

Physical Action Meets Linguistic Expression: Investigating the Co-construction of Metaphors in Task-based Conversation by Multiple ELF Speakers

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Abstract : Since the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor has been recognized not merely as a rhetorical device but as a crucial component of human thought and conceptual formation. However, many studies have concentrated on verbal metaphors, leaving relatively little research on figurative expressions that draw on additional modes, such as visual forms, auditory information, or gesture (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009, Littlemore, 2009). This paper addresses that gap by examining multimodal metaphors, which emerge through the integration of multiple modes (e.g., language and visual forms). For example, an advertisement conveying “passion is fire” by pairing the phrase “Feel the fire” with a visual depiction of flames illustrates how metaphor can be expressed in both linguistic and visual modes (Forceville, 2006). In this study, we analyze data from task-based conversation among multiple ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) speakers. Our focus is on LEGO block-creation conversations, exploring how physical operations (arranging or assembling blocks) and linguistic expressions interact to construct figurative or abstract concepts. Specifically, we investigate the types of linguistic metaphors (e.g., the expression “Let’s build a scale here” based on the conceptual metaphor <FAIRNESS IS A BALANCE>) that emerge when participants discuss the arrangement, color, and shape of blocks, as well as how abstract concepts (e.g., “equality,” “fairness,” “connection”) are represented through block configurations. The ELF multi-participant task-based conversation data consist of groups of three or four students from diverse cultural backgrounds who collaborate in English to freely assemble LEGO blocks while sharing their visions of given tasks. Six tasks were presented—responsibility, collaboration, knowledge, justice, safety, and tolerance—and each was allotted five minutes (Bjørndahl, Fusaroli, Østergaard, and Tylén, 2015). A total of 31 participants, all university students in the Kansai region of Japan, took part in the study. They included Japanese native speakers learning English, and international students (from China, Spain, Poland, and Brazil), forming eight groups of three to four members each. Their proficiency levels ranged from CEFR A2 (approximately TOEIC 750) to CEFR C2. The analysis suggests that the interaction between block handling and speech transforms abstract concepts such as “equality,” “fairness,” and “connection,” and into concrete and visually grounded metaphors. For instance, when representing “equality” or “fairness,” one group placed an equal number of blocks on a scale, while another used the theme of a criminal's wrongdoing to represent the “severity” or “weight” of punishment with blocks. Additionally, when expressing “connection,” groups created circles with blocks or connected the hands of block figures, symbolizing these concepts in a visual and metaphorical way. These examples show that groups used varied block-handling strategies, reflecting how their understanding of abstract concepts shaped their arrangements. These findings contribute to visualizing abstract concepts, promoting natural English usage, and enhancing intercultural understanding in English education. Furthermore, in business settings, visualizing tasks through block handling can facilitate team building, improve communication efficiency, and even foster creative problem solving. Thus, using such multimodal metaphors has potential not only for language learning and cross-cultural communication but also for corporate training and organizational collaboration.

Keywords : co-construction, interaction, multimodal metaphor, physical action

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