesting since there is a low correlation between what learners understand and what they believe they understand.

How do learners understand and translate metaphors?

Based on the 10 inadequate-response categories proposed by Littlemore et al. (2011), we analyzed 800 pieces of learners' translations and developed another three categories, namely, using another metaphor to interpret a metaphor, failing to translate the tense and motion related to metaphors and comprehending metaphors with the influence of L1 and culture. The following examples show learners' Chinese translations of the metaphors with their English translations in brackets.

1. Using another metaphor to interpret a metaphor

Original text: It was “the gastronomic thermometer of the market”.

Learners translated *thermometer* with another metaphor, such as 标杆 [*surveyor's pole*], 风向标 [*wind vane*], 传感器 [*sensor*], 晴雨表 [*barometer*], 观测器 [*observer*] and 检验机 [*inspection machine*]. Another finding is that none of them considered this metaphor difficult, which indicated that they believed they had interpreted the metaphor correctly.

2. Failing to translate the tense and motion related to metaphors

Original text: Europe's north is peeling away from its south.

Translation 1: 从南到北的分裂 [separation from south to north]

Translation 2: 北部从南部分离了出去 [the north separated from the south]

Translation 3: 北部与南部正在分开 [the north is separating from the south]

The metaphor referred to little bits gradually being removed from the core. However, in T1 the learner used a noun to replace the motion of the metaphor. T2 failed to translate the tense of the metaphor. And T3 did not describe the motion of “gradually removing”. Therefore, a number of learners failed to translate the tense and motion related to metaphors.

3. Comprehending metaphors with the influence of L1 and culture

Original text: European food-inspectors surely have better things to do than take a ruler to pizza.

Translation 4: 斤斤计较，锱铢必较 [weigh and balance at every turn]

Translation 5: 吹毛求疵 [nit picking]

In Chinese, four-character phrases were commonly used. T4 and T5 showed the usage of four-character phrases, which implied that the learners tried to find Chinese equivalents when they interpreted English metaphors and they preferred to translate with authentic Chinese.

Original text: These days pizza is a gastronomic mirror, reflecting Italy's anxiety about globalization.

Translation 6: 照妖镜 [monster-revealing mirror]

A monster-revealing mirror could reflect a monster's original shape in the Chinese legends and it had been used to describe something that could tell the tricks. In this case, the learner integrated the metaphor with Chinese culture and extended its meaning.

Discussion

The study investigated the metaphor comprehension of EFL learners. On average, learners correctly interpreted only 26.3% metaphors. This result is in contrast with Chen and Lai's (2012, p. 242) study which concluded "EFL learners were able to distinguish figurative language use from non-figurative language use". Thus, learners are unlikely to understand most metaphors as used in international magazines. The results show metaphors affect L2 learners' sentence comprehension, which is consistent with Littlemore et al.'s (2011, p. 418) finding that learners "were not able fully to benefit" from the use of metaphors.

The second finding is that what learners believe they understand is different from what they do understand. This supports the study by Littlemore et al. (2011, p. 426), that learners "have been largely unaware of the problems with their metaphor interpretations". Since that study used material from lectures while this study is based on the reading materials from a British magazine, we conclude that learners could be unaware of metaphor misunderstanding in both oral and written contexts. The results in this study have shown that most learners have confidence in their metaphor comprehension. There are a number of reasons for this result. First, most learners tried to analyse the metaphorical meanings instead of translating the literal meanings. Literal translations accounted for only 13% (n = 104) of all translations. Thus, learners tended to believe they had come up with the right metaphorical meanings. Second, a large majority of the translations showed learners' understanding of background information, reference to contexts and the intention to understand the judgement from the author. For example, when they translated the sentence *For the ghosts of the past are coming back*, they wrote like this: 欧洲恐怕要再次经历奥匈帝国瓦解时那样的劫难了 [Europe will probably experience what they suffered again during the Austro-Hungarian Empire fragmentation]. We can infer from this that the learner had the background knowledge and he/she gave a free translation implying the meaning of the metaphor *the ghosts of the past*; however, he/she failed to provide the metaphorical translation. In this case, since they had already understood most of the sentence, they were more likely to believe they had understood the included metaphors. Third, familiarity, a major element for learners to successfully interpret figurative language (Carrol et al., 2018), tends to affect their judgement of difficulty. Some metaphors contain many words that seem familiar but in fact may have more than one meaning. For example, many learners translated *take a ruler* as 管控 [control or regulate] because they interpreted it based on a familiar word ruler whose meaning was someone with official power. In this case, learners tended to be confident in their metaphor interpretations as well as sentence comprehension although they failed to interpret correctly.

For the third research question, we examined learners' translations and summarized three categories, namely, using another metaphor to interpret a metaphor, failing to translate the tense and motion related to metaphors, and comprehending metaphors with the influence of L1 and culture. This last category has been acknowledged by many studies that L1 plays an important role in interpreting figurative expressions (e.g., Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Cooper, 1999; Kövecses, 2001). In a study by Taki and Soghady (2013), the majority of the learners translated idioms word for word into their L1 and struggled to find L2 equivalents for the idioms. In our study, learners preferred applying L1 images to L2 metaphors and inferring meanings further according to the contexts. In addition, they tended to use "authentic" language to translate the metaphors. However, the differences between L1 and L2 (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001) make it difficult to find real, authentic language in L1 to explain the metaphor, which may influence metaphor comprehension.

Implications

The study investigated the problems of comprehending metaphors for Chinese learners. Learners benefitted from being taught about metaphors as a feature of language, rather than being taught specific metaphors, and from making connections with their own language. Some of the suggestions to learners

for working out meaning are the same as one would give for working out the meaning of new words, namely take the context into account and in some cases use word analysis.

As with most academic studies, the results often suggest possibilities for fresh research. In this case future studies could investigate the importance of literal translations to learners for understanding metaphorical meanings. Also, in the analysis of these translations, similes present another problem for comprehension. Thus, future studies could pay more attention to EFL learners' comprehension of other forms of figurative expressions. For teachers and students is therefore to think of metaphors not as word groupings to be understood out of context but rather to treat them as they would new vocabulary.

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Appendix

The sentences used in the test are listed below with underlined ten metaphors.

1. They are fretting about fragmentation: Europe's north is peeling away from its south.
2. For once more the specter of European fragmentation haunts Vienna.
3. The geopolitical centrifuge is spinning European states away from each other, like dancers at a ball.
4. They must show the pragmatism needed to keep their union afloat in the short term, while cultivating the vision needed to build common feeling in the long term.
5. They'd better get their act together, he reckons: "For the ghosts of the past are coming back."
6. It was "the gastronomic thermometer of the market": if fish pizza was cheap, there had been a good catch; if oil pizza was dear, there had been a bad olive harvest.
7. These days pizza is a gastronomic mirror, reflecting Italy's anxiety about globalization.
8. European food-inspectors surely have better things to do than take a ruler to pizza.
9. Italians like to think that their art, culture and way of life will lift them out of economic torpor.
10. That way lies paralysis and cultural fossilization.