Summary

Metaphor in newspapers

Although metaphor is commonly associated with literature and rhetoric, it is in fact part and parcel of everyday language use. It is a window on the way we think and on how language is structured. For example, when someone says “I devoured this book,” they did not actually eat the book, of course – they simply read it with a lot of enthusiasm and interest. Devoured in this context is metaphorically used: the abstract concept of IDEAS is structured in terms of another, more concrete domain of thought, namely FOOD. The linguistic metaphor devoured is a realization of the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD.

This shift in how we conceive of metaphor – not as a specialized poetic or rhetorical device but as an essential feature of language – has created a whole new field of research within cognitive linguistics and has sparked theoretical discussion as well as experimental studies. However, these studies have focused mainly on artificially constructed examples devoid of a broader context. In recent years there has been growing interest in studying metaphor as it occurs in authentic discourse. This is because only real language data can reveal how we actually use and understand metaphorical language and what its functions may be.

Journalistic writing has been a welcome source of natural language data for metaphor research. The popularity of newspaper texts for metaphor research would seem to suggest that news is a very metaphorical register. However, most studies on metaphor in news have been small-scale or restricted in their focus, investigating only a small set of linguistic or conceptual metaphors. Progress in the field has been hampered by the lack of large-scale quantitative studies and the absence of a transparent, systematic method that identifies all metaphorical language and not just a specific set. For this reason, it is actually unknown how common metaphorical language in news texts really is, what forms of metaphors are most typical and how their frequency and use compares to those in other registers.

This dissertation addresses these shortcomings. In collaboration with other researchers I have built a database of about 190,000 words of natural language covering four broad registers from a sub-corpus of the British National Corpus (news texts, academic texts, fiction and conversation). The corpus was coded for metaphorical language using an existing method for metaphor identification. During the annotation process the method was
refined and improved, resulting in a detailed protocol for identifying metaphor in discourse. Its application to news texts is particularly straightforward and reliable.

In order to make the description of metaphor use in newspapers more meaningful – how common it is, what types and forms of metaphors are used, how metaphor is distributed across word classes and what its functions are – I compared and contrasted the news register to the other registers in our database in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Since the data in newspaper texts were collected with the same method as the data in the other three registers and capture all metaphor-related language, I created a register profile of metaphor for newspaper texts with a degree of validity that has not been achieved before. This is a unique contribution to metaphor variation research because it employs both a transparent method of metaphor identification and includes all lexical units regardless of source domain.

Quantitative analysis of the corpus has revealed that news texts contain a larger proportion of metaphorically used words than fiction and conversation but a smaller proportion than academic texts. The picture is more complex than that, however, because different registers exhibit different distributions of word classes, which is connected to their diverging communicative functions. I found that the frequency of metaphors in a certain word class has to be interpreted in relation to the importance of that word class in a register. This suggests that whenever communicative functions differ, metaphorical language use will differ as well, but I also found that this is not necessarily in ways suggested by the usage of the general word classes. I linked these findings to situational characteristics in which news texts are embedded. An unexpectedly frequent use of metaphorical verbs, for example, can in part be attributed to the use of personification, which helps to communicate a message efficiently within restricted space.

While quantitative analysis can show general trends of (non)metaphorical language use, it does not tell us much about detailed functions in specific discourse contexts. I therefore conducted qualitative discourse-based analysis, drawing further connections to characteristics of news texts by analyzing why particular metaphorical expressions occur in a particular text, context, form and pattern. Not every news article is full of creative language play and extended metaphors, nor does every journalist use striking novel metaphors; often the metaphors are simply a convenient way to express an idea.

Whether or not a text seems metaphorical to the newspaper reader is likely influenced by whether or not metaphors are deliberately chosen by the journalist and experienced as such by the reader. Deliberate metaphors in news
articles can be conventional or novel and may or may not be signaled. I have suggested that future research needs to quantify deliberate metaphor use and have proposed a protocol to do this. Metaphorical language use in news writing also displays different functions that can be related to the broader situational context in which news texts are embedded. It both enhances textual cohesion and fulfills conceptual functions, because metaphors help convey complex messages that are immediately clear and accessible to non-expert readers. In addition, journalists make use of metaphorical language for communicative purposes – to entertain, persuade, or to grab readers’ attention and interest.

My work goes beyond corpus and discourse analysis. I have also conducted an experiment to address an important theoretical distinction that has practical consequences. In the past, studies of metaphor have often failed to account for the possibility that a metaphor, as identified in a text, is not necessarily a metaphor in people’s minds. For example, when writing about economic competition journalists will often use movement metaphors like accelerating economy. Does this mean they or the news readers actually think of cars or racing? This may seem a subtle distinction, but it goes to the heart of whether or not people think metaphorically – and consequently to the applicability of metaphor research in general. I have conducted an experiment to investigate under which conditions people are most likely to build their textual representations of a newspaper article on a metaphorical schema. By combining insights from on-line and memory studies looking at whether or not people make use of metaphorical mappings, and by probing signaling and conventionality, which have been ignored or conflated in previous studies, my recall study investigated the role of extended metaphors in text representation. This pattern of metaphor use is held to be typical of newspaper writing. I manipulated the degree of conventionality of metaphorical expressions as well as signaling of an extended auto racing mapping in a business news article on economic competition in a more believable text than those employed in earlier studies. A gross interpretation of recall protocols shows that people tend to integrate metaphorical schemas in their textual representation when they read a simile and/or novel metaphorical expressions. However, these results are masked by a complex interaction with yet other variables. Important considerations include time of recall (immediate or delayed) and whether or not we only count items recalled from the test passage or also consider items that were not in the passage but that are consistent with the underlying metaphor. This is an important finding as it demonstrates the need to take these considerations into account in future experiments.
Metaphorically used lexical units that are potentially realized as cross-domain mappings in people’s minds can be identified using the metaphor identification protocol described in this thesis. Determining which domains are involved in the mapping is less straightforward. Cognitive linguistics has shown surprisingly little concern about the ways in which conceptual metaphors are formulated. I have placed the process on firmer footing by further developing Steen’s 5-step method for deriving conceptual mappings from linguistic metaphors by introducing dictionaries and the lexical database Wordnet as tools to motivate and further constrain the process. My work therefore not only advances our knowledge about metaphor in news texts but also makes new contributions to method development. Besides refining the 5-step method, I also investigated the usability of the semantic annotation tool Wmatrix for the identification of linguistic metaphors on a conceptual level. Results suggest that, while metaphor identification through semantic fields is possible, the tool can only be used with certain restrictions, which I have identified. Wmatrix was not initially designed for metaphor analysis, and I suggested adaptations to accommodate metaphor researcher’s needs.