

Metaphor and the Social World
BOOK REVIEW Nacey, S. (2013). Metaphors in Learner English.
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Book review

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As the title indicates “Metaphors in Learner English” by Susan Nacey deals with the author’s quest to perform an in depth study of the metaphors produced by Norwegian EFL students. She sets out to answer three questions with her investigation: (1) how is the metaphor production in written English different for Norwegian L2 learners than for native speaker novice writers of English?; (2) How creatively do Norwegian L2 English learners employ metaphors? ; and (3) How can metaphors and metaphorical creativity in texts be identified? In order to address these questions Susan Nacey systematically checked all linguistic metaphors in 40,000 words from two sets of texts. Half of these texts were written by Norwegian learners of English and belong to the Norwegian component of the International Corpus of Learner English (NICLE). The other half were produced by British A-level students and form part of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). By means of a comparative analysis in which the texts of the British native speakers serve as a baseline the students’ use of metaphor is scrutinized. She used an adapted version of the MIPVU protocol (MIP stands for Metaphor Identification Procedure and the VU refers to the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam where the protocol was conceived) in order to free the metaphor identification from intuitive or introspective biases.

This ambitious and immensely readable book is divided into three parts that cover the research questions outlined above. It consists of eight chapters that gradually build up to a conclusion that encompasses responses to questions about L1 and L2 students’ metaphor production in argumentative texts, the phenomenon of metaphorical creativity and the theoretical and methodological issue of metaphor identification in texts.

After initiating the reader into theoretical framework of metaphor research in a first chapter, the author takes on the role metaphoric competence has been given in the Common European Framework of Reference (chapter 2). This reference document that informs language learning, language teaching and language assessment in Europe has a far reaching influence when it comes to language teaching practices in secondary schools as well as colleges and universities. Her critique of the CEFR is nuanced but very pertinent and her well-voiced stance about how the CEFR authorities render the document impervious to criticism by inviting the users to “critically apply” the suggested taxonomies should not fall on deaf ears. She eloquently reveals how the CEFR’s self-declared refusal to equate language mastery with native speaker competence is inconsistent with the idealized native speaker competence that is used as a benchmark in the competence description throughout the

1 CEFR document. I believe that the author has a strong argument when she points to
2 the ramifications of the presence or absence of CEFR recommendations concerning
3 the inclusion of metaphorical competence for foreign language practice in classrooms.
4 As it turns out, there is a marked lack of importance given to metaphor in the CEFR.
5 The phenomenon is only mentioned with reference to phrasal idioms and – contrary to
6 corpus-evidence - these are reported to be frequently used. The CEFR thus overlooks
7 the prevalence of metaphor in every day discourse and consequently condemns the
8 knowledge of metaphor to the periphery of language learning. By means of several
9 examples in the English as well as the Norwegian version of the CEFR document
10 Susan Nacey illustrates the inadequate conceptualization of metaphor and the ensuing
11 underestimation of the importance of metaphor in (foreign) language use. In defence
12 of the CEFR one could argue that the level of abstraction that is required in order to
13 be able to identify metaphor might have relegated it to the domain of advanced
14 language learners, but in such a view proficiency level would be too easily equated
15 with level of abstraction. To sum up, in this chapter the author has uncovered the
16 misalignment between the CEFR and contemporary cognitive linguistic findings.
17 Future CEFR guardians or developers should do well to bear the important role of
18 metaphoric competence for language learning in mind and adjust the document
19 accordingly.
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21 In the next three chapters great pains are taken to chronicle the history and
22 methodology for identifying metaphor and the incarnations the Pragglegjazz procedure,
23 the MIP protocol and the MIPVU protocol have undergone. Throughout the years
24 several attempts have been made to take individual variation out of metaphor
25 identification and develop a reliable method for finding metaphor in natural discourse.
26 In fact, a substantial part of the book is devoted to the identification of metaphor in
27 texts and to a study into the use of the Metaphor Identification Procedure. Only a
28 select group of dedicated metaphor researchers will fully appreciate all the ins and
29 outs of the MIP(VU) protocol. Still, thanks to the author's keen sense of humour,
30 evidenced in the wisecracks with which she regularly spices her text, the reader finds
31 himself drawn into the wondrous world of "pragglegjazzing" (i.e. the term used to refer
32 to the troubleshooting meetings in which challenging metaphor identifications were
33 discussed). These chapters also lay the foundation for the quantitative and qualitative
34 exploration of the metaphors identified in the large corpus of learner text. Given the
35 indicated time frame of the data analysis I presume that this large-scale study was the
36 research project that led to the author's doctoral dissertation. Because the
37 identification of metaphors for her dissertation ran parallel to the development of the
38 MIPVU protocol, she distinguishes her own protocol from Gerard Steen's MIPVU by
39 putting the VU between brackets. By her own admission MIP(VU) is a complicated
40 process to follow and it takes a seasoned metaphor researcher to digest the many
41 examples and discussions of chapter 4. I for one will not enter into a debate about the
42 linguistic foundation for the identification of the metaphors in the listed examples but
43 I appreciate the effort the author has taken to render this identification process more
44 transparent and univocal.
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1 That same concern for reliability and objectivity is also reflected in chapter 5 in which
2 the need for the replicability and the stability of metaphor identification is
3 emphasized. The author proposes inter-rater statistical analysis (i.e. verifying the
4 consensus between different raters in applying the metaphor identification protocol)
5 as well as intra-rater statistical analysis (i.e. verifying the consistency of your own
6 identification by repeating the identification process at a later time) in order to verify
7 the consistency of the protocol. On the basis of her own analyses she was able to
8 conclude that MIP(VU) offers a sound alternative to ad hoc, intuitive metaphor
9 identification, and that it has the added bonus of making the identification process
10 both transparent and repeatable. Her application of the protocol on a large collection
11 of learner texts is also innovative since her study is one of the first to try out the
12 identification procedure on learner language. The focus on learner language lends the
13 book relevance for metaphor researchers as well as applied linguists who wish to
14 study and improve EFL learners' language development.

15 The quantitative overview of findings from the systematic identification of all
16 linguistic metaphors in 40.000 words of argumentative essays (half of them by
17 Norwegian speakers of English, half of them by British A-level students) give the
18 reader an idea of the number of metaphors in argumentative essays. The data show
19 that the use of metaphor is ubiquitous in the written English of both the Norwegian L2
20 learners of English and the British A-level students with one of every six words being
21 metaphorical in use. Next to that the study provides the reader with valuable
22 information on how the production of native speaker novice writers compares to the
23 production of metaphor by language learners. The degree of similarity between both
24 sets of texts appeared to be striking. On the basis of the higher production of
25 metaphors in the texts of English learners Susan Nacey is able to establish that
26 metaphor is an important linguistic feature in the writing of all language users – not
27 only native speakers -, with preposition being the most metaphorical word class. This
28 finding leads to a scopious chapter on prepositions in which the author is able to
29 demonstrate that three out of four prepositions in the corpus are metaphor-related.
30 This bodes for a language teaching pedagogy in which prepositional choice is
31 explained through metaphorical mappings. Instead of having learners study lists of
32 prepositions, teachers would do well in raising their learners' consciousness of
33 metaphorical extensions, thereby stimulating deeper cognitive processing which will
34 lead to better retention and more accurate use of prepositions.

35 The book also comprises a compelling investigation into the creativity of
36 metaphor use and the distinction between difference (i.e. legitimate creativity) and
37 deviation (i.e. error) in learner language. To Nacey, metaphorical creativity needs to
38 involve an awareness of the act of creation on the part of the language user. In other
39 words: using a metaphor creatively presupposes deliberateness. Her investigation of
40 both phenomena in the texts of Norwegian L2 writers of English revealed that the link
41 between creativity and novelty is non-existent.

42 With this book Susan Nacey has added to the wealth of literature that offer empirical
43 findings on the ubiquity of metaphor in discourse. The study of metaphor is of course
44 multifaceted and innumerable theories have arisen. Susan Nacey's study clearly falls
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1 within the cognitive approach: she investigates metaphor as a matter of mind,
2 language and communication. Although she refers to findings and insights from
3 applied cognitive linguistics with its attention for language learning and the role
4 metaphor may play in this regard, I would have welcomed a more extensive summary
5 of the research evidence concerning the added value of metaphor awareness in foreign
6 language learning. This would have reinforced the applied cognitive linguistic stance
7 the author takes when she discusses the relevance of metaphoric competence for
8 foreign language learners. Nevertheless, the book is firmly grounded in the cognitive
9 linguistic tradition of metaphor research, especially the chapter on prepositions in
10 which she illustrates the cognitive linguistic stance that metaphorical senses are
11 related to the core senses of prepositions in a principled way (making them more
12 amenable to learning). The book may not be aimed at language teachers specifically
13 but it contains important pedagogical recommendations that tie contemporary
14 metaphor theory to language learning theory. The findings that are presented point to
15 the ubiquity of metaphor in argumentative essays and illustrate how metaphor can be
16 beneficial for the interpretation, acquisition and retention of lexis. It also points to the
17 similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learner production and it sheds light
18 on metaphorical creativity in language learners.

19 The author's in-depth elucidations of metaphor theory and her conscientious
20 and systematic study of metaphor in native speakers' and learners' texts will no doubt
21 contribute to the validity and reliability of current and future metaphorical analyses.
22 In applying MIP(VU) Susan Nacey has shown that the presumed fuzziness of
23 metaphor identification can be constrained through the use of a protocol (that has at
24 its core that metaphorical meaning arises from a contrast between contextual and
25 more basic meaning that may be explained on the grounds of cross-domain mapping).
26 Nacey's verdict on the use of the MIP(VU) comes as no surprise to the attentive
27 reader: although the procedure enhances the number of consistent and replicable
28 decisions, it is extremely time-consuming because of its heavy reliance on the manual
29 extraction of linguistic metaphors and the required in-depth understanding of the
30 identification of lexical units and the treatment of tropes such as simile and
31 metonymy.

32 The central goal of this and other studies is that the incidence of metaphor in
33 language becomes countable and verifiable as to ensure reliable metaphor
34 identification across investigations so that the same phenomenon can be measured in
35 several studies, targeting several text genres. Future research will show whether this
36 MIP(VU) protocol is useful in other text genres or registers and whether it lends itself
37 well to cross-linguistic analysis.

38 Apart from being an excellent introduction to the world of metaphor research
39 and metaphor identification, the book has a truly entertaining quality. Certain parts
40 demand a great level of abstraction from the reader but the book is a must-read for
41 anyone who is into metaphor (and if I have understood the metaphor identification
42 procedures correctly, this use of the preposition "into" is metaphorical!). In fact, I
43 would recommend this book to every novice metaphor researcher who needs to be

able to identify and classify metaphor in language, but discourse analysts and applied linguists will also find it a fascinating read.

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